THE YOUNG O'BRIENS

BEING AN ACCOUNT OF
THEIR SOJOURN IN LONDON

By the author of
"ELIZABETH'S CHILDREN"
[Transcriber's note: Margaret Westrup]

LONDON: JOHN LANE, THE BODLEY HEAD
NEW YORK: JOHN LANE COMPANY, MDCCCCVI

The Plimpton Press Norwood Mass. U.S.A.

By the same Author
ELIZABETH'S CHILDREN
Fifth Edition
HELEN ALLISTON

THE YOUNG O'BRIENS

CHAPTER I

Inside the hired omnibus there was a dead silence. Outside the rain lashed drearily against the window panes. From the corner where Molly sat there came a dismal, despairing sniffle, drowned, before its finish, by Denis's superlatively cheerful voice.

"Sure, 'tis a rough night entirely!" he observed airily.

Nell gave a sudden quick little laugh with a queer end to it.

"So it is!" she said, and her effort after cheerfulness gave the remark a surprised tone, as if she had not noticed before that the night was rough.

Sheila Pat sat silent in her corner, her slim little body stiff and erect, a bag and a box clutched tight in her small arms. Afterwards, later that night, she found that her arms ached. There was desperation in that tight clutch of the bag and the box.

Suddenly Mr. O'Brien spoke; he recognised the futility of ignoring what was in everyone's mind.

"Well," he said, "a year soon passes, after all, and I hope we shall be back in about ten or eleven months."

"But—but not—" came a watery stammer from Molly's corner, but Nell broke in hurriedly.

"I—I wonder will you look different, dad?"

"Oh, yes," her mother laughed the pretty laugh that was just like Nell's, "I shall be a horrid, stout old woman! Even Sheila Pat won't acknowledge me then!"

Sheila Pat said nothing.

Mrs. O'Brien squeezed Nell's fingers tightly. There was another silence. There was nothing to say. Everything had been said over and over again. The wind sent the rain beating angrily against the closed windows. The omnibus jolted and jarred over the road.

A hoarse shout smote on their ears, and the driver's whip flicked one of the panes.

Denis jumped up and let down the small window in front. Then shouting began; the wind howled derisively, drowning their voices. The driver's hoarse yells, and Denis's impatient shouts, asked and answered questions over and over again. At last Denis drew in his head:

"If that's a specimen of the London driver, I don't think much of 'em! The wind didn't get at you, did it, mother?"

"No, dear, your broad shoulders kept it off."

"Does he seem to understand the way now?" Mr. O'Brien queried.

"I wouldn't like to answer for him. I've explained till I'm hoarse, but the damp seems to have got to his brain—it won't work—rusty, you know."

"Isn't his voice funny?" observed Nell, doing her duty manfully.

"Drivers often have those hoarse voices," responded her father, and for just as long as they could make it last, they used that driver as a topic of conversation. Certainly he did not seem of much use for any other purpose.

It was not long before there came another flick against the window, and on Denis putting forth his head, there ensued more shouts and yells. In a lull of the wind the driver waxed sentimentally despairing. "Never been to these 'ere East Lunnon docks afore—eh, sir? Wot? Which turning? Can't see no turning. It ain't a night as I'd turn a pore blessed cat out—much less a respectable fambly man with little children dependant on 'im! Eh, sir? Can't 'ear, sir! Wot? Poplar? Ain't nowhere's near Poplar!"

Denis drew in his head.

"Of all the old fools! I'd better go up on to the box and direct him. I know my way better than he does, anyway, though I've only been to the docks once."

"It's raining so, Denis," his mother put in.

"But we don't want the death from exposure of the respectable fambly man on our consciences, do we, mother? Not to mention the touching little children—"

It ended in his exit to the box. Nell watched him go with wide, strained eyes; she crushed down a strong impulse to clutch at his coat. Without her twin she felt feeble and deserted.

When the omnibus stopped at last outside the dock gates, no one made a movement towards getting out. Long and dreary as that drive had been, each one, looking out at those gates looming so big and grim in the dim light cast by a solitary lamp, wished it could begin all over again. The parting grew, at that jolting stop, suddenly, acutely nearer. In spite of the dread of it, perhaps no one had quite realised it. To get out of the omnibus was to give it a hideous reality. A cautious voice demanded their business. Denis appeared at the door. One by one they left the omnibus. The policeman, to whom the cautious voice belonged, let them through a wicket; then began a dreary march in the dark; the wind sent the rain beating against them in angry little gusts. Laden with bundles and packages, they stumbled along in the dense darkness, treading into puddles,

splashing, slipping. There were no friendly lamps to cast a warning glimmer on the deep puddles left by the rain in the holes of the uneven ground. They could barely distinguish the form of the diminutive guide with whom the policeman had provided them. But they could hear him. He was a small, sharp-looking boy, who heeded neither rain nor wind nor dark, but trudged along, in and out the puddles, up and down the hillocks, emitting a kind of dismal whistling below his breath.

Nell laughed suddenly with an overdone hilarity.

"The water's trickling down my neck!"

Denis seconded her with, "It's running a regular cascade off my hat rim!"

Then the Atom spoke; it was the first remark she had made since they had started from Miss Kezia's house in Henley Road.

"Isn't is *London*?" she said.

Her father was amused.

"You know, we do see rain occasionally at home," he observed.

"There's rain and *rain*!" the Atom declared sapiently, and relapsed again into her dour silence.

Molly, with a sudden sob, put the fear that was in everyone's mind into words.

"It's—awfully bad—for mother!"

"Oh, I shall be all right, dear," Mrs. O'Brien insisted with tired cheerfulness.

"I've a good mind to drop my bag and carry you!" her husband declared.

"Oh, Owen, what a first appearance for the wife of the ship's surgeon! Let me at least be dignified."

Beyond the small figure of their guide the *Albany* loomed, slowly taking shape in the dark, big, very mysterious.

"I bet we came to the wrong entrance," Denis observed.

Mr. O'Brien handed the guide a tip. "I'm afraid we did," he said.

The guide disappeared with a "thankysir"; a steward's head bobbed up from the hatchway and shouted out directions. Mr. O'Brien and Denis helped the others along a wet, slippery board, and over the ship's side.

The saloon looked more cheerful; deserted as it was, it wore quite a festive air after the wet and darkness outside.

In the cabin they hung up a few things, to give it a more homelike air, and because it was easier to do something than not. They procured coffee from the steward, but no one wanted it. Everyone pretended they did, except Sheila Pat, who never pretended. Mrs. O'Brien made her drink it.

"You are cold and wet, dear; it—I—will—"

She stopped abruptly. Nell saw and understood. She went close.

"I—I will take care of her—" she whispered.

She had promised it so often, but Mrs. O'Brien turned to her gratefully.

"Yes, dear," she said; her eyes went from Nell back again hungrily to the bit of brow and head that Sheila Pat's big coffee cup left exposed.

"I know you will, Nell," she said gently, and kissed her.

Several other passengers had arrived and sat or stood about the saloon and cabins with an air of unsettledness, of uncertainty. The last minute came suddenly at the end. There was a sort of breathless rush; injunctions, good-byes, forcedly hopeful prognostications.

"A year soon passes!" Mr. O'Brien said again.

A little later they were in the omnibus once more. There were gaps now; there was so much room to move about. Those gaps gave a poignant reality to the loneliness.

In Nell's mind there grew up a dull wonder whether anyone could conceivably think that a year soon passes. To her the coming year stretched long and interminable; at the moment she was incapable of looking beyond it. Father and mother were gone, and home was gone too. The wonder passed, and with aching iteration there dinned in her ears—"So long as the shamrock's growing in Ireland, will there be O'Briens in Kilbrannan." It was a prediction of an old gipsy's. She had given it when telling Denis his fortune. That was last year, barely a year ago, and now—Nell's lips curled with a sudden bitterness that made her young, soft face look, for the moment, older—now there were strangers in their home, and no O'Briens in Kilbrannan. She wondered tragically how it was possible to live through months such as they had lived through. Looking back, the failure of the bank in which most of her father's money had been placed, and which had been the first misfortune to fall upon them, seemed a small calamity. She remembered the shock of it, the sorrow, with surprise now. What though they had been obliged to retrench, to pinch and

try to learn the lesson of economy, they had still their home and were not separated. The grief of parting with old servants, with some of the horses, had been sharp. But they had still dear old Patsy; they had O'Leary and Gretta; and they had—Nell's breath caught suddenly—they had Acushla, the Colleen Bawn. Her thoughts chased each other over those unhappy months. The day when her mother had so suddenly been taken ill stood out, sharp and grim. She remembered the anxious worry she had experienced when she saw that in spite of the doctor's hopeful words, in spite of the daily improvement in the invalid, her father's face refused to lighten. She remembered the slow growth of suspicion in her mind, so that when at last he asked her and Denis to come into the study one day, she knew they were to hear some bad news. Denis knew it too, but in their worst prognostications they had never given one thought to the possibility of having to give up their home for awhile. Even when their father had told them, they could not comprehend quite. Nell remembered how she had stood staring stupidly at the binding of one of Ruskin's works in the book-case, where a ray of sunlight shone on it. She had found herself saying, "Sesame and Lilies." Then her eyes had followed the ray of sunshine to the windows—beyond the windows. She gave a little shudder at the memory of that moment of sudden, sharp realisation. The study faced east; its windows looked out on to great boulders of grey rock that led in a long uneven slope to the seaweed-covered rocks and the sea. The heather had been out then; the boulders were covered with it; there was a little mist in the air, so that the grey and purple mingled in a lovely haze of colour. The sea-gulls and the gannets were quarrelling over something; their voices came in at the open windows. The scent of the seaweed had come to her, too; and quite suddenly she had understood that they were to leave it all. Her father had gone on speaking; she had felt vaguely sorry for him, as she listened to his halting speech and saw the strained look on his face. But in those first minutes nothing was of moment, nothing was real, save the crushing blow that they were to leave their home; that they were to go away; that strangers were to live in it. But presently she realised that he was trying to prepare them for some further bad news. She had smiled at his thinking it necessary to prepare them; nothing mattered now. Denis had had the same feeling. He had broken into his father's speech abruptly, roughly:—

"Tell us what it is. What does it matter, anyway?"

But Mr. O'Brien had gone on skirting the subject, preparing them.

"I have been anxious for months about those mine shares. They have gone down and down, and now they have ceased to pay any dividends at all."

He had said it before, had explained that it was because of these shares that they must let their home.

Denis said, surprised, "The Rêve d'or shares?"

"Why, yes! Oh, you mean I've told you that already? But I thought they were such a good investment—" he broke off, and walked quickly to the window.

"Your mother isn't getting her strength back," he said suddenly.

They realised at once that there were still things that mattered. He went on quickly: "You needn't be anxious. Oh, no! But Dr. O'Donovan—" he broke off, and started afresh. "You know that, as a young man, I didn't expect to come into this—" he waved his hand impatiently around. There was an air about him now of wanting to get it over as quickly as possible; an irritated impatience made his words hurried.

"Well, you know, I studied medicine. I was a qualified doctor. It's all settled. I've got the post. There's no other way. Dr. O'Donovan says your mother must have a sea voyage. We can't afford it. I've got the post of surgeon on the *Albany*—starts at end of October for Australia—sailing ship."

They knew it all at last. Thinking it over now, Nell was struck with the difference there had been from his usual manner of speaking. She knew now what it had cost him to tell them. Then she had been too absorbed in her horror to think much of anything beyond the news he had told them.

After that, in the weeks that followed, there had been the cruel carrying into effect of the news. There had been much wearisome talk. Amongst it Nell remembered one thing that had been clear and definite at once. That was Denis's determination to do some sort of work. Mr. O'Brien wished him to study shorthand and type-writing, with a literary future in view. But Denis refused, beyond agreeing to study them in his spare time. For the rest he intended to do work that would have remuneration attached to it. Already he was fired with hope and ambition to turn the strangers from their home. Mr. O'Brien secured him a position as a clerk in a London bank, the manager of which had been a schoolfellow of his. Nell cried miserably because she wasn't a

boy. Denis shook her, and painted, in glowing colours, the great academy picture that in a few years' time was to win her fame and fortune. But two or three years seemed such an interminable time that, mostly, her mind refused to grasp the thought.

There had been much discussion as to where they should stay while their parents were away. They were singularly destitute of relations. They had some cousins in America, and an aunt by marriage in London. They had never seen the aunt; but she happened to live near the bank where Denis had found employment. She had lately lost her mother, and with her the annuity that had helped to pay the rent of the house. She wrote suggesting that they should come to her. After much worried discussion it was settled that they should live with her for the time. Mr. O'Brien paid a small sum for their maintenance in advance, and they faced the thought of a house in a street in London.

Sheila Pat, before she left Kilbrannan, laid out a burying-ground. She dug with a dogged face, and a mind black with pictures of a London where it was always foggy—where there were nothing but muddy pavements; roads crowded with poor tired horses carrying loads too heavy for them; and tall houses packed so close together that you were stifled. She refused to lighten the picture by the admittance into it of so much as one blade of grass. She chose a spot for her burying-ground close by the little stream that gurgled so softly sometimes and roared and rushed at others. The smooth piece of grass, just by the boulders that turned the stream into a little cascade, was sheltered on the other side by a hill that rose up—grey rock, purple heather, bracken, and grass—till it seemed to meet the sky. There Sheila Pat buried her treasures. She had always scorned dolls; only once had she been presented with a doll, and within the day it had been mercilessly drowned. But she had many treasures, and she buried them, in an agony of renunciation. "Here you will have the heather and the stream, and when the wind blows from the west you'll get the scent of the turf smoke from Biddy's cottage." She laid a large and grinning monkey tenderly down beside a one-legged driver. "Oh, my dears, and when the wind's in the east, you'll get the sea,"—she hid her face in a passion of woe—"and you'll be hearing the trees whisp'rin' and singin' and your Sheila Pat far away in a great, dirty London, dead with stiflin', and only streets to walk in!"

She hugged up to her bosom a jaunty jockey, who had lost an eye and a nose.

"I'll put you on Mavourneen—your own Mavourneen—who won the Dalgerry race for you." She seized up Mavourneen and hugged her too. "You won't mind waitin' for me, under the earth; for isn't it Irish earth, Mavourneen? And weren't you born and bred on it? But I was, too! Oh, I was, too!"

The old grey rock and the heather looked down upon a prone Atom—prone and shaking in a storm of bitter weeping—midst dogs and horses, jockeys, monkeys, and jaunting-car drivers.

No one intruded on her there. Sheila Pat had not been known to cry since her babyhood. She scorned tears; no physical hurt could break down her sturdy self-control. In those last days she was often a ludicrous Atom. Grave, self-contained, her pig-tail immaculate, she would emerge from the burying-ground, facing the world with a brave little countenance and all unaware that it was adorned with patches and streaks of dirt.

The pig-tail was generally crooked, but that was merely because Sheila Pat invariably plaited it herself. No one would do it for her; they did not approve of her mode of dressing her hair, but the Atom clung obstinately to her pig-tail, and serenely wore it over her left shoulder.

Nell, in the omnibus, glanced across at the small, still figure opposite her; a great ache seized her throat.

Suddenly Denis made a valiant effort. He broke the silence with a jocose—

"This rivals Dinny O'Sullivan's donkey barrow! My teeth are fairly rattling in my boots!"

Nell said "yes" with weary dutifulness.

The silence fell again. He rubbed his brow, and recognised the uselessness of worrying them with such palpably unreal cheerfulness. All his castles in Spain were, for the time being, razed to the ground. With the O'Briens there was no possibility of a story or two tumbling; the whole edifice had to tower to the skies or fall flat to the ground. The omnibus drew up outside No. 35, Henley Road. They got out, and stood a moment—a forlorn little group—looking at the tall, narrow house, with, to their eyes, such an unhappy air of being wedged in too tightly between the two neighbouring houses.

"Run in and knock, while I pay up," Denis admonished them.

They trailed slowly up the flight of steps. Nell knocked. There was a pause; then they heard a step approaching the door. With a sudden spasmodic burst of awakened conscience and courage Nell drew herself erect and tried to achieve a smile.

The rattle of bars and chains that heralded the opening of the door was hideous to their unaccustomed ears; it shocked them with its clang of inhospitality—its suggestion of suspicion.

Miss Kezia opened the door a cautious inch or two and peered out. Her face appeared to them, against the light, very long and very black.

"It's you," she said; "come in."

Nell faltered, calling together all her stock of politeness, "I'm sorry that you had to sit up for us."

Miss Kezia waved it aside with a curt response that a little loss of sleep would not hurt her.

There was porridge waiting for them in the dining room. Too wretched, too apathetic to make the necessary stand against it, they sat down to the table and tried to eat.

The dining room was furnished strictly for use and not for ornament. Heavy chairs and a heavier sideboard constituted all the furniture, save the table. The floor was covered with a cold linoleum. There was no flower in the room. Only one gas-burner was alight, and it left gloomy corners. There was a stiff look about it all, a poverty and bareness that was bewilderingly new to them. A beautiful little cocker spaniel, who pressed close to them with plaintive whimpers when they entered the room, looked quite out of place there. Miss Kezia eyed her with disfavour. She demanded, "Where will that dog sleep?"

The want of due respect in the designation roused Sheila Pat.

She said coldly, "Her name is Kate Kearney."

"What a ridiculous name!" Miss Kezia ejaculated.

The Atom was indignant.

"Is it rickelous? And how about Kezia, then?"

There was a pause.

Denis interposed amusedly: "Perhaps you don't know the song, Aunt Kezia? It's like this—" Gaily his voice sang out:—

> "'Oh, did you not hear of Kate Kearney?
> She lives on the banks of Killarney—'

"Eh? Noise? *Noise*?" he murmured surprisedly. "Allow me just to whisper the lines that fit K.K. so beautifully:—

> "'For that eye is so modestly beaming
> You ne'er think of mischief she's dreaming—'"

Grim and portentous came an interruption.

"Is it mischievous?"

"Er—" said Denis, and his eye twinkled, "she was when she was a puppy, you see."

"Um," observed Miss Kezia. "If it works any mischief here, it will have to be chained up in the garden."

"Sure, then," burst wildly from the Atom, "'tis myself'll be chained beside her!"

"Sheila, do not be absurd!"

"And she isn't 'it'! If you call her 'it' again, I'll be callin' you a Scotch bannock!"

Nell roused to a perfunctory—

"Oh, Sheila Pat!"

Miss Kezia said coldly, "You are a very rude little girl." She turned to Denis. "Will you tell me where that dog is to sleep?"

"On the mat outside Nell's door."

"I will not have a dog rampaging over my house to work what mischief it likes while we sleep."

"She shall sleep on my bed," put in a very disdainful Atom.

"Certainly she shall not! Disgusting! Unhealthy! Spoiling my counterpanes!"

Nell looked at Miss Kezia, a weary wonder in her face. "She can sleep on the floor beside my bed," she said.

Miss Kezia hesitated; her eyes met those of the Atom—wide, defiant, indomitable in her small, obstinate face. In her ears echoed some words of Mrs. O'Brien's that Miss Kezia had privately labelled foolish. "Sheila Pat is delicate. Perhaps we have spoilt her a little. She is very strong-willed. She cannot be driven, but she can be led. Her feelings use her up—exhaust her." There had been a little sudden hopeless pause there; then—"I hope you will understand her."

Miss Kezia had not noticed the pause or the pleading note—a note vibrating with the struggle against the speaker's own conviction. She would not have understood, had she noticed, any more than she would ever understand the Atom of humanity who was defying her now.

"Very well," she said, with a glance of dislike at poor K.K.

Denis broke in with a solicitous air, and a tone reminiscent of the Blarney Stone:—

"I do wish you would go to bed, Aunt Kezia! You do look so tired."

Nell smiled suddenly.

"Yes, do, Aunt Kezia," she urged demurely.

Miss Kezia, after somewhat lengthy directions as to turning off the gas, shutting, locking, and hanging a huge burglar bell on the dining-room door, turned to leave the room.

Sheila Pat, stiff, erect, followed her with warlike gaze.

Miss Kezia paused and said:—

"See that that baby goes to bed the minute she has finished her porridge. She ought not to have gone to the docks at all—"

Nell flashed out a shaky interruption—

"Others—thought she ought!"

The Atom observed calmly:—

"I am not a baby. At home, gerrels of six will not be babies. I'm not wantin' the stirabout at all, thank you."

"Sheila, you are speaking with an atrocious accent!"

For the first time that night the Atom's sombre eyes lit with a gleam of satisfaction.

"Accent, is it? Sure and 'tisn't me own native accent I'd be ashamed of then!" she retorted.

"It isn't the accent of ladies and gentlemen, Sheila! You are a rude and foolish little girl!"

Calm and unabashed, the Atom responded with fervour.

"'Tis the way many of my best friends spake at home—always—wakin' and sleepin' they spake like that, and I'll be spakin' like it, too."

With her black little head well up, and her absurd pig-tail at an acute angle, she waited for Miss Kezia's response.

But Denis interposed from the doorway with a judicious appeal to her sense of economy.

"I say, Aunt Kezia, I've lit your candle, and it's spluttering like a dumb man asking for a tip!"

Miss Kezia turned and hurriedly left the room.

Molly suddenly pushed her bowl away with an angry clatter. She flung her arms out over the table and hid her face in them.

"Oh, I can't—help it!" she cried out wildly. "Everything's so—awful!" and she burst into tears.

Nell caught her underlip between her teeth and rose.

"Shan't we go to bed, Denis?" she said wearily.

"Yes, come along. K.K. may as well have the porridge. We've been neglecting you, old lady, haven't we, then?"

The Atom sat rigid, her shocked gaze bent stiffly on Molly's prone head.

"Oh," sobbed Molly, "I shall die—in a week—here—I—hate Aunt Kezia—I hate this house—I hate—everything! Oh, I want mother—and dad—"

The Atom got down stiffly from her chair, her gaze never leaving Molly.

Nell, in pity of the little white face, tried to put Kate Kearney into her arms, but she drew back. "I don't want her," she said.

They crept upstairs and bade each other good night.

"I—I'm sure I'll be dead when I wake up in the morning!" Molly quavered wretchedly. "I—can't breathe—in this place—there isn't room to move—I shall suffocate."

Sheila Pat was to share Nell's room. She followed her in in silence. They undressed quickly. The Atom said her prayers and got into bed. Nell knelt down, but no prayers would come. She knelt and cried into the counterpane.

After a while an austere voice smote upon her ear.

"Nell O'Brien, I'm thinkin' you're keepin' God up very late!"

Nell said a prayer—a somewhat incoherent one—and scrambled into bed.

An hour later she sat up and turned her pillow. She looked across at the little white bed that glimmered over by the window; then she burrowed her head despairingly down into the dry side of her pillow. The sight of it, as she had lifted it to turn it over, had brought to her mind the stout old rector at home. She remembered how Sheila Pat had once earnestly declared he was so nice to lean against—"just like a pillow." She quoted him beneath her breath, a humorous dimple denting her wet cheek.

"'Let us now consider our blessings—never mind the bad things. Let them go. Consider the good things. The bad things will have more than their share of our thoughts, you may be very sure!'" So Nell got her hands into position to tick off her blessings. "First, there's Denis." She paused; her slim body grew tense with sudden horror, as the thought gripped her: "Suppose Denis had gone, too!"

With an impulsiveness that was characteristic she slipped from the bed to the floor, seized up her dressing-gown, ran out on to the landing and upstairs to his room.

"Come in!"

She opened the door and was nearly blown backward down the stairs by the gale that met her.

Denis was sitting up in bed.

"You, old girl? Anything up?"

She stood in the doorway, her dressing-gown streaming out around her, her hair blowing across her face. She laughed uncertainly.

"Come out of that! Shut the door, you goose. And why on earth don't you furl your sails? Anything wrong with the Atom?"

She shut the door with slow care.

"No," she said; "she's pretending to be asleep."

There was a little pause. She buttoned up her dressing-gown slowly.

"You're not walking in your sleep, are you?" he suggested, with a little laugh. He swung himself off the bed and came towards her; he put his hands on her shoulders. "Now, twin, out with it! What did you come for, eh?"

She gave a little childish struggle under his warm hands; she looked up into his face.

"I had to, Denis! A dreadful conviction has come upon me that she'll give us soft-boiled eggs for breakfast!"

He swung her softly to and fro.

"Well, you needn't have come to give me nightmare just because you're going to have it! Was it the action of a twin, I ask?"

She laughed softly, irresistibly.

"Oh, oh, Denis, your floor's swamped! What will Aunt Kezia say?"

He turned his head lazily and surveyed the floor over by the window.

"It'll dry," he observed with equanimity.

She eyed the window, flung as wide as it would go.

"You *mustn't* have it so wide, Denis! You really mustn't!"

"D'you want to murder your twin? Why, I'd be dying of suffocation! There're *roofs* all round, Nell! Beastly houses stuck all on top of us—almost in our back yard! I can't get a breath of air even now!"

The toilet cover was wildly fluttering its corners; a towel had been blown from the towel horse and danced merrily in a corner; one curtain was streaming, a wet limp rag, out into the night, the other was whirling in graceful curves across the room; Denis's tie had twined itself round the leg of a chair.

She gave a little laugh.

"If you won't shut the window, I will! And," glancing down at her bare toes, "I don't feel the least bit inclined to paddle just now."

"Then don't."

"But you *will* shut it—"

"But I won't!"

She looked out into the darkness where the curtain waved forlornly.

"Seriously, Denis—"

"Seriously, Nell, it's in bed you ought to be, not to mention your poor twin!"

"You see, I've got a conscience."

"More noodle you! Go and sleep it off."

"Sure now, asthore, you'll not be refusin' your own twin?" she cooed.

"You're a beastly little humbug!"

He went across to the window and banged it down. The bang echoed startlingly in the night.

"Oh, Denis, you've shut the curtain out!"

"Eh? Oh, well, it can stay out."

A loud whisper hissed with disconcerting suddenness through the keyhole.

"Denis O'Brien, are you asleep?"

Nell turned to him with a little gasp.

"Denis, I—I can't stand any more of her to-night!" Her small fingers caught his arm with sudden desperation.

"Here, in you go!" He picked her up and deposited her in the bed. "Keep quiet," he said peremptorily.

He emitted a loud and very realistic yawn.

"Denis O'Brien!"

"Is it dreaming I am?" he observed in a sleepy voice.

"Apparently you are!" came the sharp retort through the keyhole.

"Is that you, Aunt Kezia?" he queried in a surprised voice. "Isn't it time you were in bed?"

"I wish to speak to you at once!"

"I'm here, close to the keyhole."

"Open the door!"

"Oh! Er—you know—my costume—rather primitive, you know—" His absurd air of coyness brought an irrepressible giggle from the bed.

"Please don't try to be funny! Unlock your door at once!"

"It's never locked at all." He opened it so suddenly that Miss Kezia nearly fell headlong into the room. He caught her in his arms. "Are you hurt? Sure? Well, what is it now? A mouse? Let me go and kill him!"

Miss Kezia had righted herself; she stood, candle in hand, glaring at him angrily. The light flickered over her gaunt face and weird night-cap, over the severe and scanty folds of her sombre dressing-gown.

"I heard a window closed," she began.

"Window? I say, Aunt Kezia, don't be nervous, but—er—don't London burglars generally open windows? Let's find a poker. I," quoth he, bravely, "will protect you."

"It—wasn't you?" Miss Kezia hesitated.

Apparently he did not hear. He was gently but firmly ejecting her from his room. Together they searched the house, but found no suggestion of a burglar. Miss Kezia went back reluctantly to her bed.

"Let us trust she'll be visited with a plague of nightmare burglars!" Denis sent after her cheerfully.

Nell, creeping back to her room, heard through the half-open door a murmur. She looked in, and saw a small pig-tailed figure sitting up in bed clasping something black to its bosom.

"Oh, my own K.K.—did I say I wasn't wantin' you, asthore? 'Twas only because I was frightened I'd cry, like that silly Molly. I didn't mean it, K.K. Oh, I didn't! 'Twas cruel of me to say it, dear—" The murmur was broken, full of tears.

Nell went back softly up a few stairs; then came down again, with a little stumble and an "Oh!"

She could not help an apprehensive thought of Miss Kezia and burglars. When she entered the bedroom Sheila Pat lay still, apparently fast asleep.

Trotting across the floor, back to the petticoat she had purloined from a chair, went a sedate little Kate Kearney.

CHAPTER II

"Four and threepence," said Denis, with his head up the chimney.

"Sure?" said Nell, doubtfully. "I've added it up three times, and it hasn't come to that once."

"Then there's no doubt about it; four and threepence 'tis, my dear!"

A pause. A scream.

"Oh, Denis, rescue them!"

A horrible smell of burning ensued. Denis eyed the smoking stockings with equanimity.

"O dear," sighed Nell, "and there was only one tiny hole in them. It's all your fault, Denis. You shouldn't be rude to me, when your head's such a beautiful target."

But Denis had emerged from the chimney, and was quietly smoking his cigarette in the open room.

"Jolly good idea, old girl. Twig? Every time I want to do a smoke, we'll burn a pair of stockings—they'd out-smell Patsy O'Driscoll's cigars!"

"Denis," Nell spoke with a puckered brow, "how much *is* five cakes when they're four for threepence halfpenny?"

"Nell, your grammar! It makes me feel faint!"

"'Are,' then. You're only trying to gain time. Oh, Atom, don't move! Kate Kearney's splendid like that. I *must* get her."

Denis looked over her shoulder as she dashed in a rapid pencil sketch. He glanced across at Molly and winked. It was a family joke that everything Nell began—accounts, sewing, tidying-up—ended, on the slightest possible pretext, in a sketch.

"Oh, Denis," Molly besought nervously, "I *know* Aunt Kezia will smell your cigarette!"

He struck an attitude.

"I defy her! Shall an O'Brien be cowed by a Scotch woman, and in his stronghold, too? Shall a young man who is also a bank clerk be frightened of a mere ignoramusess—oh, Lor', Molly, hide me—hide me—here she comes!"

Molly flung down the stocking she was darning.

"Oh, Denis!" she gasped, jumping up and knocking over her chair. "Oh—"

But Denis had subsided on to the old lounge, with his head buried in the cushion, and Molly realised she had been "had." She made a wild rush at him, K.K. joined in the fray, and Nell's model was gone.

"Pommel me as much as you like," cried he, weakly. "That's the third time to-day you've swallowed Aunt Kezia!"

"I should think she would be rather indigestible," opined Nell, putting in a few finishing touches. "Denis, what do you think of the way these chrysanthemums have faded? Only two days, and they cost half a crown!"

"I'll get you some more."

Nell looked thoughtful; she stubbed her paper viciously.

"I begin to fancy paupers oughtn't to indulge in flowers."

"Oh, Irish paupers ought," he declared airily.

The Atom arose, shook out her skirts, and proceeded to the door.

"Where are you going, Sheila Pat?"

"Downstairs," was the staid reply.

Once outside, she stopped to smooth her hair; then she stood considering, with a thoughtful brow. She went into her bedroom, dragged a chair to the toilet table, scrambled on to it, and anxiously examined the pair of slim legs displayed in the glass. What she saw displeased her; she stamped angrily, and toppled off the chair with a crash.

"What's up?" came a musical shout from the direction of the "Stronghold."

"Nothin' at all!" responded the Atom, with unabated dignity, though she was obliged for the moment to stand on one leg. She waited a minute, then lifting her loose frock, wiggled round and round in her efforts to unfasten her petticoat. She managed it at last, shook it down to her ankles, and mounted the chair again to view the effect. Her anxious face fell; she sighed heavily, and slowly climbed to the floor. She fumbled at the fastening of her petticoat, pulling it well up, then left the room. She went down the stairs till she reached the last flight that faced the front door. She sat down on the top stair and waited. The dusk deepened; the clock ticked on and on down in the hall, but the little pale face glimmered patiently at the top of the stairs. Presently a key grated in the lock of the door; Sheila Pat rose. The door opened, and a big broad man in a huge ulster came heavily in. Sheila Pat took a dignified step forward, missed, in the dusk, the stair, and rolled down and down to the big man's feet.

"Ach!" exclaimed the big man, and then he made noises that interested Sheila Pat, because they made her think of the hens in Biddy O'Regan's cottage. She rose; her cheeks were scarlet with shame.

"Are you hurrt?" exclaimed the big man.

"Not at all. Please," said the Atom, with a dignity a good deal bigger than herself, "please don't mention it. 'Tis a visit I've come to pay you," she added.

"Ach!" said the big man again.

Over a large and very fierce mustache, all grey bristles, his eyes were twinkling down at her.

"Pray come in," he said, and opened the door of the room opposite the dining room. The Atom's face kindled triumphantly as she looked round. Miss Kezia's grim voice seemed to hover alluringly round the solid mahogany chairs and table.

"You are not to enter this room. Remember, I have forbidden you."

Sheila Pat climbed on to one of the big chairs and sat down with a complacent smile.

Herr Schmidt eyed her anxiously.

"You are quite sure you are not hurt, meine liebe? It was a bad fall, a very bad fall."

Sheila Pat looked surprised. As a matter of fact her left elbow was smarting badly, and her left ankle bone, too, but in the O'Brien phraseology, this did not signify a "hurt." Moreover she objected to his alluding again to her undignified entrance into the hall. She gave her skirts a pull, and turned the conversation.

"How-d'you-do?" she said.

He came forward and gravely shook hands.

"It is ze fine day, hein?" he observed, with a curious elephantine anxiety to be properly polite to his very polite visitor.

The Atom's eyes turned to the window and studied the brilliant pink sky beyond it.

"The fine day, is it? It's not so bad for London," she observed in a disparaging voice.

"You come from Ireland?"

"Yes."

He peered into the rigid little face and understood.

"I come from Shermany," he said gently. "Little one, you will return some day."

The Atom said nothing.

"You haf ze nice little dog." Herr Schmidt changed the conversation cheerfully. "What do you call him?"

"She isn't a him at all," the Atom said scornfully; "'tis herself's a lady! An' her name's Kate Kearney."

"Ach!" said Herr Schmidt.

Sheila Pat looked at him gravely.

"I am very small for my age," she began in an anxious voice. "I'm not very young really. I'm more than six. I'm quite nine weeks more."

"Quite very old," he agreed heartily. "And now you will eat and drink with me, hein?" He was opening a cupboard. "It is a very goot cake. I am what you call an old sweet-teeth. And the drink will not harm you; it is sweet and hot—it is made by my old mother." He poured out two glasses and handed her one.

"We will drink and be friends, eh?"

She hesitated.

"'Tis wondhring I am just what a lodger *is*," she explained. "I've never met one before, you see. Nell turned up her nose at you and said she'd never be dhramin' Aunt Kezia was so bad as to have a lodger."

"Your aunt is a very kind laty; she allows me to live here, while I am far from Shermany," he said gravely.

The Atom looked interested; after a pause of wonder she dismissed the question of her aunt's being a kind lady, and observed:—

"Is that all? We'll drink then and be friends. I hope you won't mind if I don't love you *very* much, because you're not Irish, you see."

He declared he would be satisfied with what degree of affection she thought fit to bestow on him. She lifted her glass.

"'Tis Sheila Patricia Kathleen O'Brien I'm called, but *you* must be callin' me Miss O'Brien."

"Ach, so, of course. And I," he bowed deeply, "am Herr Schmidt, Miss O'Brien."

The Atom's heart rejoiced exceedingly. She put down her glass and slipped off her chair. Gravely she bowed her head, and the pig-tail stuck out with a rakish air of enjoyment. Reseating herself, she politely urged him to have some cake.

"Now we are friends, I will interdruce you to my Snowy-Breasted Pearl, Mr. Hair Smitt. He is very beautiful. I couldn't bring him with me, because, he preferred to stay in his cage." She eyed a red tooth-mark on her forefinger. "He is very high-spirited, you see. He is gold and brown and he has a white breast like pearls and snow, and he is white behind, too—just up over his extremes and both hind legs. Nell has painted him lots of times. You see, in the song, 'the snowy-breasted Pearl' is a lady, but my *dear* guinea-pig was so *'zact*, I crissened him that."

"I wish you would be so goot as to sing the song to me, Miss O'Brien."

"Is it me sing? Oh, yes. But it's rather long. Do you think you'd get tired of it at all?"

He denied such a possibility with horror.

"My mouth is rather full of cake, Mr. Hair Smitt. Do you mind waitin' a little?"

The cake disposed of, she lifted up a sweet little voice, and sang:—

"'There's a colleen fair as May,
For a year and for a day
I have sought by ev'ry way
Her heart to gain.

"'There's no art of tongue or eye
Fond youths with maidens try,
But I've tried with ceaseless sigh,
Yet tried in vain.'"

(Pause.) "I'm afraid I forget some," the Atom confessed, ashamed. "But I know all the parts about my guinea-pig," she added anxiously.

"Will you sing those parts?" he asked courteously.

She began again:—

"'Oh, thou bloomin' milk-white dove
To whom I've given my love,
Do not ever thus reprove
My consancy.

"'For if not mine, dear boy,
Oh, snowy-breasted pearl,
May I never from the fair
With life return.'

"It *ought* to be 'girl' to rhyme with 'pearl,' but, you see, he *isn't* a girl, so I made up 'boy' myself. Doesn't the song fit him *beautifully*?"

The door had been left ajar; a small black nose inserted itself in the crack with a pathetic snort.

"It is your little dog!" Herr Schmidt exclaimed. "Come in! Come in!" He gave a great fat laugh. "Come in!"

Sheila Pat slipped to the floor.

"She's shy," she explained, and went and opened the door wide.

Kate Kearney trotted in, sleek and black, giving little scriggles of love as she came. She rubbed herself against the Atom's legs, she licked her hand, she lifted superlatively great innocent eyes.

"Kate Kearney, what is it you've been doin'?" the Atom said.

K.K. went into an ecstasy of adoration; she jumped and licked the Atom's cheek, she wriggled, she ran to and fro, she gave short little whimpers, and she turned a reproachful, widely innocent gaze upon the Atom's suspicious countenance.

Sheila Pat laughed proudly.

"She always looks burstin' with goodness when she's been doin' somethin' bad," she said.

"She is a beautiful little dog."

"She got first prize at the dog show, in the cocker spaniel puppy class, an' a 'Highly Commended' in the open class."

"Ach!" said Herr Schmidt.

"Aunt Kezia doesn't like her. Molly says she would if she was a cat, because old maids always like cats, but Sarah says she won't let her give scraps to the poor starvin' creatures at all. Kate Kearney mostly stays in the Stronghold with us. Denis 'gested the name. Isn't it a good one? It's our very own room, you see, and Aunt Kezia's the enemy we keep—" There was a jerk, a pause.

Herr Schmidt, peering across at her, saw an agonised wave of red mount to her very brow.

"I—I think I'd better be goin' now," but she did not move.

He took a step towards her.

"Oh, oh, *please* would you mind stayin' there?" she cried out in a shrill little agitated voice.

He stopped abruptly.

"What is it, meine liebe?"

"You have been very kind, indeed, Mr. Hair Smitt." The Atom's exceedingly grown-up manner

precluded any more questions. "Thank you very much. Would you mind turnin' your back a minute?"

He moved away and looked out of the window.

Sheila Pat with trembling hands turned up her skirt and grasped the dangling petticoat beneath, but as she did it, a wicked black head emerged from beneath the table, and wicked white teeth closed on the flannel and pulled—pulled.

"K.K.! I'll *whip* you! Drop it! Oh, *drop* it, K.K.!"

But whether it was that the Atom dared not raise her voice above a whisper, or whether K.K. just felt specially naughty—anyway, she did not leave go.

And Sheila Pat's proud soul was filled with very real agony. With a despairing "Please don't turn round—I'm goin'!" she fled out into the hall, stumbling along, with K.K. and her petticoat dragging her sideways. She sank on to the lowest stair and let her petticoat go; she watched K.K. drag it down her legs, across the hall. He had treated her so beautifully! He had behaved as if she were a grown-up. All had gone so well—and what would he think of her now? A vision of Biddy O'Regan's numerous babies trotting about with various garments dangling about their legs rose up before her eyes. Only babies let their things come down, the Atom thought, and she shuddered.

K.K. brought the petticoat to her with a conciliatory wag, and laid it gently in her lap. The Atom took no notice. She was sure he had forgotten how she had tumbled down the stairs, and now—K.K. pushed a moist nose into her hand. "Oh, K.K., is it lovin' me you are after *that*?" She pointed to the petticoat with a short but tragic finger. K.K. laid a sweet head on her knee, with upturned eyes adoring.

CHAPTER III

"I'm getting quite fond of our Stronghold," said Nell. "That's crooked, Denis!"

"What if it is, and you an artist! I'm not going to take the nail out,—no, not if it's standing on its head. Isn't my thumb pathetic pulp already?"

"*Gerrls* can't use a hammer! *Gerrls* always hit more thumb than anything else!" from the foot of the step-ladder came an impish voice.

"That you, Atom?" Denis flung himself down the steps. Sheila Pat fled, squealing, down the stairs and into the garden.

"*What* we would have done without this room to call our own, my brain refuses to imagine!" Nell observed.

"Wasn't it just like mother to think of it?" queried Molly, wistfully.

Nell nodded.

"And our teas! Thank goodness, Aunt Kezia desires us to have tea up here, in case some of her friends turn up. It's something to be looked upon as savages, after all, Mol!"

She was digging a drawing pin through a mounted photograph of a beautiful Irish wolf hound. She touched his head softly with her finger before she turned away. He was Denis's dog, and he had been left at Kilbrannan with friends. She picked up a photograph of her little chestnut mare. She stood with it in her hands, then turned suddenly and put it away in her drawer of the table. The hound was still Denis's, but Acushla was sold—sold to the same friends who were taking care of the dog. Nell clinched her teeth. The other horses had been sold, too. She gathered up a pile of photographs taken by herself and Denis, and laid them in her drawer. For a minute the sick longing for them all, for her home, her father and mother, gripped her and held her silent. Then she turned to Molly.

"Hark at Sheila Pat's accent! Whose benefit is it for?"

Molly looked out at the dingy scrap of garden.

"There's that little boy in the garden next door. Denis is chasing Sheila Pat."

They reappeared in the Stronghold, the Atom's wild little face emerging from beneath Denis's arm, her legs and arms kicking and struggling. Denis seized the tablecloth, hauled it off with a clatter of falling lesson books, drawing board, pencils, and paint-box. "Hang on, Nell! We'll toss her."

Miss Kezia, entering the room unnoticed, was surprised to find her youngest niece bouncing in the air.

"Aunt—Ke—" With a burst of terrified laughter Molly smothered the rest of the word.

Denis and Nell, holding the tablecloth, with Sheila Pat enthroned in its middle, turned innocently to their aunt.

"I came," said Miss Kezia, "to see if there had been any accident."

"Won't you sit down?" suggested Denis, with a wave of his disengaged hand toward a chair. "There's been no accident at all. What made you think there had?"

"The noise!" It was snapped out like the click of a box being shut.

"Noise?" He looked surprised. Sheila Pat, tailor-wise in her tablecloth, regarded Miss Kezia thoughtfully.

"May I ask," resumed her aunt, "if you are playing a game?"

"Jolly good game," Denis agreed smilingly.

"And it necessitates the smashing and throwing to the floor of—those?" pointing majestically. "And the ruining of the tablecloth?"

"Not necessarily, Aunt Kezia; Sheila Pat's only an Atom—I don't expect she'll tear the cloth."

"You will not have another, in any case," Miss Kezia said. A little flush rose to Denis's brow; his mouth shut into a thin line. Then he looked at Nell.

"Nell, amn't I right in understanding that this is *our* cloth?"

"Quite, Denis."

"Have—" exclaimed Miss Kezia, suddenly, "have you been knocking nails into my walls?"

"We'll pull them out," said Nell coldly, "since you object to them."

Miss Kezia actually smiled a grim little smile.

"How very Irish! What good would that do, when the holes would still be there? It is most tiresome! It ruins the walls! It really—good gracious! Call your dog off!—Go *away*!" Miss Kezia, red-faced, undignified, was striving wildly to extricate her skirt from K.K.'s teeth.

For a few moments Denis and Nell's attention was engaged elsewhere; each was rearranging assiduously the folds of the cloth. And in the middle of it Sheila Pat sat and chuckled softly.

Then Denis turned.

"K.K., drop it!" he said sternly, and K.K. obeyed with a sad little wriggle.

"It's a most objectionable dog," Miss Kezia said breathlessly. "I insist that you make no more holes in my paper!" And she marched from the room. Denis sank on to the lounge, stuffed the cushion into his mouth, and wildly waved his legs in the air.

The door reopened—Nell made a frantic dash at his legs. "Of course you understand that I will not have that guinea-pig brought into the house!" Miss Kezia said, her eyes on Denis, who at the sound of her voice dropped the cushion and sat up with a ludicrous face of dismay.

She retired once more, and for a minute there was dead silence in the room she had left. Then Nell fell into Denis's arms. "Oh—you gossoon!"

On the floor, where she had been ignominiously dumped, Sheila Pat sat in her tablecloth and hugged Kate Kearney.

Denis arose and seized her pig-tail.

"Let's attack the garden now, Atom."

Nell was looking out of the window.

"There's that pretty little lame boy next door. I'm going down to talk to him."

"I don't want to come, thank you," Sheila Pat said to Denis.

"Eh? Why not?"

"A person," quoted the Atom, "may have reasons."

"You're a lazy Atom," said Denis, and strolled out of the room.

"The little boy's gone in," Molly observed.

The Atom slipped out of the room and downstairs after Denis. Denis sat on an old up-turned wheelbarrow and studied a book on shorthand and the garden alternately.

"It's a problem that requires a good deal of thought," he observed lazily. "A back yard: Item—a patch of bare ground adorned with ten and a half blades of grass. Item—a narrow ridge of clay running parallel with the walls, in which flowers are presumably meant to grow. Item—a careless mosaic of china, etc. Item—a wheelbarrow. Item—a dustbin. Item—a diminutive Atom ready to turn it all into an elysium of sweet flowers."

"Go on with your readin'," said the Atom, refusing to smile, and valiantly beginning to pick up bits of china.

"The spirit is willing, but the brain is weak. I've come to a standstill. Hulloa, K.K.'s over the wall!"

"It was a cat makin' faces at her. If that little boy's there, he'll be very frightened."

"Why on earth should he be?"

"Oh, I know he will," with dire meaning.

Nell came dancing out into the garden with Molly.

"You're out of step, Mol! Kate Kearney, I saw you leap the wall after a poor pussy!"

She dug her toes into the wall and looked over.

"Can you give me that wicked little black bogy?" she called.

Sheila Pat turned and trotted towards the house.

Denis, on his wheelbarrow, eyed her inquiringly.

"Where are you off to? Going to exercise the Snowy-Panted Pearl?"

The Atom refused to acknowledge the question. She always did refuse when he miscalled her Pearl so rudely.

Over the wall Nell accepted a limp Kate Kearney from the little shy, fair-haired boy she had accosted, and held a conversation with him.

"Nell!" came a faint voice. "Nell! I'm caught! Oh, *Nell*!"

"Someone is calling," observed Denis, from his barrow.

Nell looked round.

"It's Molly. I thought she was here. Stewart, you hear that cry? It comes from the mouth of my sister Molly. She has a predilection for falling into slop-pails, jamming her fingers into doors—*Coming*!" she sang out in response to a louder cry. "Good-bye, Stewart. Another time you must see my littlest sister." She dropped to the ground.

Up in Molly's room she found wild confusion, and, in the midst of it, Molly hanging out of the wardrobe.

"I'm caught, Nell! Oh, it's killing me! You might have hurried—oh!"

"Hair this time," observed Nell, untwining and pulling, while the house echoed with Molly's screams. Her hair had caught in the hooks of a blouse hanging on one of the pegs. They were safety hooks, which were one of the trials of Molly's life.

When she was freed at last, Nell looked round the room littered with boots, hats, frocks, collars.

"Whence?" she said, with a wave of her hand.

"I was looking for my thimble."

"Oh!" said Nell, expressively.

"Nell," shouted Denis, from somewhere, "come up and look at these beastly grey collars!"

She ran up to his room. The laundress was a grievance of his.

She sat on his bed and sympathised; then she observed, "Denis, tell me what this Pennington is like."

"Haven't I told you? I'll look a fine guy this evening in a dirty collar!"

"'Not half a bad chap. See him mimic old Tellbridge, his uncle—simply ripping,'" mocked she, suggestively.

He laughed. "Is that all I told you? Well, it's his chief accomplishment. He's a little chap—very dark. I say, I told you old Tellbridge apologised that his wife hadn't called, because she's abroad, didn't I? He isn't a bad old chap, only he's got such a beastly pompous manner. Pennington calls him Uncle Pom-Pom. Well, he hasn't got much of a bargain with me!" He gave a quick sigh. "I do loathe figures, Nell!" Then he laughed again. "Aunt Kezia has been talking to me about the hours she expects me to keep! 'Pon my word, I believe she thinks I'm not a day over eleven!"

At ten o'clock he came meekly home.

"Please, Aunt Kezia, I hope I'm not late?"

"I told you ten o'clock. You are punctual."

He went up to the Stronghold. He found Nell huddled over the account-book.

"Well?" she said.

"Where's Molly?"

"Just gone to bed."

"What are you doing?"

She laughed.

"I'm *trying* to do accounts. I've been trying more or less all the evening."

"More foolish you! What's the use of accounts, anyway? If the money's gone, it's gone!"

"Yes, but still—why, you see, Denis, we—we've just got to be careful now, and I must see how our money dwindles when we never spend a farthing! And I can't get to-day right. I come threepence short."

"Put it down to stamps."

"I do my accounts honourably!"

"I'll help you. Read out items."

"Woman with baby—india rubber—watch for boy," she enumerated glibly.

"Eh? Woman with an india rubber baby and a watchful boy? How much that little lot?"

She was surreptitiously trying to tear a leaf from the account-book.

"Fivepence," she said, "and there was the hair ribbon for Molly—tenpence three farthings—that is one and threepence, three farthings, isn't it?"

He reached out a long arm and captured the book. On the leaf opposite the items for the day, dangling, half torn out, was a pencil sketch of Kate Kearney.

"I—I forgot," said Nell. "I really didn't know I was doing it!"

"You know it's forbidden in this book," sternly.

"Plase, your Honour, I'm sorry."

"You've got her expression splendidly. What had she been doing?"

"Eating Molly's hair-brush."

"Injured innocence. It's ripping, Nell! You'll be a second Rosa Bonheur yet!"

She sighed.

He glanced at her quickly.

"We'll manage it somehow, old girl!"

"So we will! I'll sit on the pavement and draw pictures in vivid chalks, as a beginning, and with my earnings—oh, up and up I'll go—"

"To the Royal Academy—a studio in South Kensington—private exhibitions—your photograph in all the papers—interviews—'The charming young genius who has taken the artist world by storm greeted me with a delightful amiability. She afforded me a glimpse of a dimple and a half. I understand that her intimate friends are treated to three whole ones—'"

"Oh, be quiet. Tell me if I've done the adding and subtracting right."

"You have! Nell, you're getting on. Meanwhile, we're threepence short. Three whole pennies!"

"Threepence is threepence."

He looked surprised.

"Are you sure?"

"I *can't* think what it is."

"Account-book?" he suggested blandly.

On the occasion of Nell's first essay at accounts, she had worried and fought and wrestled over a missing sixpence, till Sheila Pat brilliantly bethought her of the account-book, price sixpence. Thereafter the account-book was a family joke.

"*Chestnuts*!" said Denis, in solemn tone.

"Oh, you jewel! That's it. Now I'm beautifully right." She scribbled it down.

He picked up a piece of stick, smooth and round. Nell glanced at it and laughed.

"That's Molly's! She's been sitting with a bit of hair rolled round it all the evening!"

It was the ambition of Molly's life to have waving hair like Nell's. Secretly she tried many ways to make it curl. Pencils, pens, bits of stick, all were requisitioned in guilty secrecy.

"Now tell me about your evening, Denis. Who was there?"

"Uncle Pom-Pom and Pennington, of course. Chap named Lancaster, and a queer little man—Yovil, I think his name is—all grey and black bristles. He used to be the elocution master at Pennington's school. He writes, Nell!"

"Oh, what does he write?"

"There was an article of his in last month's *Imperial* on Coleridge. I'm going to get it. Pennington goes to his place every Tuesday—in the evening; some of the other boys who used to go to his school go too, and they talk and read and recite. No fee, you know; he just does it because he likes it—has an idea that when you've got to leave school to be a beastly clerk or something of that kind, you let your reading slip. Pennington says he's cranky on Billy S.!"

"Don't be so irreverent, Denis!"

There was a pause.

"And the other—Lancaster—what is he like?"

"Decent sort of chap, I should think. Don't know much about him—awfully quiet—hardly spoke to any one. Pennington seems to think a lot of him. He beat me at billiards, anyway. Father's got a pot of money. There, that's all I know."

Nell sat gazing into the fire. Suddenly her mouth dimpled.

"Denis, what do you think I've been doing this evening, beyond accounts?"

"Daubing."

"No. I've been looking at things from Aunt Kezia's point of view."

"Oh, lor'!" he said heavily.

"And I've come to the conclusion it's pretty hard on her to have four practically unknown relatives dumped down on her."

"We're not sacks of coals," he remonstrated, "and she offered for the post. And we efface ourselves as much as possible. And we're rather nice, you know."

"Sheila Pat went down to Herr Schmidt this evening, and requested him to take her for a walk, as she felt stifled. He did take her, and Aunt Kezia disapproved of that! Molly bet me I couldn't run up and down the stairs six times without a pause. I did it, and she disapproved of *that*. Poor Molly, trying to jump a hurdle,—two chairs arranged by me,—fell and hurt herself badly. She disapproved of *that*. Certainly she broke the chair," reflectively; "still, it seems to me Aunt Kezia disapproves of everything."

"And on top of all that you fall to pitying her! I can't rise to your heights at all, my dear." Nell, chin in hand, puckered her brow thoughtfully.

"Why, you see, from her point of view we're a horrid nuisance—"

"Oh, are we, indeed? I wish Sheila Pat could hear you! Nell, if I don't go to bed at once, you'll arrive at the point of considering our respected aunt a martyred saint, and us the bad little imps who got her her crown! Well, anyway, the imps are useful! For isn't it a grand thing to be a martyr, and aren't we helping her to be one? I'm going to bed."

"Lazy!"

"My dear, remember I am now a working man. Remember what my earnings are to go towards—" He broke off suddenly. "Nell, why can't I write a book or a play, and make my fortune?"

"You will soon."

He shook his head.

"I can see it's all rubbish almost as I write it. No, Nell, you'll have to give us back Kilbrannan, alone!"

"I won't, Denis! You know you're much too conceited to let me do it. Mustn't you have your finger in every pie? And don't speak as if it isn't ours still! It's only let—"

"So it is!" He seized her round her waist. "We'll do it together—you and I—turn 'em out—buy back all the horses—and meanwhile—meanwhile, we'll economise like a couple of German Jews!"

She looked at the jar of great golden chrysanthemums, at a large box of Fuller's chocolates he had brought them that day, and at her account-book where the money seemed to run away so mysteriously.

"Oh," quoth Denis, "it isn't the things like that that use up the money; it's the little things—copper here, copper there; 'Take care of the pence and the pounds will take care of themselves,' you know. That's sound commercial sense."

"Is it?" said Nell. "It *sounds* all right."

"It's as right as your hand which isn't your left. I'm going to put out the lamp."

CHAPTER IV

"Sarah," said Sheila Pat, "who's in the drawing-room?"

"Mrs. Barclay, miss."

"Oh!" said Sheila Pat.

"Bread and butter—cakes—best milk jug—smallest spoons—that's right." Sarah's muttering ended with a sigh of relief.

"Sarah, are you very busy?"

"I've took the things up, miss, and now I've got to wash up the dinner things."

"Sarah," wheedlingly, "let me help you."

"Oh, no, miss, certainly not, and you oughter be upstairs, too."

"I don't wish to be there," with dignity settling herself on the table. "Sarah, haven't you any silver to clean now? I do like cleaning silver."

"Oh, no, miss, and you're making yourself dirty and all!"

A pause, while Sarah bustled about and the Atom watched her.

"Sarah," sternly issued the small voice, "I inquest you to give me some work *at once*!"

"Oh—oh, certingly, miss, yes, miss." Sarah, in a flurry, routed out some shining pots and pans

and gave them to the Atom to dust. Sheila Pat took them and examined them carefully. There was a long silence, while Sarah made up the fire and left the room to fill the coal box. When she returned she saw the Atom sitting in stiff idleness beside her pots and pans.

"What, done them already, miss! Well, you *'ave* been quick; and how nice and bright you've made them look, to be sure!"

The Atom fixed her with a stony eye.

"I haven't touched them," said she.

Sarah collapsed in dire confusion.

"I may wear short dresses," resumed the Atom, coldly, "my fam'ly is resisting about that,—but I am not a *baby*, Sarah Jane Jones."

Meekly and in awe, Sarah provided her with real work in the drying of cups and saucers and plates. The Atom unbent over her rubbing.

"Have you any brothers, Sarah?"

"Yes, miss, two."

"How old are they?"

"One's three and t'other four and a 'alf, miss."

"Have you any sisters, Sarah?"

"Yes, miss, three."

"How old are they?"

"Two and five and seving, miss. I'm a long way the eldest in the fambly. There's three died between me and Gladys. Father, 'e died eighteen months back, too."

"Your mother has had a lot of trouble, Sarah."

"Yes, miss, and she's mostly ailing."

"Would she like some cough medicine, do you think? You see I've got some in a bottle upstairs. I didn't use it all."

"Thank you, miss. She takes in sewing when she's able, but they pay that bad! Threepence for a blarse! Did you ever, now?"

The Atom fidgeted uncomfortably.

"I don't *quite* know what a blarse is, Sarah, not *quite*, you see."

"Why, a bodice as don't fit, miss, just 'angs loose, and you pull it in round the waist with a belt or somethink."

"Oh!" said the Atom, recognising "blouse" now, but too polite to explain.

"No," pursued Sarah, "*I'm* the worker of the fambly!"

The Atom eyed her gravely.

"You're not *very* big and strong, are you?" she queried doubtfully.

"Oh, there's a lot of work in me, miss, more'n you'd think. I can go on and on, you see. Why," proudly, "lots o' times when my back's just aching all over and my legs and feet too, I can work just as well as *hever*!"

"That's spunk, Sarah," said Denis's voice round the door.

"Oh, sir! Oh, Mr. Denis!" Sarah, in her confusion, let fall a plate. "Oh!" she cried, "four pieces! Oh!" She wrung her hands.

Denis laughed.

"My fault, Sarah; put it down to me."

But the poor little maid-of-all-work had no smile left in her; her sharp little face was puckered and drawn into ludicrous lines of woe; tears stood in her pale eyes. "'Alf a crown at least!" she moaned beneath her breath. "I'd never match it under!"

Denis glanced sharply at her. "What do you mean? You talk as if you will have to pay for it!"

"So I do, sir! Ten pounds—washing done out—pay your own breakages—no beer—no followers," she rattled off glibly.

"Do you mean Aunt Kezia makes you pay for everythin' you break?" interposed the Atom.

"Yes, miss!"

There was scorn in Denis's eye; he drew a half crown from his pocket.

"I broke it, Sarah," he said gently. "Would you mind getting the new one for me? You'd bargain better than I should. Come on, Atom, everyone's asking for you."

Sheila Pat held back.

"Is the goody-goo up there, too?"

"The what?"

"The little lame boy."

"No; only his mother. Hurry up!"

They left Sarah half weeping over his magnificent kindness. Denis little knew how from that moment he was a young god—a prince in a fairy tale—a hero—to the romantic Sarah.

Up in the drawing-room a stiff little party sat nursing empty cups. In vain Mrs. Barclay tried to unstiffen it. Her eyes met Nell's, and a gleam of amusement shone in them before she discreetly veiled them beneath decorous lids.

Miss Kezia was cross. She had been taken unawares. With a queer kind of heavy hospitality, she liked to know when a visitor was coming, that she might have cakes and scones of all sorts freshly baked. To-day she had not known, and there was nothing but bread and butter and half a dozen small cakes. So she sat, stiffly disapproving, and refused to unbend.

Sheila Pat marched in, calm and cool, greeted Mrs. Barclay with her most pronounced accent, took her seat upon a chair, pulled down her skirt, and surveyed the room.

"I have a little boy not much older than you," Mrs. Barclay began pleasantly.

"Sure I'm knowin' that already."

"He wants to know you very badly."

Dead silence.

"I hope you will be friends—you and he."

The Atom wriggled on her chair; then,

"I don't care for children much, thank you; that is," her hopeless honesty impelled her, "not some children!"

Nell broke in hastily, "I have spoken to him over the wall."

"So I heard. He is rather lonely. We do not seem to know any nice young people."

Denis suggested, "*Used* not to know?"

She laughed.

"I stand corrected. Well, I hope we shall soon know very well some very nice young people!" She rose to go.

"Will you come in to-morrow afternoon? Early—about three?"

"Oh, thanks—if Aunt—" Nell looked inquiringly at Miss Kezia.

"I have no objection."

"When will *you* come, Miss McAlister? It is so long since you have—"

"I have not much time for gadding about, thank you."

"Mind," Mrs. Barclay turned back to the others, "you are all to come!"

Clear and distinct spoke Sheila Pat.

"'Tis engaged I'll be, Mrs. Barclay."

"What do you mean, Sheila?" demanded Miss Kezia, frowning mightily.

"I shall be helping Sarah, thank you."

"What maggot have you got into your head now?"

"'Tisn't a maggot at all," calmly. "I wish to do it. Sarah's a very good girl—for London, that is—and she has too much work entirely."

"Sheila, when I wish you to help in the menial work of the house, I will ask you to do so. Tell Mrs. Barclay at once that you will be very glad to accept her kind invitation."

The Atom heaved a most palpable sigh.

"I will come, then, thank you," she amended her aunt's words.

"Of all the rude little grumps!" Molly attacked her later on.

"I don't care! I do erject to goody-goos!"

"Who is a goody-goo?"

"Why, that silly little Stewart, of course."

"How do you know?"

"Know, is it?" scoffed the Atom. "Hasn't he got big blue eyes and fair hair and a lame leg? Sure I know the sort!" her pig-tail jerking angrily. "And I just can't bear them, Molly O'Brien!"

"I don't see how you can tell. Denis has blue eyes—"

"Oh, *Denis*!" in a tone of strong contempt for Molly's lack of understanding. "There are eyes and eyes!"

CHAPTER V

"Is my pig-tail quite tidy, Nell?"

"There isn't a hair out of place, Sheila Pat. Atom, do let me do your hair nicely just for once."

"I prefer a pig-tail, thank you."

Nell disappeared into the wardrobe in search of a skirt. When she emerged she stared incredulously at the Atom.

Sheila Pat was wriggling her head into a pink cotton frock.

"What on *earth* are you putting that on for?"

"I prefer it to that," with a nod at a loose white cashmere frock lying on the bed.

"Are you mad, Sheila Pat? Why, it's November. Where did you dig it up from?"

"One of the trunks. Will you hook it, please, Nell?"

"Indeed, I won't. Take it off at once. Don't be so silly."

"I'm never cold. Do let me wear it, Nell." Sheila Pat laid her delicate little face wheedlingly against Nell's arm. "Do let me."

"I can't, asthore. You'd catch cold."

When the Atom indulged in her rare coaxing she was hard to resist.

"I'll put my coat on, too, Nell!"

But Nell was firm.

"No, Sheila Pat. And why do you want to wear it, anyway?"

"It's just a little longer than that one. Why, I show my *knees* in that, Nell!"

"What's it matter if you do, you goose?"

"I do not *like* showin' my knees. And I want pertickly to look grown-up to-day."

"Why?"

"Persons," quoth Sheila Pat, austerely, "can't take liberties with grown-ups. They can't talk to them if you don't wish them to," her pronouns getting somewhat mixed.

"Whom don't you want to talk to you?"

"That little boy—Stewart."

"But why not?" Nell peered at her laughingly through her hair.

"I know him. I've got him at home in that book Mrs. Norton gave me," laboriously wriggling out of the much-desired cotton frock. "He saves up all his pocket money in a money box and buys himself a new coat with it. And he'd sooner learn his Catchykism than play cricket. I know him!"

"Well," said Nell, tying on her hair ribbon, "of all the nasty little hard-hearted wretches you're the worst!"

"Oh, I'm very sorry he's lame," with belated consideration, "but I *won't* have him talk to me!"

"I don't believe he's a bit goody, poor little chap, and, anyway, why should he want to talk to you?"

This aspect of the case had not struck Sheila Pat. She considered it as she pulled on the cashmere frock.

"Amn't I Irish, then?" she decided gloomily. "Of course he'll want to talk to me."

"I'm going to see how Molly's getting on," Nell said.

In Molly's room chaos greeted her. On the floor stood a drawer, its contents scattered everywhere. The bed was strewn with blouses, hats, a pair of shoes, collars, while Molly herself, red-faced, dishevelled, attired in skirt and petticoat-bodice, was wildly turning out another drawer.

"Ready, Mol?" inquired Nell, blandly.

"Oh, don't, Nell! I can't help it! I *can't* find my grey blouse—the one with the white piping—I've hunted *everywhere*!"

"In the box?"

"N-no! I forgot!" making a dash at the dress basket. "Oh, don't laugh, Nell. I looked *everywhere* else!"

"Of course you did, when we decided to keep all our nicer blouses in there! Do hurry up. Here, I'd better do you up now. Fancy all this fuss just to go next door! I was going in my blue flannel that I had on this morning, but Aunt Kezia gave such stringent orders. Isn't it absurd?"

"Ridiculous. Oh, you're pinching a bit of neck in!"

Nell, at the door, looked back.

"Sure you've got everything? Your hair ribbon?"

"Yes, everything."

When Nell and the Atom were ready they went back to Molly's room. Worse chaos than before greeted them. Molly was crawling under the bed.

"I've lost one of my shoes! Oh, I'm *so* hot! And now I suppose my nose will get red!"

The Atom, wise beyond her years, found the shoe in a hat box, and they sallied forth.

"Thank goodness, we're not needing hats and things," sighed Nell, "or we'd never start at

all!"

"*Nell*," on the next-door doorstep came an agonised whisper from Molly, "I've forgotten my waist belt!"

In the drawing-room Sheila Pat ensconced herself behind a table, and kept a wary eye on Stewart. Presently his mother sent him across to her. He came and stood in front of her; the Atom gazed over his head.

Nell caught her eye and frowned meaningly.

"Sure, thin, haven't you a tongue at all?" Sheila Pat obediently opened the conversation.

"Y-yes."

"Why aren't ye usin' it, thin?"

"I—I—don't know."

"Well!" said Sheila Pat.

The boy's fair little face flushed scarlet.

"I—I've got a rabbit!" he burst out desperately.

"Um! what colour is it?"

"Fawn and white. Come and look at him."

Sheila Pat hesitated. Longing to see the rabbit fought with disinclination to be alone with Stewart.

"If you'll promise not to talk goody, I'll come," she said cautiously. Suddenly he changed; he turned on her a small, passionate face.

"I don't want you—you little beast!"

Sheila Pat gasped, and grew slowly red.

"You are very rude," she said with tremulous dignity.

"I don't care if I am! D'you think you're the queen or what? *I* don't want to speak to you. I can't bear you!"

He limped away to the other end of the room.

Sheila Pat sat very still and quiet for a while, then she rose and went after him.

"I think, perhaps, I wasn't *very* perlite," she said stiffly.

"Come and see my rabbit," he rejoined.

Sheila Pat went with alacrity; she was reflecting satisfiedly that the goody-goo little boy of her imaginings would never have called her "a little beast." Still she was not completely reassured. Together they examined the rabbit, and the Atom told him all about her Pearl, and nothing "goody-gooish" appeared about him. But as they went back to the house for tea, she sounded him cautiously.

"Are you fond of cricket?" keeping a stern eye on his face while she awaited his answer.

He hesitated.

"No," he said.

"*I knew it!*"

"Awful clever of you!" he muttered sarcastically.

"I s'pose," she went on as they reached the door, "you'd sooner be at your Catchykism now than cricket?"

"Yes," he said.

"I knew it!" gasped the Atom, and fled into the house before him.

From a far corner she presently accosted her hostess.

"Is that a silk *blouse* you're wearin', Mrs. Barclay?"

"Yes, my dear."

"Did you give more than threepence for it?"

"Sheila Pat!" stammered Molly.

"A little!" Mrs. Barclay's fair little faded face was vividly amused.

"I'm glad you did," with grave approval. "But Sarah's mother only gets threepence for the ones she makes, and she's always ailin', with a large fam'ly of babies and her husband dead and three more dead between Sarah and the next one."

"Who is Sarah?"

"She's just the little maid at Aunt Kezia's. She's a real good worker—for a Londoner, of course, I'm meanin'!"

"And her mother makes blouses?"

"Yes, and only threepence for them, but perhaps they wouldn't be silk."

"No, they wouldn't be silk, but it is shocking to hear how badly they pay for such work."

"Is it at sales?" Nell queried, looking very wise.

Mrs. Barclay smiled.

"Oh, no, my dear. The big shops and wholesale places buy hundreds of blouses that they sell off cheap, and that is what they pay for the making of them. What is that noise?" she broke off.

"It's rats!" opined Stewart, shyly.

But it was Kate Kearney scratching at the door. When she was let in she came, wriggling and wagging, lifting great pathetic eyes to the faces of her own people.

"You bad little K.K.," laughed Nell. "What door did you get in at, I wonder?"

Kate Kearney trotted sedately over to the Atom's corner, and Stewart followed her with a piece of cake.

"Mind she doesn't bite!" jeered the Atom, rudely.

He flushed, but did not answer. He gave K.K. two pieces of cake, then turned politely to Sheila Pat:—

"Would you like to give her some?"

He held out the cake.

His politeness—to her a sure and distasteful sign of goodyness—riled the stormy Atom past bearing.

"Is it *afraid* you are?" she cried scornfully.

He raised his arm with a sudden fierce gesture and flung the cake straight into her face. It bounced off her small nose and lit with a thud on a chair. In silence they glared at each other for a minute; then he turned to Kate Kearney, thrust his hand right into her protesting mouth, and walked off.

Sheila Pat sat trembling on her chair. Twice that afternoon she had been insulted, and by the goody-goo!

During the leave-takings Sheila Pat and Stewart coldly ignored each other's existence.

In the hall at No. 35 wrath awaited them in the shape of Miss Kezia, who had just returned home from some shopping. She faced them dramatically, her tall, thin figure drawn to its full height.

"You mean to tell me that you left *my* house, and made an afternoon call on a friend of *mine*—like *that*?" she cried, pointing a long and disapproving forefinger at her nieces.

Molly clapped terrified hands to her waist.

Through Nell's mind there darted two lines of one of Denis's nonsense verses:—

> "She stood, a tall, and bony queen,
> And eyed her subjects very keen."

"What's wrong with us at all?" demanded the Atom, indignantly.

"No hats! No coats! No gloves! House-shoes—"

"Ought we to have put on our outdoor things just to go next door?" exclaimed Nell, opening her eyes wide.

"Of course you ought! It is most reprehensible! You are not in the wilds now! No one thinks of going into the street in London without being properly clothed—"

Nell almost chanted aloud:—

> "'Her tongue it wagged, her tongue it wogged,
> Her subjects then she up and flogged!'"

"Eileen," Miss Kezia broke off sharply, "don't look so idiotic! You look as if you think it is funny!"

"Do I, aunt?" said Nell, meekly.

"I cannot think how you, at least, did not know better," pursued her aunt.

"You see at home we are as often without hats and things as with them."

"Well, please to remember you are in London now!"

Miss Kezia turned and marched up the stairs.

> "'The Queen turned tail and up she went,
> Her subjects then their clothes did rent!'"

chuckled Nell, and sank down laughing on to a hall chair.

The Atom disappeared in the direction of her Pearl. It was a cherished conviction, on her part (and on no one else's), that the Pearl moped in her absence.

"Where's that boy Denis, I wonder?" Nell ran up stairs two at a time.

In the Stronghold she found a torn slip of paper on the table: "Off to Lancaster's to dine. Who sneaked my nail-brush?"

"Molly, was it you?"

"Oh, yes, I meant to put it back. Mine tumbled into the slop-pail full of dirty water."

Nell wandered into Denis's room.

"Just like Molly's, only it's masculine chaos instead of feminine!" She laughed softly, and began to tidy up. When Miss Kezia heard of his absence she drew down her long upper lip.

"Who is this Mr. Lancaster?"

"A friend of Pennington's—"

"*Mr.* Pennington, if you please. Is that all you know about him, Eileen?"

"Well," said Nell, demurely, "'decent sort of chap, I should think ... awfully quiet ... father's got a pot of money—'"

"Eileen O'Brien, how dare you speak vulgar jargon like that to me!"

"Me, aunt?" with injured innocence. "I was only quoting Denis."

"Then kindly do so no more. I object strongly to the tendency of the modern girl to use slangy, slipshod, vulgar English. I will have none of it in my house.

"I hope Denis will not come home late," she pursued. "I do not like his going out in this way—without my permission."

"He isn't a baby, Aunt Kezia! And, anyway, you were out this afternoon."

"Some boy of whom I know nothing—"

Nell interrupted impatiently, "He's a friend of Mr. Tellbridge's! Denis met him there."

"Why didn't you explain that before? Of course Mr. Tellbridge would have no one—Sheila, are you feeding that dog again?"

"Yes, Aunt Kezia."

"Then leave the room at once! You really are a most tiresome little girl!"

The Atom arose and walked from the room. It was her way of obtaining release when she considered a meal had lasted sufficiently long.

"I will not have late hours kept in my house," said Miss Kezia, with a final snap of her lips.

When ten o'clock came and went without bringing Denis, Nell began to grow anxious. Half-past ten was Miss Kezia's hour for going to bed. At twenty-eight minutes past ten she "locked up." She never varied the time by a minute, unless by special arrangement with Herr Schmidt.

Listening behind the door of the Stronghold, Nell heard her lock up as usual and retire to bed. She slipped out and down into the hall. From beneath Herr Schmidt's door there came a thin line of light.

She softly unbarred the chains and lifted down the burglar bell; then she stood listening for Denis's step. Suddenly Herr Schmidt's door opened. Nell, in the darkness of the hall, gazed expectantly at the big figure outlined against the light of the sitting room. She crept back and hid behind a coat hanging on the stand. The next moment hands fumbled against her throat.

"Ur—ur," she gurgled irrepressibly. "Oh, you tickled me!"

Herr Schmidt stumbled back.

"Himmel!" he gasped. "Ach, what is it?"

Nell emerged from the coat.

"Oh, hush! Aunt Kezia will hear you. She *mustn't* catch me down here."

A door opened overhead. A voice called over the balusters.

"Is that you, Herr Schmidt?"

"Yes, Miss McAlister, it is I. I stumble and make a noise. I beg pardon."

"It is granted. Good night, Herr Schmidt."

"You're a brick, Herr Schmidt," said Nell's pretty voice.

"A brick? A good fellow, is it?"

She nodded.

She stood in the light now, and he looked at her benignly.

"You are playing go-hide-and-find?" he suggested.

She shook her head.

"Hush! I'm waiting for my brother—to let him in. Aunt Kezia never dreams he could be so depraved as to be out after twenty-eight minutes past ten, so she has gone to bed with a serene

mind."

He looked rather troubled.

"Your aunt is a worthy lady."

"The horse is a noble animal."

He peered at her through his spectacles in ludicrous bewilderment. Nell was half sitting on, half leaning against, the marble slab of the hall table. Her head was tilted back; the light caught the ends of her roughened hair and turned them into gold, and they made a sort of halo round her mischievous face.

"Well?" she said. "You're not shocked, are you? Why, he's seventeen, Herr Schmidt. And you know if they don't dine till—say—eight o'clock, he can't very well be in by half-past ten, now, can he? Isn't it very rude to rush away as soon as you've eaten all you want? I'm sure I've seen that it is—in a copy-book or somewhere."

"You will, perhaps, do me the great honour of waiting in my room, Fräulein?" he asked, giving up the other question in despair.

"I can't, thanks. I want to hear him come, so that I can stop his knocking, you see."

"I will leaf my door open to gif you a little light, hein?"

"All right, thanks; you might, if you don't mind."

He stood looking down on her in obvious trouble.

"You will be angry if I tell you not to be naughty to your aunt?"

"Oh, no, I won't. It amuses me, Herr Schmidt."

He sighed, and retired to his room. In a few minutes he reappeared, beaming over his spectacles at her.

"See, I haf ze sweets. Young laties like ze sweets, hein?"

He was carrying a little crumpled paper bag with a few fruit drops in one corner. His simplicity touched her. She took two with a hearty "thank you."

"Oh, there he is!" She ran to the door and softly opened it.

"Whence this sepulchral—" Denis began cheerfully.

"Hush!"

He raised his eyebrows.

"Bad little boy to be out at eleven o'clock, eh?" he whispered.

"Be quiet, chatterbox!"

"Goot night," said Herr Schmidt.

"Eh?" Denis looked surprised. "I hadn't seen you."

"Herr Schmidt has been keeping me company while I waited for you, Denis."

"Has he? I say, are *you* allowed to be out after half-past ten, Herr Schmidt?"

"I haf no one belonging to me to care," he said pathetically.

"We'd give him Aunt Kezia," suggested Denis, *sotto voce*.

They retired upstairs.

"I say, Nell, I'm beastly hungry," he declared.

"Greedy, didn't they give you a good dinner?"

"Rather! Lancaster did the thing in style. Old man's away. Lancaster seems to pretty well boss the show."

"Why are you hungry, then?"

"Well, I've been out since then." He looked at her with twinkling eyes. "Tearing around in a motor makes you hungry, I can tell you!"

"A—motor!"

He nodded.

"Jolly fine one, too. And at this time of night when all the squares are pretty well deserted it is fine."

"How many dogs did you run over?"

"Dozen or so."

"I'd just have thought he'd have a motor!" She couldn't have sounded more scornful if she had said a wheelbarrow.

"Well, can't you give me something to eat, anyhow?"

"The kitchen's unprotected. Let's try."

Downstairs they crept.

"Oh, more bolts!" groaned Nell.

In the kitchen Denis stumbled over the coal-box and sent the coal flying.

"Oh, Lor'—and I've got no matches! *Nell*!" flinging out and catching her as she stumbled

forward.

She subsided on to the chair she had fallen against.

"Don't make such a row. Nell, there's a rat or something running up my leg!"

"Is—is it a *beetle*, do you think?"

"Very likely."

"Oh, Denis!" she drew her toes up on to the chair.

"Where do people keep matches, Nell?"

"I expect they're locked up!"

"*No*! Well, I can't go to bed on an empty—um—chest."

"Sleep on your back, then."

"Unfeeling twin! Dash it all, what a beastly hard chimney this is!"

"And what a soft head it came in contact with."

"You're helping a lot, aren't you? Sitting in the seat of the scoffer. Here, come out of that. You've got to help!"

"Denis! Oh, *do* be quiet!"

He had seized her round the waist. "If you don't promise to help look for those matches, I'll roll you into the scullery where the black beetles live!"

"I promise, Denis!"

She came gingerly forward and gave a scream.

"*Denis*! I trod on something horrid and soft! Oh, Denis!"

"A rat, I expect. I thought I heard a squeak. Eureka! Got 'em! Now for the larder or pantry or storeroom or whatever it is—"

"I'm going to see what I trod on first. Light a match, Denis!"

He lit one and discovered her standing staring at the floor, her skirts gathered up. "Oh, 'twas an iron-holder!" she cried. "A dear, innocent little iron-holder!"

In the end they found half a loaf of bread and a pot with a little raspberry jam in it. Nell found the jam and was immensely proud of herself.

"By all that's wonderful, a hap'orth of jam in the bottom of a pot! Left out—unlocked—for the first thief to break in and steal!"

"Don't call nasty names. That'll do. I'll be a cripple soon—I've burnt all the tips of my fingers off already. Come along."

Upstairs he sat on his bed and munched bread and jam.

"He's got horses, Nell! One—a ripping chestnut—made me think of Acushla."

He picked a crumb off his knee and ate it thoughtfully.

Her lip curled.

"And he prefers a motor!" she ejaculated.

He did not heed her; he still looked thoughtful.

"But it's a gloomy house, somehow. I think London's a gloomy place. But he's got a room—his own—quite different. You'd go cracked over it. Crammed with carved wood things, Indian, Japanese—ivory, too. And a jolly Grand— Hulloa, what's that?"

A sepulchral whisper came floating up the stairs.

"Are you children not in bed yet?"

He went out on to the landing.

"Just off, Aunt Kezia. Let me carry your candle for you."

"I can carry it myself, thank you. You ought to be in bed and asleep at this time of night."

"Me isn't s'eepy, auntie, weally," he lisped, and Miss Kezia almost relaxed into a smile.

"Nell," he said, returning to his room, "you're to go to bed at once—a baby like you!"

"Oh, oh, have you been talking to her like that?"

"Like what?"

"L-look in the glass!"

He looked and grinned.

"'Twas a grim and gory sight,'" he quoted. "'It hath a manly look which pleases me.'"

"A baby look, you mean. Babies always smear their cheeks with jam."

He was engaged in twisting his tongue out and round in a vain endeavour to catch the smear of jam.

"Nell," advancing his cheek, "lick it off for a chap. Pity to waste it."

She boxed his ear.

"Now I won't buy you a box of Fuller's chocolates!"

She sobered. She was discovering, to her amazement, that money, even when never spent in

larger sums than a few shillings or even sixpences, had a mysterious and alarming way of dwindling.

"No more sweets, Denis!"

He went across to the wash-hand stand.

"I was going to buy you a three-shilling box of chocolates, and yet not make our fund a penny the poorer!"

"Is it a riddle?"

He nodded.

"Give it up. It's too late to solve riddles."

He was rubbing at his cheek with a sponge.

"I won it. I, even I, Denis, the twin of Nell, won it in a sweep-stake. Now see how businesslike I've grown, Nell. I pulled off six bob really, but it was a shilling to enter each time—that's two bob—and the time I lost, another, so I reckon I won three altogether. See?"

"What a beautifully easy way to get three shillings!"

"I might have lost two instead. Seems to me there's an idea somewhere there, Nell—work it on a bigger scale, and you'd have me turning those beggars out of Kilbrannan."

"But suppose you lost?"

"Oh, I shouldn't. Anyhow, I'd stand to win so much more than I'd lose. I'm going to think it out. There are places abroad."

"Denis, you'd get taken up! I remember dad reading about a case—"

"Not me," airily.

Nell punched his pillow thoughtfully. "I don't like it, Denis," she decided. "It's too risky, and—and—"

"Well?"

"I'm sure dad and mother would call it gambling! There, I feel like a goody little sister in a book."

He laughed.

"You don't look the character, anyway. And you're to go to bed."

"But—but you won't—"

"Oh, I may break the bank of England yet, who knows?" teasingly; "go to bed and dream of me, asthore."

"Is it nightmare you want me to have?"

"Race you to your room—in the dark!"

Two minutes later Miss Kezia's door opened once more. Dead silence greeted her. She went a few steps up the stairs. All doors were shut. Miss Kezia was sleepy, even more than she was cross. She went back to her bed.

As Nell laid her head on the pillow she muttered, "Of course it was that tiresome Lancaster!"

CHAPTER VI

Molly was huddled up on the hearth-rug, chin on knees, staring with her great soft eyes into the fire.

"Nell, do you think I'll be like the ugly duckling and grow pretty?"

"You're not ugly enough."

Molly sighed.

"I *wish* my hair curled!"

"Molly," said Nell, flinging down her pencil in despair of seeing any longer without the lamp, "your soul is full of the vanities of life. 'Be good, sweet child, and let who will be—pretty.'"

"It's so easy for pretty people to talk like that!"

"I'm bowing, Mol, I really am—only it's so dark it's lost on you."

"I've a good mind to start saying 'prunes and prisms' all day long, my mouth's so huge!"

"But it's so Irish, asthore!"

"I hate you," said Molly.

Nell stuck her elbows on the table, and her chin into her hands, and studied in her mind the painting of the old cab horse. It was such a glorious painting—there was such depth—his muscles—the veins in that leg were wonderful—in her mind. She sighed.

"Nell," in the firelight Molly blushed, "I'm going to soften Aunt Kezia's heart!"

"What? Soften her heart, is it? You'll have to soften her head first, my dear."

She began to laugh softly.

"How are you going to set about it, Mol?"

"Like they do in books. Oh, Nell," Molly's romantic soul lent enthusiasm to her tone, "you know they always do! However hard and grim and horrid she is, the niece, or whoever comes and stays with her, gradually twines herself round her heart—"

"She must be an acrobat, then," put in Nell, sotto voce.

"And alters her whole nature. You see, I'll be awfully sweet and nice—I'll do things for her. They always pick up her handkerchief and fetch her spectacles and put down her shoes to warm when she's coming in with wet feet, and things like that. You needn't laugh, Nell! It's something to do—I'll try awfully hard. I think," Molly's pretty voice trembled, "I think mother would like it."

Nell jumped up.

"All right, only don't go and put your great, noodlish heart into it, Mol! For she's not the right material, old girl!"

"I like her awfully grim and hard at first," enthusiastically. "It's a pity I'm quite so frightened of her, though. I just can't help it—she makes me shiver in my shoes!"

"Nell," from a dim corner came Sheila Pat's voice, and a squeak as she moved.

"Where are you, Atom? Yes?"

"Nell," in very judicial tones, "is it very rude to ask a person not to talk goody?"

"Rather riling, I should say."

Silence.

"Shall we light up?" said Nell, lazily.

"Nell, is it very rude to ask a person if he's afraid?"

"More than rude, Sheila Pat, downright insulting!"

"Oh!"

Pause.

"But he wasn't an *Irish* person," ingenuously.

"Was he English?" gravely.

"Yes."

"No one can say Englishmen are cowards, Sheila Pat. They don't understand us, but they're not cowards."

"Is it rude to ask a person if he likes his Catchykism better than cricket?"

"It's unkind, Sheila Pat."

Pause.

"Is it more unkind if he—if he is lame, Nell?"

"Miles worse. Downright mean."

After a long pause:

"May we have the lamp now? I wish to write a letter."

"Who to?" inquired Molly.

"To a 'quaintance."

Nell rose from the hearth-rug.

"Nell," the Atom pressed close and spoke in a loud whisper, "a person can't be *very* goody-goo if he calls you a beast and throws a piece of cake at your nose, can he?"

"Good gracious!"

"Hush!" the Atom seized her arm, almost trembling with terror of her dignity being in danger. "I didn't say *my* nose, Nell! Or *my* beast!" incoherently.

"Of course not. Where are the matches?"

Sheila Pat took a long while over that letter. Her delicate little face downbent over the sheet of paper flushed and paled several times before it was done. Her heart and her dignity fought it out again and again. At last she evolved the following:—

"DEAR MISTER STUART

"this leter coms hopin you are wel i do not bare maliss and perhaps i was not very perlit which i regret bein a lady i hop. I therefore beg to apologise and will never menson the cak or the beest but i shud dye of rag if you tel anyone of that grate indignity with kind regards your very truly Miss Sheila Patricia Kathleen O'Brien i must be honourable and ad that this spelling is not qite all my one bein helped by Miss Eileen O'Brien."

She addressed it to "mister Stuart barclay essire," and going downstairs desired Sarah to take it next door.

Sarah was forbidden to leave the house without permission, but, in face of the Atom's tremendous weightiness, she fled.

Sheila Pat returned slowly to the Stronghold, her face weary with overmuch thought. Nell was surreptitiously studying a photograph of Acushla jumping a stone wall, with herself on her back. Denis had taken it with his Goetz camera. It had been a glorious morning in early spring. She remembered the vivid blue of the sky, the wonderful golden mist that had hung over the Ballymara hills, the feeling of utter fresh joy of life that had filled her and Acushla—

"Hulloa! How quiet we are!" Denis invaded the room with cheery breeziness. "Nell, rub noses! Mine's frozen. I say, the atmosphere's too exalted altogether for me."

"Perhaps we're doing penance," she laughed. "Denis," she broke off, "whatever have you got?"

He was swinging a large square hat box to and fro.

"Catch hold!"

He swung it across to her.

"It's for you, old girl."

"For me? Give me the scissors, Molly!"

Presently she pulled from a nest of tissue paper a great soft brown felt hat, with one long brown feather drooping on the brim.

"*Denis*! Oh, isn't it lovely!"

"Put it on."

She put it on, and turned to him, irresistibly pink and pretty.

"But 'tis *wicked*, Denis! And *why* did you get it? And where—"

"It's lovely," exclaimed Molly, with a big sigh.

"Oh, I heard you talking to Molly about having to wear up a hat you hated with your brown suit—"

"I thought you were fathoms deep in your Latin!"

"Ah, but I wasn't. So I asked Lancaster if he could tell me of a decent hat shop, and he told me of one in Bond Street where his cousins go. You should have seen his face when I asked him whether he wasn't coming in with me! He never dreamt I was really going to get it. Don't see why, myself. 'It's full of Frenchified women!' he gasped. So it was. They were awfully sweet to me —tried on the hats, but, by Jove, what hats they were, Nell! I found this one myself. Now isn't it just the colour of your suit? Let me look at you."

He turned her round by her slim shoulders, and eyed her critically. She was adorable in it.

"I—I shall take it back, Denis. I suppose they'd give me back the money? How much was it?"

"Don't ask rude questions. And don't be a goose! They wouldn't think of taking it back."

"Oh!" her voice rose with an irrepressibly joyful lilt. "Are you sure?"

"Quite puffeckly sure. Don't I shop well, now?"

"But I *could* have made the old one do!" Her dimples refused to be repressed. "Denis, what a dream that feather is! And the sweep of the brim—"

"Oh, stow it, Nell! Great Scott, spare me more! I've had enough of hat-jargon to last me a lifetime. 'So chaste, isn't it? So pure—so simple—but of an elegance so chic! A poem, Monsieur, an idyll—a three-volume novel! It expresses so much! Worn so—cocked over the right ear—it is gay, insouciante, of an impudence, Monsieur! So—down in front—demure, sweet, to suit the freshness of a young demoiselle—'"

"Denis, you're making it up!"

"Oh, well, that's the sort of stuff they talked—more or less. Wish old Lancaster had come in! He's gone off to meet his governor at Paddington."

"What does he *do*, Denis?"

"Who, the old man? Used to sell pigs or tallow candles or something."

His eyes twinkled.

"He made his money in something like that. I forget what it was. Believe it was lamp oil!"

"That accounts for it."

"Eh? Accounts for what?"

"Oh, everything," vaguely.

"What d'you mean, Nell?"

His tone was peremptory.

"Oh, I don't know," she hedged. "But I didn't mean his father, anyway. I meant *him*. What

does he do, Denis?"

"Nothing, apparently."

"But why isn't he at school or college or somewhere?" her voice was scornful. "Do you mean to say he just hangs around all day, and does nothing?"

"Suppose so."

"Well!" said Nell.

"Suppose he knows his own business," suggested Denis, slamming his books down on to the table. "Hadn't you better put that hat away?"

Nell walked off with the hat.

"Of all the great, lazy *boobies*! And he dare—he *dare* make Denis in a rage with *me*!"

"Nell!"

"Sheila Pat, I didn't see you. What are you doing?"

"Sarah told me that she always lengthened her skirts by *letting down* the hem. What does it mean, Nell?"

Nell explained absently.

Sheila Pat looked thoughtful.

Nell went back to the Stronghold and bent over Denis's shoulder.

"Shall I dictate for you? Are you going to practise shorthand?"

"No," grumpily.

"Denis, asthore, the hat's *so* lovely!"

He burst out laughing.

"You rank little duffer. Well, tell me why you were doing penance when I came in."

"We weren't. I merely suggested that *perhaps* we were. I meant because we've done nothing all day but get into Aunt Kezia's black books. First," she ticked off the items on her fingers, "we heard a band playing—"

"Oh, Denis," interposed Molly, "it was playing 'The Girl I left behind Me.'"

"So we rushed out, as surely anyone with feet *would* rush out to hear a band. It was at the corner and we rushed along and stood and listened—"

"And

> "'By came a Flappyjack turning out her toes,
> Forth she spurted anger like a garden hose.'

"Eh?"

"But the rest doesn't apply—

> "'But the boys of Bally more had kissed the blarney stone,
> Soon her anger melted—she sighed, Asthore! Ochone!'"

"Well, she sighed neither the one nor the other. Oh, she *was* angry! No melting of her! Next," she ticked off another finger, "we conceived, or I believe *I* conceived, the brilliant idea of an obstacle race on the garden walls. Oh, Denis, 'tis such fun! You see, the boughs of the trees next door and the summer house are the obstacles, and then when you try to pass each other, one is always bound to topple off. I'm bruised horribly, and Sheila Pat fell into the garden next door, and then of course Molly must needs roll off—"

"Into the dust-bin for a wager!"

"Of course; and the tin lid smashed in, and she went in after it, and *yelled*! And I laughed so I slipped all down the wall into the garden and scraped skin off everywhere. And Aunt Kezia came out!" She stopped with a vulgar but expressive little whistle.

"You see, Sheila Pat was in the garden next door; and halfway through Aunt Kezia's lecture her head came bobbing up! That made matters hotter than before. O dear, she has got a lot of breath to waste!"

"Why," inquired Denis, judicially, "weren't you doing your lessons?"

"We were. Those were the interludes. And oh, Denis, we've been locked into separate rooms all the afternoon till a little while ago! It was because we tried tobogganing down the stairs. We took a leaf out of the dining-room table. Aunt Kezia was out, so 'twas quite safe. It's not at all bad, only the leaf had silly little ridges, one at each end, that caught on the stairs in jerks, so we had

to put it shiny side down. Molly kept getting stuck—wedged in between the balusters and the wall, and of course she did it just when we heard Aunt Kezia's key in the front door. It was such hard luck, because I'd tobogganed down once straight into Herr Schmidt (we hadn't dreamt he was at home), and he didn't mind a bit—"

"He gave such a hop that all the house shook," put in Sheila Pat, with deep enjoyment.

"Well, I banged right into his poor shins," said Nell, reflectively. "I've come to the conclusion that he's a dear old man, though he *is* the lodger! And he sat down rather suddenly on the hall chair. We had to flee and leave the leaf wedged," she added sorrowfully. "We hoped in vain that Aunt Kezia would turn into the dining room or kitchen or somewhere, but she didn't. Not she! She smelt that leaf! And she stumbled over it, which made it worse. And when she came to lecture us her bonnet was all crooked. *Oh*, she was in a temper! Here's Sarah, and tea!"

"How," she asked pathetically, later on, "can I feel good and sorry when she's scolding us with *such* a long nose? Her upper lip comes down and it drags her nose down with it. It's like a barometer—I can always tell how her temper is by the length of her nose!"

"You've tired the Atom out, anyway," teased Denis.

Sheila Pat was on his knee: her head had lain motionless against his shoulder for the last half hour. She sat up as if worked by a wire.

"I'm not tired, Denis O'Brien! A person has things to think about sometimes!"

"Hulloa, thought you were asleep!"

The Atom struggled to get off his knee, but he held her fast.

"Please let me go, Denis!"

"You're not angry with your one and only brother, Sheila Pat?"

"You shouldn't be sayin' rude things," she wavered. She adored Denis so deeply that she could never hold out long against him.

"It was all her fault to-day, anyway," declared Molly. "She just *wouldn't* settle down to anything!"

"Couldn't," murmured Nell, with a glance at Sheila Pat's great eyes.

Denis suddenly began to laugh.

"It was awful sport this afternoon! Lancaster came to the bank. Old Tellbridge and Jackson were out, and we got fooling around. I was standing on a chair spouting that thing I made up—you know—

> "'Now Micky Magee wi' his piggy so wee
> Went courtin' the fair Molly Moore—'

"Remember? Well, I put a lot of expression and action into it—chaps were roaring, and as I finished, out from the manager's room burst that little chap—Mark Yovil! Wasn't it killing? He had heard it all! Owned he'd been listening. And he's quite struck!" He gave a shout of laughter. "He is, 'pon my word! He says my voice is made for reading aloud and reciting! I feel like a little saintly chorister or something. Lancaster and I have promised to go to his place next Tuesday. They're going to start on Henry V,' and I'm to be Hal himself! *Now* what do you think of your twin, Nell?"

"That he's getting so puffed up that soon all that remains of him will be a farewell pop—oh—"

Along the passages her fleeing voice echoed, "I haven't any run—left in me—*oh*, Denis!"

CHAPTER VII

It was a damp close day. Nell felt stifled and cross, and was ashamed of the feeling. The deep depression that sometimes seized upon her held her now. The longing for her home gripped her in a sudden fresh access of misery. She sat on her bed and tortured herself by imagining strangers in all the rooms—about the grounds. As she always did, in these depressions, she lost sight of the fact that her home was let and not sold. She told herself they had not a home now. She said that they were outcasts, and would never set foot in Ireland again. She wondered keenly why they did not all die. Turned out of home and country; father and mother hundreds of miles away; poor and desolate, why did they continue to live? And laugh! She was quite sure just then that she would never laugh again.

She rose to make her bed. The depth of her depression had a physical effect, making the mere folding of her nightgown an act that required a strong effort. At Kilbrannan no weather had affected her beautiful young health and strength. She did not realise that the sudden and tremendous change in her way of living was bound to tell on her, more or less, at first.

She made her bed languidly. When Molly burst into the room she actually jumped.

"I'm growing nervey in my old age! If I believed in presentiments, I should think something horrid was going to happen. I feel presentimenty." Of course she did not believe in presentiments; she reminded herself so several times that morning. Just as, of course, she wasn't the least bit superstitious. She knew a great many of her country-people were, but not she! When she found herself inadvertently walking beneath a ladder, she laughed. "If I were superstitious, I should feel horrid that I had done that!" At luncheon Denis helped her to salt, with a mischievous grin as he did it.

"I shall bring you sorrow now, old girl!" he murmured, "unless," his eyes twinkling, "you throw some over your left shoulder, you know."

"It's likely I would!" said Nell.

She fell to thinking how funny it was that all on that one day she had a presentiment, first of all, that something bad was going to happen; then she walked beneath a ladder, and then Denis helped her to salt. If she were superstitious, how uneasy she would be! But she wasn't, so it didn't matter.

Miss Kezia picked up a letter that had come just then. Molly went a fiery red, glanced at Nell, then blurted out, jumping up and knocking her chair over, "Do let me fetch your spectacles, Aunt Kezia!"

Miss Kezia turned her head slowly and looked at her, with a good deal of offence.

"I never wear spectacles, Molly; I do not require them. Pray sit down."

"Oh!" gasped Molly, and sat down, covered with confusion.

"I do not know," pursued Miss Kezia, "if you intended to be impertinent. If so, it was very feeble."

The whole table except Molly and her aunt were too convulsed to offer the former any aid.

Molly sat and stared into her plate, the fiery red of face and neck refusing to die down. In books, she reflected miserably, the aunts always wore spectacles.

After luncheon, when Denis had gone back to the bank, Nell tried to go on with a painting she was doing of Mrs. Barclay's tabby cat.

"To think that I should have come to cats! To be so hard up for models that I have to seek refuge in a *cat*! Oh, what a great, stupid, moon face you've got, Tim! K.K., come here. You needn't be jealous, my dear. You're worth all the cats in the world."

Kate Kearney refused to budge. She sat in a corner, her back to the room. It was her way of showing dignified disapproval. Denis called it sulks. Poor K.K.—she had been called sternly to order when she teased the cat. No one seemed to object to the cat's swearing at her. Very well. It was an unjust world. She sat and presented the room with a beautiful black shiny back and long drooping ears.

For no obvious reason, except that it was a horrid day, somehow, and horrid things seemed to come naturally into one's mind, Nell fell to worrying over Denis and his ideas on the lottery question. He often teased her on the subject, declaring that though he had not gone in for any more just yet, he was working it all out in his mind, and would be a millionnaire some day, in spite of her.

"Oh, K.K., let's go out! Cats are too much for me! So are studies to-day."

A quiver tingled all along that sedate little black back.

Nell laughed. "Very well, we'll go without her, won't we, Sheila Pat? We'll go for a walk—a *walk*! Good-bye, Kate Kearney!"

It was too much for her dignity or her sulks. With a frenzied howl she hurled herself on them.

"Nell," Sheila Pat looked thoughtful, "don't you think it would be perlite to ask that little boy next door to come with us? But I won't walk beside him," she added hastily.

The breach had been healed between them, to a certain extent. Stewart had responded suitably to her letter that she was "sorry," but the Atom was still cautious; the Catechism and cricket question loomed always before her.

She planted herself between Nell and Molly, and walked along with a certain aloofness that kept him in his place. He laughed and talked with Nell, and the Atom listened. In her rigidly honest soul she confessed that he did not sound like a goody-goo, but there was always that question of the cricket and the Catechism.

He came in with them and had tea. Denis did not appear. Nell found herself making an effort to laugh and talk. It took her back, with a little shiver, to those bad last days at Kilbrannan. Stewart avoided the Atom's serious eyes shyly; he seemed much more at his ease with Nell and Molly.

When he was going, Sheila Pat went down with him into the hall. Nell went, too, and Molly. But Sheila Pat slipped out on to the doorstep, and accosted him in an earnest whisper. "Are you *sure* you'd sooner learn your Catchykism than play cricket?"

"Yes," he said with an obstinate jerk to his small chin.

Sheila Pat followed the others back to the Stronghold in silence. Sarah came up presently with a slip of paper in her hand.

"For you, miss," she said to Nell. Nell opened it wonderingly.

"Don't know what time I'll be in, old girl. Haven't a moment to write. On the way to be a millionnaire. Tell you when I see you. Awful spree. Don't let on to anyone.

"Denis."

It was scrawled in pencil, evidently in a frantic hurry.

"What is it?" Molly inquired.

"Only a note from Denis—to say he'll be late." Nell spoke slowly. She twisted the paper in her hands with a feverishness, a restlessness oddly in contrast with her slow speech. She turned and went downstairs to the kitchen.

"Sarah, who brought that note just now?"

"A boy, miss."

"What sort of boy?"

"A urchin, miss, up to no good, I should say."

Nell wandered aimlessly to the dresser and played with a plate.

"Did he look disreputable, Sarah?"

"Awful, miss," delightedly revelling in her word-painting, "sort of boy the pleece 'ud be after, I should say."

"The police!" Nell gave a queer little jump. "Oh, Sarah, isn't it hot to-day?"

"You do look pale, miss; it's a nasty un'ealthy day, an unlucky day, my mother 'ud say."

"Unlucky! Oh, why, Sarah?"

"Well, you see, miss, it was on just such a warm, unseasoning (Nell supposed she meant unseasonable) day that father was run over and killed."

"Oh, don't, Sarah!" Nell hurried away into the hall. She stood a moment, hesitating. A latch-key fumbled in the lock of the door. She waited, knowing it was Herr Schmidt. Miss Kezia never fumbled. He came in with his heavy tread.

"Ach, Fräulein, it is a bad day, eh?"

"Horrible!" she said.

He glanced at her and smiled.

"Poor Mr. Weather," he said, chuckling. "We are angry when he is colt, we are angry when he is warm."

"May I—may I come and talk to you a little, Herr Schmidt?"

"Oh, with such bleasure!" he beamed at her over his spectacles.

Nell went into his room and stood looking out into the dark street.

"I will light the lamp, Fräulein. Zere, now you can see me. Will you blease to sit down?"

She sat down. "You—I suppose you know all about business and money, don't you, Herr Schmidt?" She had seized an ink pot that was on the table, and seemed to be clutching it meaninglessly.

He smiled widely.

"They call me a goot business head, Fräulein."

"Do you have good weather in Germany, Herr Schmidt?"

He looked rather bewildered. The other question had seemed the opening of a conversation on business matters. He replied with conscientious length. Nell seemed to be listening absorbedly; she left hold of the ink pot. She was wondering if she had artfully put him sufficiently off the scent. Denis would never forgive her if she were to talk of his lottery to Herr Schmidt.

"I suppose," she remarked casually in a pause on his part for breath, "there are lotteries and things like that in Germany as well as here?"

Herr Schmidt had not finished about his climate. He blinked his eyes several times, then turned his mind to the new question. He started to give her a good deal of information on the subject. He spoke strongly, because he felt strongly about all forms of gambling. Nell had clutched hold of the ink pot again.

"And—and are there gambling places like that in England?" in a pause on his part.

"Ach, yes, Fräulein. In the bapers constantly one reads of the bolice appearing at the scene and taking them all to brison."

"Oh!" Nell jerked the ink pot suddenly and a few drops spattered her hand. Herr Schmidt produced blotting paper, and wiped the spots off carefully.

"Thank you very much." She rose and went to the door. "Good-bye, Herr Schmidt."

"Goot-bye. You, berhaps," with a curious, wistful glance over his spectacles that made him look like a great baby, "would not care to eat a biece of cake?"

"Not now, thank you. I—another time if I may."

The evening wore on slowly. Nell twice put her ear to the little clock on the mantel-shelf, thinking it must have stopped.

Molly, fathoms deep in "Monsieur Beaucaire," was blind and deaf to everything else, but Sheila Pat eyed Nell shrewdly.

"Can't you be sittin' still at all, Nell O'Brien?" she demanded impatiently.

Nell started and grew red.

"I like walking up and down."

"Do you like pickin' up that jogglefry book and lookin' at it every time you pass the table?" The Atom's sarcastic little tongue was sharp.

But Nell squashed her with a guiltily unkind, "What's a jogglefry book?"

The Atom grew slowly scarlet. After a little while she fetched the dictionary, and wrestled with it indefatigably till bedtime. She hunted, her mouth set firmly, her brows frowning, all through the "J's". She went to bed unsatisfied. When Molly had been in bed a few minutes a little night-gowned figure crept into the room.

"Molly!"

Molly gave a yell of terror. "Oh, Sheila Pat, you did make me jump! What do you want?"

The Atom stood shivering beside her bed. "Molly, how—how'd you be savin' Jog—you know all about pennyshulars and capes and gulfs and things?"

"Geography, do you mean?"

"Yes. Jography. Is that right?"

"Yes," sleepily. "Go back to bed."

In the Stronghold Nell waited for Denis. It was nine o'clock. She went into a front room and looked out into the street. She wondered vaguely why everything sounded so clear and loud; why the scent of a sandal-wood box was so sharp. She did not know that every nerve was on the stretch, that she was strung up till every sense was painfully acute. As she stood at the window she heard a hubbub of men's voices; the noise of many feet. They passed into the distance, across the top of Henley Road. She saw them in her mind—men being taken to the police station. She turned suddenly and ran into her bedroom. Sheila Pat was asleep. She seized a hat and coat, flung off her shoes, put on others, and crept down the stairs. Miss Kezia was not at home, but in the hall, just going out, Herr Schmidt stood drawing on his gloves.

"I haf to take a book to a friend," he said, his eyes questioning her surprisedly, as his tongue was too polite to do.

"Yes?" she said vaguely. She went to the door.

"Is your brozzer outside waiting for you, Fräulein?"

Up went Nell's head.

"No, Herr Schmidt."

He moved a step so that he blocked her way.

"He is coming down ze stairs?"

"No. I am going out alone. Please let me pass, Herr Schmidt!"

There was a little pause. Nell pulled restlessly at the throat of her coat.

"It is nine o'clock, Fräulein. Young laties do not go out alone at that time."

"Let me pass!" her eyes blazed; she stamped her foot. "What business is it of yours? How dare you stop me!" she said haughtily.

"I am frightened," he declared simply, "but I dare because I see you are young and a little girl who does not understand—"

"But I must go, Herr Schmidt! Please, oh, please don't stop me! It is important—"

"Poor little one, no, I will not stop you. I will kom also."

He moved aside and began to open the door.

She said coldly, "It—it is a private matter!"

"Zen take your bruzzer, Fräulein."

"He is out."

"Zen I know. See, I will be blind, Fräulein. I will be deaf. I see noting. I hear noting. I do but take care of you, Fräulein, hein?"

"Very well," she said impatiently. "I want a cab."

He beamed. "Zat is right, meine liebe. All will be well now."

Nell was quivering with nervous impatience. She gave the driver Ted Lancaster's address and sprang into the cab. She was conscious of the heavy jolt as Herr Schmidt climbed in—so slowly, oh, so slowly! She had lost all sense of proportion in her mind. She was absorbed in a sort of wild terror, a foreboding, and her one idea was to get to Ted Lancaster. It was all his fault. He would know. Probably, almost certainly, it was at his house it was all going on. She did not wait to wonder what Denis would think of her appearance on the scene. She had only room for one thought—to get him away, to warn him, before the police came.

The cab stopped at last at No. 16 Gowan Square, and they got out. Herr Schmidt rang the bell, and after an interval the door was opened by a sleepy-looking maid.

"Mr. Lancaster, miss?' He isn't at home. Oh, Mr. Edward—yes, he's at home. Will you come this way?"

They entered the handsome hall; the maid opened a door and showed them into a small sort of anteroom.

"What name, please?"

But Nell was strung up to such a pitch now that she could wait no longer. She followed the maid across the hall. In answer to her knock a lazy voice responded, "Come in." Then, as she opened the door: "You don't mean to say you've come, Thompson! Why, I've only rung once!"

Over the maid's shoulder Nell saw a large, handsome room; a table still littered with the dinner things; a huge fire, and in front of it a chair, over the top of which she could see a piece of smooth, dark head. On the mantel-shelf reposed a pair of patent-leather shoes; she had a glimpse of the legs they belonged to, of a pair of black silk socks with a little green pattern on them, and a haze of blue smoke. She saw it all in a lightning flash, and Denis was not there!

The pleasant, lazily sarcastic voice had drowned the maid's words. She began again.

"Thompson's out, sir, and it's a lady to see you."

"A lady?" Neither the head nor the feet moved. "Oh, I say, Mary, it's the Pater she wants."

"She said you, sir."

"Don't you know her?"

"No, sir, and—and she's *here*," in a desperate voice, suddenly becoming aware of Nell's proximity.

"Here!" Down came the legs; up jumped Ted Lancaster.

"Oh, I say!" He stood facing Nell, red and uncomfortable. He gave his hair a surreptitious pat and flung his cigarette into the fire. Then he turned on Mary.

"Why did you show this lady in here? Where's Thompson?" he demanded angrily.

"He's out, sir, and—and—"

The sudden apathy of disappointment that had come over Nell broke.

"She didn't show me in here. I followed her. This room will do. I am in a hurry."

The maid disappeared.

"Where is Denis?" Nell's voice broke the little silence in measured accents.

"If you will come into another room—"

"No, thanks. This room will do."

He pushed a chair toward her and gave his tie a pull.

"Where is Denis?" she repeated, not noticing the chair. She stood facing him, her slim figure drawn to its full height, her head thrown back.

"I—I'm sure I don't know—won't you sit down?" He drew his hand nervously over his hair. "Do you mean O'Brien?"

"Whom else should I mean? Where is he?"

"'Pon my word, I don't know! I—*won't* you sit down?"

"Hasn't he been here this evening?"

His rueful brows mounted higher and higher till his forehead was all little creases, which, oddly enough, Nell remembered afterwards.

"No—no, he hasn't— But I saw him—about—about—"

"Oh, would you mind being quick?" she broke in irritatedly; her cheeks were a vivid pink, her eyes shone. Ted, looking at her, suddenly burst out, "I say, are you O'Brien's sister?"

"Oh, no, his aunt!"

It wasn't a dignified retort, but the extreme and very scornful exasperation in the sarcastic inflection made him redden to the roots of his hair.

"When did you see him? Oh, do tell me quickly!"

"I beg pardon. It's—er—a trifle disconcerting," a gleam of humour shot into his grey eyes, "rather unexpected, you know, and—er—all that. I saw him about three, I think."

"Oh!" gasped she. "That must have been in the bank! You *know*—you *must* know—I don't mean that! Where is he *now*?"

"I don't know," patiently.

"Don't know! Don't you know anything, or don't you care? I must find him. He—he maybe wearing handcuffs in prison now!"

Ted Lancaster put up his hand and rubbed his nose.

For the first time she noticed his coat. It was a pretty coat—a loose, silk smoking-jacket—but in some unaccountable way it was, to her, the last stroke. All her pent-up nervousness, her quivering impatience, suddenly culminated in wild wrath against the wearer of that coat.

"Oh!" she cried, her soft voice low and passionate. "It is all your fault! You invite him here—you suggest this hateful lottery business. What do you care? You make him gamble—but it doesn't hurt you. *You* don't need money—you aren't led on by the hope of winning a great heap of money. You only dabble in it. It doesn't matter to you whether you win or lose. And you don't care if he loses! Why should you? You don't care if he gets into trouble—if he's taken to prison! Oh, no, you're safe, so what does anything matter? And now he has gone—gone somewhere to make money, and I—I can't find him. He is so careless—he would laugh at the idea of a policeman coming after him. It's all a joke to you—I expect," her voice suddenly lost all its fire; "you are laughing at me now—"

"I'm not! I'm not a cad, whatever else I may be!"

She glanced at him, vaguely surprised. His face had lost its ruefulness, its uncomfortableness. He looked suddenly older and grimmer; his eyes stared at her angrily from beneath frowning brows.

She turned to the door.

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know—to find him."

In a few strides he was before her.

"You're not going out alone to look for him!" he observed quietly.

She drew a quick little breath.

"Now look here," he went on before she could reply at all; "I don't know where he is. I haven't an idea. But I'm a good deal more likely to find him than you are. Whether he'll be pleased to have me coming around after him as if I'm his nurse is another matter. I'll do it. He'd be angrier if you did it. Although I'm the bad character you've just drawn for my benefit, I promise I won't give information to the police you're so afraid of. I shall go first to Pennington's. Anyhow, I'll find him somehow. But you've got to promise to go straight home first."

"Allow me to pass at once!" Her face was quite white now; she spoke in a low, desperately quiet voice.

"I'm not going to. What's it matter if I'm rude to you? Isn't it only in accordance with your idea of me?"

"Quite. But it matters, because I am *determined* to go and find him. I am not alone. I am with a gentleman," she added this unwillingly but in despair. "He will go with me."

"He'll take you home at once. You'll excuse my saying that you're acting very unwisely. You're only keeping me—and doing no good. O'Brien is probably at home now—or more probably," his mouth twisted humourously, "out hunting for you. Hadn't you better go?"

"Yes, I'll go!" her voice gave a little choke. "I'll go, but oh, how I *hate* you! If only I could show you how I hate you!"

"If that's all, you're showing me remarkably well, Miss O'Brien."

He turned and opened the door for her. She went across the hall and rejoined Herr Schmidt. When she saw his broad, kindly face, his anxious eyes peering over his spectacles at her, she felt a sudden fondness for him, a weak inclination to cry. She ran to him and slipped her hand into his arm.

"Take me home, Herr Schmidt, please," she cried.

In the cab the reaction came. Suppose she had been making a fuss about nothing? What would Denis think of her? Two tears fell with a little splash on her ungloved hands. She turned suddenly to her big, silent companion.

"Herr Schmidt, was I horrid to you about coming with me?"

"Ach, mein Fräulein! I intrude, I know—-"

"Oh, you don't, you don't! I think you have been beautiful! I'll never forget it!"

"Fräulein, you are goot to say so, but I am troubled. I haf ze unquiet conscience about you."

"You needn't have, Herr Schmidt. I—" with a sudden wild Irish change of feeling, "I believe I have just been making a fuss about nothing!" She gave a quick little laugh. "Oh, Herr Schmidt, it's nothing at all! Don't go making mountains out of it."

"Fräulein, I will think of it as a mere young maid's episode. Hein? A mere naughty prank."

She laughed almost hysterically.

"That's it, Herr Schmidt!"

She went up to the Stronghold and sat down wearily. Only five minutes to ten now! It seemed hours since she had left that room. She sat doing nothing—just waiting. She had not long to wait. In a very little while there was a ring at the door; she sat forward, listening breathlessly, but she did not go downstairs. Then she heard him coming up. He strode into the room, laughing.

"I say, old girl, such a spree! Never enjoyed myself so much since I've been in London! Spoilt my gloves a bit! Given 'em quite the dear old look—"

"What have you been doing, Denis?"

"Driving a hansom!"

"A—is that *all*?"

"Rather! Quite enough, too, with a brute like that! What's up, Nell?"

She had risen and gone across to the window; she was looking out with great interest through one of the slats of the Venetian blind.

"Nothing. Tell me about it."

"I'm ravenous, by the way! Still, here goes. I went with Pennington about his camera—gone wrong—to the shop after I left the bank this afternoon. When I left him I came upon a hansom—empty—no driver—ugly brute of a horse, sort of pink roan. I was having a look at him when out came cabby from the public house. He had evidently 'met friends,' as they say at home, and he hailed me as a long-lost brother. Well, I wanted to drive that hansom, wanted to see what it was like. He wouldn't let me—swore he'd be taken up and so should I if we were found out. I tipped him. He hesitated. I let out a flood of native eloquence and another tip. I might drive it to the corner and up the next road and back to him. I did. Then at the corner I called back to him not to get anxious if I took a few hours getting to the end of that road. Heavens, he did swear! He started chasing me, too, but gave it up when he found a lamp-post in his way. I called out to him that all the tips over sixpence I won by my eloquence I should stick to. By Jove, it was a spree! I pulled my hat down over my eyes, turned up my collar, and trusted to the darkness to hide my aristocratic features from the bobbies. Then it struck me you'd get wondering where I was, and I pulled out a letter I'd taken down for old Pom-Pom to some man, and which I'd forgotten to send off, tore off the blank sheet, scrawled that message to you, shouted at a boy, threw it at his head, and sent him off with it. I've posted t'other half just now, by the way. Then I prepared to enjoy myself! I've taken tons of people to the theatres and restaurants. I made that brute go! But he nearly pulled my arms out of their sockets every now and then—had a mouth like my boots. Guess what I made—thirteen and six! Not bad, you know. But I needed it all to soften cabby's wrath. He'd been in a dead funk that I'd made off with horse and cab for good. Oh, I can tell you, he was pretty eloquent! But I soothed him a bit with the thirteen and six. I wish I'd met Lancaster a bit sooner," he broke off, "I'd have made him pay double fare!"

"Sooner?" Nell said.

"Yes. Met him just now. He was apparently gazing at the house. Fallen in love with Aunt Kezia, perhaps."

"Did—didn't—he say anything?"

"Not much. What d'you mean?"

"I—I want to tell you something, Denis. I—I've been—mad, I think—"

"Thought there was something up. What is it, old girl?"

Nell suddenly turned and faced him.

"You'll hate me," she said, and plunged into her story.

When she had done there was a little silence. She had averted her eyes from him in terror.

She knew how a boy of his age would loathe the fuss she had made—how he would resent her going to Lancaster. She turned her eyes to him—he had buried his head in the cushion and was shaking with laughter!

"Oh, poor old Lancaster! Did you really slang him like that, Nell? I can see him."

She drew a deep breath.

He sat up, rubbing his eyes.

"Poor beggar!" he chuckled. "Oh, it's rich!"

Then he sobered.

"But—were you mad, Nell? To make up bogeys in your mind and go rushing off like that—"

"I don't know, Denis," she said humbly. "I don't know what was the matter with me to-day. I—I never was so silly at home. I felt sort of funny all day, I think."

He was frowning.

"I don't like it at all—your going off to Lancaster like that! It was jolly decent of Herr Schmidt to go with you. You ought to have known better, Nell."

"Yes."

He looked at her irritatedly.

"Don't be so beastly meek! You know you've been awfully idiotic all round. And you've made me look a most consummate fool, and"—his mouth widened again in spite of himself—"you've slanged poor Lancaster most unwarrantably. It was awfully rude, you know, and quite mad. He really hasn't been leading your little twin astray. As a matter of fact, it was he who squashed my idea of making money by going in for big lotteries. He's got a level head, and he reasoned it all out on paper and proved some way or other that I stood, ten to one, or a hundred to one, or something, to lose in the end. I've only been teasing you when I talked about going in for them. I didn't know you were bothering about it. And I never thought of the beastly things when I scrawled that note off to you. I've never been in for any sweepstake or thing of that kind except that one I told you of. I hope you think you've made enough fuss all round about nothing!"

Nell was silent. She seemed to have no spark of spirit left. She made no defence. Suddenly he rose and came to her. He caught her shoulders and shook her.

"There, never mind, you poor meek little goose! You'd better be off to bed, and sleep some sense into your soft old head."

She was struggling desperately against tears.

"I—I'm awfully sorry, Denis—and ashamed—I—I do believe I was mad—"

"Course you were," cheerfully, "temporary insanity. It's this beastly London fog got into your brain. I'll make it all right with Lancaster—tell him you're sorry and all that."

She winced.

"Yes—please," she said. "And—and you won't—feel that you—that I—"

"I've forgotten all about it already, old girl!" he declared generously.

CHAPTER VIII

"What d'you think I'm let in for, Nell O'Brien?"

"I don't know. I haven't a guess in me. Aunt Kezia has squashed me flat. I've low instincts, Denis,—think of that! And no sense of what is befitting a young lady, and all sorts of other things. Oh, I'm a bad character entirely!"

He flung down his hat.

"Think I didn't know all that already? What made our respected aunt discover it?"

"I'm sick of having no models!" she burst out passionately. "I haven't touched a horse for weeks! I—I'm just aching for the mere feel of them! A cat! Beyond Kate Kearney I'm offered a cat! It's like offering a starving man a piece of sugar-stick! Denis, try to draw a cat! A heap of stupid, meaningless fur! No muscles—no veins—oh, a horse is so glorious to paint!" She broke off with a quick little laugh. "Twin Nell 'pletely sorry," she said, using an old baby formula. "Tell me what you're let in for?"

"Not till you tell me what you've been up to."

"Oh, it was nothing. I saw a hansom waiting outside the corner house. Ripping little chestnut, Denis," her whole-face kindled irresistibly; "the driver told me she was almost a thoroughbred. When a car passed along the top of the road, she played-up beautifully. Oh, the drawing in her! Well, I saw her from a window and seized up my sketch-book and bolted up the road. Now, is

there any harm in that? I asked the driver how long he thought he'd be, and he smiled and said his fare was a solicitor who'd come to a client's house on business. 'They charge for their time, miss!' he said meaningly, so I rejoiced and started sketching her in. And he was such a nice man, too. He'd actually been to the Dublin horse show a few years ago. We had an argument about our horses. And he made her put her head as I wanted, and he told me how he'd come across her, and then—oh, I'd left the hall door open, of course, and Aunt Kezia—oh, Denis, you'd think I'd committed something much worse than a murder!"

"Show me the sketch."

"I did one of her—and then several bits—quite rough. I'm going to paint her into that picture I was doing."

"It's splendid, Nell. What a cute little beast!"

"Now tell me what you've been let in for?"

"A speech! A lecture! Old Yovil has let us all in for it. You can't say no to him somehow—he sort of works you up. Lancaster's swearing like the wind round the Craffrone tower. He says he must have been out of his mind to say he'd do it, but he can't go back now. It's to be on the third. Choose any subject you like—write it up—no notes, though—and spout forth in his drawing-room to a long-suffering audience. There're six of us going in for it, and a ripping edition of all the immortal Billy's plays for the winner."

"Which will be you," annotated Nell with conviction.

"Not it! There's one chap—Morley—poetical sort of ass, who wears his hair too long—he'll beat me in a canter, my dear, not to mention the others."

"I'll come and hear you, won't I, Denis?"

"Wish you could! But there won't be any ladies. Only us and Yovil, you know."

After luncheon a maid came to ask if the Atom might go and have tea with Stewart. Sheila Pat, her Pearl clasped beneath one arm, and a spelling-book beneath the other, interviewed her in the hall.

"I'm not comin', thank you, Mary."

The maid hesitated. "If you could, miss—"

"I have reasons of my own for not comin', Mary."

"Very well, miss, only—he's such a dear little boy, and you'd brighten him up like."

Sheila Pat looked worried.

"Does he want me to come?"

"Yes, miss."

"Then I will!" She heaved a big sigh. "Unless," brightening, "Aunt Kezia doesn't wish me to. I'll go and ask her."

She came back sadly.

"I can come," she said ungraciously.

"Sarah! Sarah!"

Down the stairs floated Miss Kezia's voice, stern anger in its tone.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Sarah, I cannot find my house-shoes! I have forbidden you to move any of my things."

"I—I haven't touched 'em, ma'am!"

"She's getting trembly—like an earthquake, poor little hap'orth," observed Nell.

"Not touched them? Then where are they? They have disappeared! Are you sure—"

"Nell—oh, *Nell*, I—I put them on the dining-room fender to warm!"

"Molly! Oh, you are too lovely for anything! Hadn't you better go and tell her?"

Molly cowered down in her chair.

"I daren't!"

"I will, then."

She turned to the door, but Molly jumped up. "No, I'll go!"

She came tearing back presently and flung herself down into a chair.

"Well?"

But Molly buried her head in the chair-back and said nothing.

"Molly," Nell grasped her shoulder, "was she awful?"

"Y-yes, she was!" sobbed Molly. "Oh, I did want to soften her—and—and—oh, Nell," her voice suddenly shook with watery laughter, "K.K. had been at her shoes and—*had eaten all the linings*!"

"Oh, how *delightful!*"

"It's awfully funny, but—oh, she's in a frightful temper! She—she says I'm an interfering—busybody! And when she wants coddling—she'll—she'll have a nurse in to do it for her—properly!

She—shut K.K. in the boot closet! She made Sarah clear it out first. Can't you hear her howling? Oh, Nell, why did I go and forget all about her shoes? I meant to take them to her directly she came in—all nice and warm—"

"She might be warm, but she wouldn't be nice, Mol."

"Don't be silly! You know what I meant. Of course, it's all very funny to you—"

"My dear Molly, you must confess it is rather funny!"

Molly began to shake with laughter. "Oh, Nell, and K.K. looked so beautifully meek and innocent and the linings only little bits of leather left sticking out—and they're *such* big, flat shoes! And K.K.'s toe-scratches all over them. Oh, and Nell—" Molly couldn't go on for a while —"while she—was talking—so awfully majestic and angry—oh, *Nell*!—K.K. seized a shoe out of her hand and fled with it, shaking it—you know how she does! Oh, I'm glad you weren't there!"

After a while Nell went upstairs. She listened outside the boot closet; all was still. A good deal surprised, she went into her room. Sheila Pat, in her petticoat, sat huddled up on a chair, scissors in hand, bending over the frock she had just taken off.

"What are you doing, Atom?"

She lifted a worried face.

"I'm just lengthing it," she said curtly.

"Oh, Kate Kearney, how did you get out of the boot cupboard?"

"I let her out," calmly. "I tried all the keys on the doors, and," triumphantly, "Sarah's fitted it!"

"Sheila Pat, I'm ashamed of you. My dear child, you're not unpicking the stitches at all—you're merely cutting little snips in the stuff. And, anyway, you're not to do it."

"I like this dress, but it's rikkleously short. I don't think it's *perlite* to wear them so short, Nell."

"Well, you'll have to be impolite then. Come along into the Stronghold, sweetheart. You're frozen."

"I did want to wear it to go and see that boy! Nell, wouldn't *you* just let down the hem?"

"No, Atom, I won't. I hate long frocks for short atoms."

Presently, uneasily, "Do you hate me for being so hard, Sheila Pat?"

"The O'Briens," excessively grown-upedly, "don't hate each other so easily, Nell."

When the Atom came back after tea she was very quiet. Nell wondered if she were tired; she answered all questions as to her afternoon's enjoyment in her soft little voice that gave her curt sentences such a quaintness, but she originated no remark of her own. An hour after she had gone to bed Nell went into her room and peeped at her. She lay wide-eyed, thoughtful. A little after that she appeared suddenly in her night-gown at the door of the Stronghold.

"Hulloa, Atom!" Denis seized her and swung her up; her arms went round his neck.

"Denis," the strenuous little voice sounded as if it were near breaking, "I must go next door, please."

"Now?"

"Yes."

"But you're in your nightie, old girl! What do you want to go for?"

"It's a private reason." Her arms clung tighter; she pressed her cheek against his. Nell met the great eyes looking over his shoulder, and went up to her gently.

"Can't you wait till to-morrow, Atom?"

"Why, you'll have to," put in Molly. "If it's Stewart you want, he'll be in bed."

"I must go now, Denis; please take me now."

"We can wrap her up," said soft-hearted Denis.

The arms round his neck gave a little spasmodic squeeze.

"Thank y-you," said the Atom.

Laughing, he wrapped her in a great coat of his and a blanket, and carried her down the steps and in next door.

Mrs. Barclay was a good deal surprised to see them. Denis put the Atom down, and she stood shivering, her small white face peering with a queer intensity from out the blanket.

"Stewart, my dear? Well, I am afraid he is in bed—"

"Please may I go up to him?"

"Very well; come along."

"Please may I go by my *alone*?"

"Oh! Yes, dear, if you like."

"Thank you."

She turned and went up the stairs to the room Stewart had shown her that afternoon. She knocked politely at the door, then went in. The gas was burning dimly.

"You? Is it a fire next door?" He sat up in bed with joyful anticipation on his face.

"No. I—I want to speak to you."

"Is the Pearl ill?"

"No." She climbed on to his bed and sat silent.

"Hurry up!"

"I—you see, I think I have been very unjust. I am sorry. I—when you said you would rather learn your Catchykism than play cricket, was it because of your leg?"

"Oh, don't bother! I want to go to sleep!"

"Please tell me!" the tone was not pleading, but authoritative.

"Yes, then!"

"I—I'm very sorry," quavered Sheila Pat. "I'm not mostly so nasty," she added extenuatingly. "I didn't think of that."

Stewart was hugging his knees up under his chin.

"You see, I kept thinking you must be a goody-goo because of that."

"You see," he said haltingly, "I—can't run quickly—or field—"

"No."

There was a pause.

"Do you think," came the quavering little voice, "you will ever be able to like me?"

"Rather!"

"Do you like me now?"

"Course!"

"You may kiss me just once—round by that ear—if you like," said Sheila Pat.

"I'll kiss you twice if I like!" giving her two hearty smacks.

"Oh!" said Sheila Pat. Suddenly she perked up. "I shall call you Tommy," she said. "Stewart is like a book."

"All right."

"You see," her tone was rather uncomfortable, "I did mean—I had quite dessided—you see, I thought I had been very nasty, and I thought you would be very cross, and I did mean to give you —my Pearl—for a whole week—but I don't want to now."

"I wouldn't take her. Peter'd be awful jealous, you bet!"

"So he would," joyfully. "Oh, Tommy, do let's have a pillow fight!"

So it was that the listeners downstairs, with the memory of the small tragic figure that had left them still vividly in their minds, were startled by a sudden uproar of cries and bumps and laughter. Denis, up the stairs in a moment, and joining in the fray in another moment, found a wild Sheila Pat, shining-eyed, squealing with excitement, pelting Stewart with a pillow. He was not surprised, but Mrs. Barclay felt somewhat bewildered.

CHAPTER IX

Sheila Pat came thoughtfully into the room. "Nell," she observed, "we give Sarah a lot of extra work."

Nell looked up with an absent eye. She was trying to calculate how much they would be able to spend on toys for their Dublin hospital this year. They were determined not to omit their contribution to the annual Christmas tree and festivities.

"We make our own beds," said Molly, virtuously.

"But she has to clean out this room to-day; it's cleanin' day. And she's goin' home this evenin' to see her mother, and she walks all the way there and back with her young man. You see, if she didn't, she'd never be walkin' out with him at all. And she tidies up at home, because her mother's mostly ailin', and she bathes every one of her brothers and sisters. There now, Nell O'Brien!"

Nell flung aside paper and pencil.

"Come on, Atom, we'll turn this room out ourselves!"

"I'll go and tell Sarah." The Atom trotted contentedly from the room. "Aunt Kezia's out!" she called back.

"How on earth do you begin?" asked Molly, looking helplessly around.

"Oh, you put everything out in the passage first of all," said Nell, confidently, "then you tie your head up in a duster or something, because of the dust, you know, and then you begin to sweep and fill the room with dust. Oh, and the big things you cover over with dusting sheets. I'll get all the things we'll want from Sarah. You go and tie up your head."

"Oh, miss!" Sarah was in a state of horror bordering on lunacy. "You young ladies to do my work!"

But Nell got her way in the end.

The Atom helped in a silence that was ecstatic. She pinned up her pig-tail, and tied a clean duster round her head. Molly followed suit, and then the supply being exhausted, Nell twisted a pale blue silk scarf round hers, and they set to work. They brushed and brushed; silence reigned in the Stronghold. Sheila Pat broke it to observe in a rather breathless but deeply content voice, "We're gettin' a fine dust now!"

Denis came in with a rush. "Hulloa! I say, old man," he called over his shoulder, "rather a choking atmosphere!"

Nell's greeting froze on her lips. Her laughing glance met a pair of well-remembered grey eyes looking straight at her over Denis's shoulder. She stood quite still; the hot colour dyed her face red.

"I'll go—really, O'Brien, I'd rather—another time!"

The uncomfortable murmur reached her ear; she forgot all about her unfortunate visit—all about her sense of antagonism. She went swiftly forward, hand outstretched, smiling charmingly.

"Please don't go! Really, we've almost finished. The dust is dying down already."

"After manoeuvring the barricade outside successfully you've got to stay, old man," Denis declared. "Tell us what you're doing, anyway, Nell."

But Nell was interested to see the ruefulness in her visitor's face change suddenly to keen amusement. She followed his look to the head of Sheila Pat, which, adorned dusterwise, was crowned with her pig-tail sticking straight up on top out of the duster. She gave a little laugh, and he laughed too. She turned to Denis and explained why they were cleaning out the room. Then Ted Lancaster astonished them all.

"I say," he burst out eagerly, "I wish you'd let me stay and lend a hand!"

Sheila Pat, squatting on her heels in the middle of the floor, with a short brush, looked up at him approvingly.

"Come along in and shut the door, there's a good boy!"

The good boy's eyes twinkled as he obeyed. He removed his extremely smart coat and professed his readiness to begin.

"By the way," observed Denis, the corners of his mouth twitching humorously, "I'd better introduce him first!"

"Oh—yes," said Nell, blushing suddenly.

Ted Lancaster bowed gravely to her and with almost deeper gravity to Sheila Pat.

"That's another sister over there in the cupboard," Denis remarked. "Molly's fond of cupboards."

The two boys set to work and raised a fearful dust. Nell observed ruefully that the parts they were sweeping had been gone over once already.

Ted looked up earnestly, his brush pausing:—

"You must let us do it—O'Brien and me—every week, Miss O'Brien; our arms are stronger."

"I," said the Atom, weightily, "think you are a very nice boy."

"And I think you are a very nice lit—young lady."

"I'll show you my snowy-breasted Pearl afterwards."

"Eh? Oh, thanks."

"He's very sensertive; you mustn't mind if he bites you a little."

"Oh, I'll like it. So your white-breasted Pearl's a boy, is he?"

"I'll essplain to you about his name another time," she said with great dignity. She came closer, and whispered: "Denis calls him somethin' else. I'm 'fraid he might do it now. Promise you'll never, *never* ask him what he calls my Pearl!"

He looked surprised into the beseeching face.

"All right," he said gently, "I'll never ask him."

"Thank you."

She dusted a table leg in silence.

"You are English, aren't you?" she said then.

He nodded.

"Perhaps you've lived years and years in Ireland?"

"No."

"Perhaps you've lived a little while there?"

He was looking amused.

"No."

"Perhaps you've stayed for *heaps* of visits there?"

"No."

"Perhaps you've stayed for just a *few little* visits?"

"No."

Sheila Pat stared in disappointed wonder.

"Haven't you ever been there at *all*?"

"Never set foot in it."

"Oh!"

Presently, "Well, you're not at all bad—*for England*."

"England," quoth he, gravely, "is the finest country in the world!"

The Atom's eyes and mouth opened incredulously; a swift rush of delicate pink dyed her face.

"You—you're forgettin' Ireland!" she gasped.

"Not at all. I believe Ireland's a very decent little place."

"Decent, is it?"—the Atom forgot her dusting—"I'm just s'prised a big boy like you should be such a—a *hignoramous*!"

She waited proudly, then pursued, her voice trembling with earnestness: "You're all the same—you English! You're jealous of us! You—oh, you're all stupid donkeys!"

It was a downfall from eloquence to rude vituperation. But she was, for the moment, beyond realisation of that. She stood waiting, her eyes shining. But interruption, in the form of Miss Kezia, broke in on Ted's answer, and the discussion had to be postponed for the present. Miss Kezia was somewhat amused, in a dry sort of way, at their room-cleaning. She shrugged her shoulders over it; if they liked to amuse themselves that way, it did no harm, and work never yet hurt anyone. She asked Ted to stay to luncheon, and he accepted. He seemed to enjoy the roast beef and jam roly pudding. He talked courteously to Miss Kezia, he skirmished with the Atom, but he avoided Nell's eyes.

Nell seemed absent-minded, sunk in thought. After luncheon in the hall she seized an opportunity and approached him.

"I—I want to beg your pardon," she said stiffly, "for—for that night—"

"Oh—ah—awfully good of you—*good-bye*! I say, O'Brien, you'll be late at the bank—I mean," glancing swiftly at her and away again, "not at all—of course—" He was out of the hall door, hustling in front of Denis, down the steps, and into the street.

"You're in a hurry, aren't you?" observed Denis, mildly surprised.

"Er—yes." He turned his red face away, and strode on.

Nell went up to the Stronghold, smiling unwillingly. She felt as if she had known him for years, and she resented the feeling. She told herself that it was most annoying—his having come in just that morning when they were cleaning out the room; it was most unfortunate, for how could anyone be politely distant and dignified under such circumstances? And of course sweeping and laughing and having jokes *made* you feel as if you had known a person for quite a long while—even an objectionable person like this Ted Lancaster, who spent his time lounging about and doing nothing except visit his tailor. She was quite sure he visited his tailor a great deal. And he preferred a motor-car to horses! By the time she reached the Stronghold she was frowning.

"Sheila Pat, come and write your dictation."

"Nell," the Atom observed as she sat her down, "I'm very sorry for that poor boy."

"Why?"

"He's *never been in Ireland*, Nell!"

"Well, so haven't lots of other people."

"I don't mind about them, but I like that boy, and all these wicked men in Parlymint have—*diseased* his mind about Ireland! I have forgave all the nasty things he said because I'm so sorry for him, poor boy. And you see," patronisingly, "he doesn't know anythin' about it."

"He's not a bit good-looking," observed Molly irrelevantly; "he's got rather a big nose."

"Molly O'Brien, you're none so beautiful yourself that you need be rude about other persons' noses," severely. "That boy's the best I've seen in this London yet!"

"What queer taste you have, Sheila Pat!" said Nell, with a curl of her lip.

The Atom did not heed her. She was sunk deep in thought.

"I like him," she remarked after a while thoughtfully. "Sure I wouldn't mind him about—when it's mistletoe time!"

CHAPTER X

Miss Kezia put her latch-key into the lock in a serene frame of mind. She had spent a morning in giving advice. In any case that was a way congenial to her of spending her time. Moreover, on this occasion her advice had been taken; all the bare, unsweetened pills concocted of her wisdom had been swallowed unmurmuringly. Miss Kezia smiled decorously as she stood on her doorstep. Then she opened the door, and was greeted with an emphatic: "Git out, you old meddlar! D'you hear? Git out!"

The shock to her was considerable; it was the more considerable that it came on top of her advice-given-and-taken morning.

She paused, her hand on the latch of the door. She had a confused impression that her Irish relatives were showing her a new side of their character; the voice had come from the Stronghold. Hitherto, however noisy, however tiresome, they had not been rude. Indeed, their soft manners had oftentimes riled her, she being unable, in her rough austerity, to disconnect the softness altogether from insincerity.

She was not an imaginative woman; her mind was not formed even to comprehend, or make allowance for, the quality of imagination in another. But as her bonnet slowly rose from her head, she felt suddenly as if she had been precipitated into an evil dream. For a moment the solid aspect of everyday life, in which she moved and had her being, lost its common-sense reality. She merely stood, feeling her bonnet rise. Then, with a sudden angry gesture, she put up her hand to her head. It encountered another hand, a little, soft, cold hand; gentle little flabby fingers clung round hers, and even Miss Kezia's strong nerves received a severe jar. She had no belief in ghosts, in spirits, or any of "that sort of rubbish," under which designation she lumped many occult subjects together, but a little gentle hand in mid-air, clasping hers, was somewhat disconcerting even to her well-balanced mind. She glanced up hurriedly, feeling suddenly very hot. She saw nothing. She gazed, with a sort of angry anxiety, round the little hall. The two chairs stood there as usual; the hat-stand looked no different. Mechanically she counted, seizing unconsciously and with relief on the everyday hats and coats. There was Herr Schmidt's bowler and Denis's cap and coat. Her eye was arrested suddenly; from out the coat a little wizened face looked down at her, inimitably wise, inimitably sad. Miss Kezia took a step towards it; a long lean arm came softly out in the direction of her bonnet. She drew back and went towards the stairs.

"Hulloa!" shouted a voice. "By Jove, ain't she a disy! Oh, Lor'!" The voice broke suddenly into shrieks of laughter. It was such intensely rude laughter that Miss Kezia reddened hotly, and almost shrank, for a moment, from it. The plaintive, long-drawn miaow of a cat rose above the laughter. Howls—sudden, frenzied wails of woe rose above both. Miss Kezia went upstairs and entered the Stronghold.

As she opened the door something darted past her. There was a wild shouting: "Shut the door! He's gone! Look out, she'll be off, too!" Miss Kezia felt herself being pushed unceremoniously to one side; there was a bang of the door, and she found herself alone in the Stronghold. She drew her hand across her forehead.

"Oh, Lor', here's the disy!"

Miss Kezia positively jumped; she jumped quite badly. She found herself staring into a grey old face, into a pair of eyes that seemed to have looked into all the wickedness of the world. She was not alone in the Stronghold. A grey parrot sat on the back of a chair and returned her gaze with an insolent *sang froid*.

"Get out!" he adjured her. "You're a disy, you are!"

The dissipated wrinkles round his old eyes added to his *blasé* air of knowing all things.

"Old meddlar!" he screamed at her in sudden anger. "Old meddlar,—meddlar-meddlar-meddlar," and he sank into sudden heavy silence. He was a particularly ugly specimen of his kind; he was scarce of feathers, on his poll there was a nasty wound, and one leg had very obviously at some time been broken and very badly reset. His self-admiration, nevertheless, was so absurdly apparent that it raised an intense irritation in Miss Kezia's mind. His air of superiority was aggressive; his little beady eye told her she was dirt. They stared at each other. Then Miss Kezia's attention was drawn suddenly to a box on the table. Under the circumstances

she was not really much surprised to observe that its lid was slowly rising. Across her mind there flitted, with a vague discomfort, the memory of Irish superstition, of the Irish belief in fairies and "such rubbish." She gave herself an angry shake and approached the box. As she did so a small brown head appeared in the aperture, a small brown body followed it, and a thin little mouse scudded across the table and disappeared. Miss Kezia waged a deadly war with mice; the faintest suggestion of a nibble anywhere in the house resulted in traps—a whole army of traps—up and down stairs. But now she stood and watched mouse after mouse push up the box lid, alight on the table with a little thud, and disappear. She counted six mechanically, and then she awoke to full realisation of the enormity of what was happening. She approached the box, and with a firm hand pushed down the lid and put a heavy book upon it. Of the fact that the box was empty she remained in ignorance. Then she opened the door and went out on to the landing. She looked down into the hall, and beheld the decorous Sarah, capless, wispy, her apron torn, standing upon one of the staid hall chairs and screaming. Perhaps that gave Miss Kezia as severe a shock as any she had yet received. But it also acted as a swift and very emphatic brain-clearer. No douche of cold water was ever more effective in its action.

"Sarah!"

Now Sarah had not been aware of the fact that her mistress was within the house. The knowledge, sudden and grim, found her quite unprepared, and coming, as it did, a climax on top of mice, monkeys, cats, dogs, parrots, tortoises, was too much for her equilibrium. Sarah fell with a clatter and a scream, and took the staid hall chair with her. She also took two umbrellas and a puppy. The puppy burst into howls and Sarah burst into tears. Each made a considerable noise, and a mouse fled appalled into Herr Schmidt's bowler. Some of the O'Briens appeared from the kitchen (Molly had apparently been embracing the coal box).

"Here's the puppy!"

The joy in Sheila Pat's shout was the finishing touch to Miss Kezia's wrath. It fairly blazed forth; she excelled herself. Her audience consisted chiefly of Sarah, still weeping; Molly, also weeping; and the wise-faced monkey, who sat in Denis's coat collar and listened with sad attention. For the rest Denis and Nell and the Atom appeared and disappeared at intervals in pursuit of the puppy, the cat, and the mice. Miss Kezia's peroration was eloquent; wrath lent it fire. But her eloquence began to fail at last, and then she demanded an explanation. Unfortunately, only Molly and Sarah were present at that point. Molly essayed an explanation, but evolved only the following:—

"We—we didn't mean—it—we didn't. They—they—oh—poor little things—all cramped up—the—the cages were smaller—than themselves—we—we—we—"

Then Miss Kezia said something that was not at all like her usual method of speech. In a voice thin and rasped with irritation and much eloquence, she observed:—

"Apparently you think you are a pig! Eileen! Eileen! I *command* you to come here!"

Nell, a struggling puppy in her arms, stopped short. She was breathless, untidy, and hilarious.

"We've got them all now, except three of the mice," she added.

The jet ornament in Miss Kezia's bonnet quivered spasmodically.

"Perhaps you will condescend to explain now how it happens that you have turned my house into a menagerie," she said.

Nell sat down on the lowest stair and kissed the puppy's ugly little head.

"We are going to send them all to Kilbrannan, Aunt Kezia. Duckie, stay still then! You see—"

"You cannot send the missing mice away! They will overrun my house."

"They'll have plenty of room, anyway! If you had seen the cages, Aunt Kezia! This blessed puppy—"

"Was in a cage smaller than himself! I have heard that already." There was sarcasm in her tone that was completely lost on Nell.

"Yes! Just imagine! Oh, we just had to buy them all. And that poor parrot was eating out of an empty pan! It was cruel! We just went in and bought them all."

"Bought—them—all!" Miss Kezia echoed her words quite faintly.

"You *paid* for these—these creatures!"

"Why, yes! It was a horrid little shop, half full of papers and magazines, half full of tobacco and pipes, and half full of these poor dears. Of course it was a good deal of money, but what were we to do? It was Jim who cost the most—oh, Denis, have you got the rest of the mice?"

"This beast of a midnight caroller has scratched a hunk of flesh out of my hand, and all because I saved a mouse from her cattish jaws!"

He was holding a thin and mangy tabby cat at arm's length.

"Why didn't you let her catch it? It is perfectly ridiculous to be so childish at your age!" Poor Miss Kezia could not find words to express her utter disapproval and want of understanding.

"Well," observed Denis, "'twould be playing it pretty low to buy half-a-dozen tame mice and give 'em to the cat. I expect, if their opinion were asked, you'd find they preferred even the old Jew's cage to the cat's interior."

Miss Kezia gave some final directions; there was a subdued fury in eye and voice due as much to her inadequacy to the occasion as to her anger at the havoc wrought in her well-ordered house. The monkey coughed softly, and Sarah, still weeping in the background, screamed. Sheila Pat appeared, climbed on to a chair, and lifted the monkey down. The monkey put a thin arm round her neck in a horribly human way. Sheila Pat kissed his face, and Miss Kezia called out in irrepressible horror.

"I love him," the Atom said calmly. "He's just 'zact like my dearrest Patsy O'Driscoll."

The monkey's bright little eyes blinked knowingly.

"I believe he's a first cousin," Denis declared. "Ever been to Kilbrannan, old man? Played hand-ball on summer evenings on Patsy's wall, eh? Driven Kate in the jaunting-car? D'you know the road up-along by Dinny O'Sullivan's? Sure ye'll be meetin' the doctor's house to the west—ah, yes, thin, ye're knowin' that all right. Look at him smiling, Nell!"

Miss Kezia turned a stiff back upon them and walked into her bedroom.

"She doesn't appreciate you, Jim."

Jim coughed delicately. It was a funny little soft deprecating cough.

"He is just like Patsy," Nell said. "If we were to dress him up and put him on the box seat of the jaunting-car, he'd be acknowledged by his own mother!"

Miss Kezia's bedroom door was opened.

"You will please to send off all those creatures to-day—and at once!"

It was several hours before her mandate was obeyed. The packing took a considerable time. During those hours the monkey crept more and more into their affections.

"I think," opined Nell, "it's positively wicked to send him on a long, cold journey with a nasty little cough like that!"

"I shall feel as if I'm murdering one of my own relations," Denis agreed.

Sheila Pat put a protecting arm round the monkey.

"Jimmy O'Driscoll," Denis said suddenly, "you have an artful countenance. Could you make yourself scarce whenever our respected aunt appeared on the scene? James, could you remember to remember that you're actually and bodily in Kilbrannan?"

"Oh, Denis!" Sheila Pat broke in ecstatically. "Oh, I do love Patsy's cousin!"

That night Miss Kezia said, "I am thankful that your *pets* have left my house, and I beg that you will not spend your money in that ridiculous and wicked way again!" There was a sarcastic inflexion on the word "pets."

CHAPTER XI

Denis stood upon a chair and declaimed. His audience consisted of Sheila Pat and Jim O'Driscoll.

"'Literature of the Elizabethan Period.' Pause, Sheila Pat, with an inward gaze. By the way, how d'you gaze at your innards? Then you fling back your hair," he tried ridiculously to fling back his short locks. "Meant to let them grow long for the happy occasion. Then you begin: 'The Elizabethan Period was one of grand, of glorious prolificacy in the realms of literature. What names the mere mention of the period conjures up, names that still ring, and will always ring'—ha! ha! ha!"

He doubled up with sudden laughter. Jim, squatting in a chair, eyed him with the same grave attention that he had given to the opening of the speech. He was an earnest, if not a particularly appreciative, audience.

Sheila Pat demanded, "What are you laughin' at?"

"I saw old Lancaster's face suddenly. He's dangerous. His scowl's enough to turn the sunshine into a black frost. But he won't back out now. He's too jolly obstinate. You should have seen his face when Yovil told us his sister had persuaded him to make the evening a bigger affair and invite ladies too. And his 'naughty little cuss words,' Atom! What d'you think he said about your sex too? He said: 'What meddlers women are! Why must they have their fingers in

everyone's pie?' Why, James there would be more gallant!"

Sheila Pat did not respond to his nonsense. She said sombrely, "I'm comin' to hear you speak, Denis O'Brien."

"Sorry, old girl, but the invitation's only for Nell, you know."

She shut her mouth obstinately.

Denis approached Jim.

"Jim, what have you got in your mouth?"

The monkey, in a flutter of fear, opened his mouth and shot out a piece of india rubber, a small tube of paint, a button off the chair, and a thimble. He had a habit of putting things in his mouth and carrying them about with him. Denis had taught him already to give them up. As the thimble rolled on to the chair, Jim sprang away, up the curtains, and sat glowering down from the curtain rod.

"He asked Aunt Kezia to come," Sheila Pat said.

"But when he heard that—ahem—unfortunately she was engaged for that evening, he said he hoped I'd bring my sister myself,—only mentioned one sister, you see. Fact is, he's full up—afraid his drawing-room won't hold them all."

The Atom stared out of the window. Jim, having, with a good deal of ingenuity, extricated a curtain hook, dropped it on her head. She shook it off impatiently. Jim watched, peering impishly over the curtain rail.

"I'm awfully sorry, asthore,"—Denis pulled her pig-tail lovingly—"shall I put you in my pocket?"

"I will hear you speak," the Atom said.

"Well, I'll recite my speech to you and Jim here. Nell was saying she wishes you'd take her place."

"Don't be silly, Denis."

A measured step approached the door.

"Aunt Kezia—and Jim not in his cage!" he ejaculated, and strode to the door.

He glanced back at Jim—a dim little outline in the curtain. "If only he stays there!"

He swung out on to the landing, nearly upsetting Miss Kezia.

"I wish to see Molly," she said.

"Molly? She's not in there, Aunt Kezia."

"One of my boots is missing. I conclude that Molly, for some purpose of her own, has taken it." She moved towards him and the door.

"Don't you trouble," he besought her; "you go and finish getting ready. I'll find Molly and ask her."

"I prefer to look for myself."

She entered the Stronghold and gazed around.

Jim peered inquisitively at her over the curtain top. Denis frowned at him and shook his head.

"There is my boot!" Miss Kezia dragged a large and solid boot from beneath a chair. "Well!" she ejaculated, and the amount of indignation she managed to compress into that one word was terrific. She held up the boot—there was not a button left on it. But on the floor, ranged in a neat little line, sat ten black buttons. The absolute regularity of the line, the precision and neatness, somehow seemed to aggravate the offence.

"I—I would like to *whip* Molly!"

Miss Kezia's accents were not so judicial as usual; there was a hurried, almost a pathetic, note about them. She was at a loss. "I will find Molly," she said with dire meaning, and stalked towards the door.

"I'll find her for you!" Denis exclaimed, and brushed past her. When the door was shut, Sheila Pat, with a smile for what had occurred, went back to the window and her thoughts.

Jim crept stealthily down the curtain and across to the boot buttons, which had been scattered by Miss Kezia's angry toe. He picked them up, one by one, and laid them in a neat little row again. Then he sat and regarded them with his head on one side.

Sheila Pat's solitude was invaded presently by a very injured and tearful Molly.

"She thinks I'm mad! And he isn't worth it! I'm to—to sew them all on myself! I can't!"

Sheila Pat rose suddenly and left the room. She went into her bedroom.. It was a bright, cold day with a brilliant sun sparkling on a fast-disappearing frost. But Sheila Pat donned a dark blue raincoat. She looked down with satisfaction on the neat little ankles and feet that were all that emerged from that end. From the other end, above an intensely sporting turned-up collar, her small face looked out with a weighty seriousness. She put on a dark blue peaked sort of cap, also

rain proof, slipped downstairs, and left the house. With her hands in big pockets, she walked staidly down the road, a quaint little exceedingly tailorish figure. She stopped to accost a grey cob in a milkman's cart, and on the milkman's appearing from a house fell into conversation with him. Suddenly she broke out, appealingly young and eager in spite of her coat:—

"Might I—oh, *please* might I get in and hold the reins while you're in the houses?"

He appeared to hesitate.

"It—" a little choke jostled the words—"it's weeks and weeks since I've held the reins!"

The milkman glanced dubiously down at the very small Atom, then at his quiet old cob, and assented. As he politely helped her in he felt the little tremor that shook her, but he did not understand it. He smiled surprisedly at the workmanlike way in which she gathered up the reins. He nodded kindly into the suddenly joyous face uplifted to his. Sheila Pat let out a great big breath and clucked softly to the cob.

"Plenty of work in him yet," she observed conversationally. "Pretty shrewd, too," with a proud little laugh as the cob stopped outside a house.

"He knows the houses I supply as well as I do, miss."

On his rejoining her, "Any special fad?" she asked.

"Well, he's steady-going as a rule, miss,—don't mind motors, or trains, or stone-crushers a bit,—but it's a funny thing he can't stand wheelbarrers! Shies at 'em quite skittish."

Sheila Pat listened with absorbed interest. The milkman came to the last house on his list, and she drove him in style to the dairy. The conversation on the way was strictly horsey. As they drew up she mentioned where she was going.

"Mr. Yovil? Oh, we supply him. I'll take you there, miss; it's close by."

So it came about that Mr. Mark Yovil, looking forth from his study window, beheld his milkman driven to his gate by a very small and very dignified driver, who, after bidding the cob a lingering and loving farewell, shook hands with the milkman, and entered Mr. Yovil's gate.

A few minutes later a rigidly grave maid announced: "Miss Sheila Patricia Kathleen O'Brien," and the Atom walked in.

"How-do-you-do? I am the sister of Denis O'Brien."

Mr. Yovil took off his glasses and polished them with his handkerchief, then he fixed them on the brown and bumpy bridge of his nose, and regarded her through them.

"I'm sure I'm very pleased to see you," he said in a particularly charming voice. Sheila Pat would never have dreamt how exceedingly curt and cutting that voice could be. "Pray sit down."

"Thank you."

There was a pause, while he watched her pulling down her long coat over her ankles.

"You see, I've come on business," she said presently, looking up straight into his face.

"Oh, indeed. I'm afraid," with a comical shake of his bristly head, "I'm not much good on business matters."

"It's not about money at all. I—" there was just a tiny pause—"I want to know if you—if you would engage me as an extra hand on next Wednesday."

"An—extra—hand?"

A little pink signal of distress lest he laugh at her flamed in her cheek.

"You see," the staid voice grew hurried, "I'm rather small for my age. I'm not really very young. I'm quite six and fourteen weeks, and I—I'm 'ceptionally strong. I could wash the plates and knives and forks, and—and run errings—and fill the water jugs. I'd do anythin', and I wouldn't want any wages. The only stippleation I'd make is that I might listen in a corner to Denis's speech."

"It's very kind of you," the dark eyes behind the glasses were twinkling a good deal, "but I really do not need an—er—extra hand."

There was a pause. Sheila Pat swallowed twice, quite loudly.

"P'raps," tremulous hope sounded in her voice, "p'raps you'd like me to show people to their seats?"

"N-no," he said slowly, "I really don't think there's any office I need filling."

He stared distressed at the woeful face of Sheila Pat. He polished his glasses with a queer nervousness, this quick-tempered little man before whom so many grown-ups had trembled.

"I—" with a trembling burst of desperation, "I could fill the coal skuttles!"

He came over and, drawing up a chair, sat down beside her.

"Will you tell me why you want to—er—fulfil all these menial offices?" he asked gently.

She slid off her chair.

"It was to hear Denis, you see. Good-bye, Mr. Yovil."

"But—why not come with your brother?"

"Nell's comin', and you're full up. Molly doesn't want to, anyway, because there'd be so many boys starin'."

"I shall be very much hurt if you don't come, too."

A little flush rose to her cheeks.

"I'm not wishin' to intrude, thank you; I wasn't askin' for *that*! Only, you see, I thought if I could be an extra hand, that would do."

He took the hand extended to him, and with his other rubbed his brow wildly. He realised that nothing would induce his small companion to come on the Wednesday merely as a visitor. He stared at her in comical distress.

"Good-bye," he said absently.

As she reached the door he gave a jubilant shout.

"Could you be my Social Prompter, do you think?"

She turned back.

"Yes," she said. "What is it?"

He smiled.

"Come and sit down again. There, that's right. Oh, I shall want a Social Prompter that evening!" he gave a quizzical little chuckle. "Now listen, my dear. I'm a rude man. Oh, yes, I am," as she politely refuted his statement. "A good many ladies have told me so. I never speak to the people I should speak to, and I speak to those I shouldn't. Well, there will be a good many ladies present on Wednesday, and I must speak to them all and I must say just about as many words to one as the other. Now, my sister was to have been hostess, and she gives me a sign whom I'm to accost next, and so on. But her little boy has the measles, and she won't come up to town. Do you see?"

"Oh, yes!" Sheila Pat's face was intent. "I'll turn up my nose at the ladies you've spoken to, and smile at the ones you haven't."

"Well—hardly that. The ladies whom you turned your nose up at might be hurt, you know. Let me see, now. I think if you come quietly up to me every now and then, and suggest what group I shall join— How will that do?"

"Yes," said Sheila Pat. She put out her hand and gave his arm an ecstatic little squeeze.

"I did want to see Denis get the prize."

"But perhaps he won't."

"Oh, yes, he will. He's Irish, you see. Good-bye. I'm very much 'bliged."

"Not at all. It's I who should say that. I'm coming out. We'll start together."

With infinite tact he invented the need of tobacco, because he knew there was a tobacconist's near the top of Henley Road. He never smoked any but a particular brand that he procured at a particular shop, and that evening his man was gratified by the present of a tin of tobacco.

He bade the Atom good-bye at the top of her road, and looking after the sedate little back, he smiled. Such an immense dignity was there in that small back view of Sheila Pat that it was difficult to associate her with the severe scolding to which she knew she was walking.

CHAPTER XII

"Four half crowns is ten bob. Sarah, if ever I catch you carrying that heavy coal-box up to our room again, I'll give you a month's warning and pack you off without a day's notice!

"Nell," entering the Stronghold, "to-day is Saturday. Old Tellbridge, gazing at my interesting countenance, pale from overwork and perhaps tired of my unfortunate method of making two and two tot up to five or three, let me off early. The pit of a theatre is peopled nowadays by a most respectable and worthy—"

"A theatre? Oh, Denis! Which? What?"

"My dears, do not shout. 'Tis vulgar. You've heard of a play called 'Monsieur Beaucaire.' Softly—softly. And James, there are no—er—butterflies in K.K.'s coat, I assure you. Yes, Atom, we *are* going! Yes, we must start *at once*! Lancaster says it's going very strong. We'll have to wait outside ages. As our aunt is not at home, I would suggest a raid on the kitchen, and then flight."

Nell said demurely:—

"Yesterday Aunt Kezia was holding forth on the vulgarity of any but grocers' assistants and 'sich-like' waiting in a queue outside a theatre."

Down in the kitchen a scandalised Sarah looked on while they "foraged." She held a table-cloth in one hand and two table napkins in the other. Agitatedly she sought to thrust them upon the O'Briens, while they sat on the table and ate cold jam-tart, bread and cheese, and apples. Later, as they hurried out of the gate—Molly, gloveless, working her arms into her coat—she called after them:—

"You'll be faint with 'unger, missansir!"

On the omnibus Molly discovered that she had brought odd gloves with her.

As they drew near the theatre they were overcome with a sudden fear that they would be too late to get seats in the front row and they scrambled anyhow down the omnibus steps. Sheila Pat took a flying leap that brought down upon her shouts from the conductor and from the drivers of two cabs. The Atom, safe and sound on the curb, drew herself up with dignity.

"Really, in this *London* a person can't do a thing at all, without being interfered with!"

Then they ran. When they arrived at the theatre, they found only about ten people there before them. Denis assured them they would get front-row seats, and they exulted.

The long wait did not seem long to them. But their money flew. There was the poor man who tied himself into horrible knots; the newspaper boy, who had blue eyes, and whom they thought might be Irish. When he thanked them for the sixpence, his Cockney accent shattered their hopes. They gave pennies to the little pink-nosed boy whose sister played the flageolet, and to an old man who sang.

Then the move began. A very big man directly behind Sheila Pat looked down amusedly at that excessively small, but excessively determined young person. He recognised the fact that the Atom meant no one to push in front of her. In the front row Sheila Pat sat her down, and looked around, quivering with excitement.

Just before the curtain went up Ted Lancaster strolled into the stalls, and sat down in front of the Atom. She bent forward and dug eager little fingers into his shoulder.

"Won't you be speakin' to me at all, then, Mr. Lancaster?"

He turned.

"Why, it's my lit—my Irish friend! How-do-you-do, Miss O'Brien?"

"Oh, please," said Sheila Pat, "is there anyone *Irish* in the play?"

"I'm afraid not. But you'll lose your heart to Monsieur Beaucaire, though he's only a Frenchman!"

She shook an obstinate head.

"I won't!"

At the end of the first act he turned to her. A little faint pink colour dyed her cheeks, her eyes were wide and bright.

"Well? How about your heart?"

"I—I *haven't*! I won't!"

"I love him!" said Molly. "And oh, I *loathe* that wicked Duke of Winterset!"

When the curtain went down at the end of the first scene of the second act, he turned to her again. Her eyes were brighter, her cheeks pinker than before. She refused to look at him.

"It's only two minutes," Ted said. "Miss Sheila Patricia?" he finished with an uplifting of brows.

"I—I *haven't*! You are a very intruding boy!"

The curtain went up, and he turned away.

The moment when she finally and absolutely and openly capitulated was when Monsieur Beaucaire came down the stairs, taking the old Countess of Greenbury to supper. In the midst of the storm of applause, one ecstatic little voice rang out.

"He's *worthy* to be Irish, anyway!"

As they went out Molly managed to become separated from them and lost.

Denis said, "You stay out here with Lancaster," and plunged back into the crowd.

Sheila Pat, excited, too restless to stand still, plunged eagerly after him.

Nell was left standing with Ted. Now Ted Lancaster was possessed of some physical attributes that particularly displeased Nell, as being so ridiculously untrue to his character. She fell to pondering the strength of his rather thin mouth and of his chin; on the look of cleverness about his deep-set eyes. The very breadth of his shoulders displeased her. She told herself that a slack creature such as he must be, who lounged about and did nothing except drive in a motor, had no business with a face like his. Irritatedly she fought against a strong inclination to like him.

"Isn't your motor waiting for you?" she broke the silence in a bland tone of voice.

"No." He sounded a little surprised. "There're always hansoms, you know," he added.

"Oh! But you prefer your motor, don't you?"

He gave her a quick, shrewd glance; there was just the suspicion of a smile at the corners of his lips as he answered carelessly:—

"Well, they get you along quicker, you know."

"Yes," she said, "and of course when you've a lot to do—when you are very busy—that's a consideration."

There was a little pause. She glanced at him and smiled maliciously. He had flushed a little.

"Yes," he agreed nonchalantly.

She watched three women frantically tearing about in search of a hansom, but she was thinking of Ted. What a cool voice he had! She wasn't sure that it wasn't impertinent. And as for his looking tired and ill—well, of course he would, living an unhealthy, self-indulgent, lazy life. Suddenly she began to contrast his mode of life with Denis's before they had left Kilbrannan. Impulsively she spoke her thoughts aloud, keeping, in actual words, only to Denis, his prowess in the hunting field, football, and so on; but her expressive voice and face pointed the moral, drew the contrast, as plainly as if she had spoken it. There was another pause when she stopped.

Then Denis appeared with the others. The relief in her welcome was unmistakable.

"Got her! She was rushing off in a frenzy straight for the North Pole! You're not going, Lancaster? Rot! Come along with us, old chap, and be introduced to Jimmy O'Driscoll."

Ted glanced at Nell; it was an odd glance, and his mouth twisted in a sudden dry smile.

"Yes, won't you?" she said carelessly.

"Thanks, no, I've to meet a fellow!"

He raised his hat and walked away.

Sarah let them in at No. 35. She looked scared and spoke in a loud whisper.

"Oh, missansir, there's been murder done as sure as my name's Sarah Jones! Hush! She's in! The poor little dog! Its dying 'owls were pitiful! I allus knew that unchristian monkey-thing would do us a 'arm!"

She managed to work on their feelings to a certain extent, although they knew that Jim had conceived a deep affection for Kate Kearney, which that young person returned with a disdainful and bullying sort of tolerance. They hurried up to the Stronghold, Denis produced the key, and they opened the door. The room presented a somewhat chaotic appearance; bits of Denis's slippers strewed the floor; a fur rug distributed itself in bunches round the room; the table-cloth had been pulled off, and with it various books, papers, and a bowl of chrysanthemums. With the chaos a dead silence greeted them; they could see neither Kate Kearney nor Jim O'Driscoll.

Molly gasped:—

"Oh—they're both killed!"

Behind the easy chair they sat, two little mute, obstinate figures, palpably worn out, and each still holding on grimly to a battered thing of felt and ribbon that once had been a hat of Nell's. In Jim's thin little hands, as they gripped the hat, bunches of black fur were discernible, which told a tale. At their approach K.K. arose, panting, and renewed the struggle. She was very strong and Jim was very small. With her teeth fixed firmly in the felt, she pulled and pulled, backing all round the room, and at the other end of the hat came Jim, hopping, sliding, but never letting his hold slip. His pathetic little wizened face added to the ludicrousness of the spectacle. In the end Denis bethought him brilliantly of a way to end the struggle with fairness to both sides. He took a knife and sawed Nell's hat in halves. Immediately each went straight for the piece the other held, and as each dropped its own piece, Nell picked them up, and the battle was perforce at an end.

Jim fled, chattering with rage, to the top of the curtain, and Kate Kearney had resort to what no doubt she would have termed a hurt dignity, but what looked considerably like a fit of the sulks.

"Now," said Denis, "how did that little beggar undo his cage door?"

Nell said, still laughing:—

"It's just struck me that it's rather hard on my hat!"

CHAPTER XIII

Denis was immersed, fathoms deep, in unutterable gloom. It was the all-important day, at last. That morning he had risen in wild spirits. "Don't believe my poor old essay is so bad after all! Anyhow, what's it matter?"

At luncheon time he was still hilarious; at tea time down, down in the depths. His thermometer had been very much like that in regard to his speech, up and down, down and up, for the past week.

"It's tea time, Denis."

"All right." He glanced up from his notes with his eyebrows up, his forehead wrinkled. "T'won't make any difference whether I go on reading up or not—it's awful rot, anyway."

"It's grand," declared Sheila Pat, and the Pearl chattered his teeth angrily at the enthusiastic squeeze she gave him.

"Don't lose heart, Denis, it's a fine speech," said Nell.

"It's stiff—stilted," he said, frowning.

She flushed; he had put her own secret fear into words.

"I'm quite sure you will get the prize," remarked Stewart, who had been invited to tea. He spoke with deep earnestness; he had an intense admiration for Denis.

But Denis sat glum and gloomy while they pressed bread and butter on him, and Stewart made him a slice of French toast. Then suddenly he looked up, and he burst out laughing.

"Oh, how you're all waiting on Sir Doldrums Gloomy-grump! Look at the noble Stewart's flushed countenance, reddened in my unworthy service! Not another word on literature! Let's forget that such things as speeches exist!"

But presently he began to laugh again:—

"I'm thinking of poor old Lancaster. Saw him this afternoon—talk about gloom! He was in a vile temper! 'Pretty lot of fools we'll look! But I deserve all I get!' he growled, and off he marched, though I wanted to speak to him particularly!"

While they were dressing, Stewart slipped away next door.

He reappeared, oddly red and shy.

Sheila Pat, in short white petticoat and stockinged feet, met him on the landing.

"Where have you been, Tommy?"

"Just home."

"What's the matter, Tommy?"

"Nothing!"

Sheila Pat considered him gravely.

"Your face is very red."

"Rot!"

"And why are you keepin' your hand behind you?"

"Want to!"

She made a dart, but he turned, too. Round and round they went, and she won. She was too quick and elf-like for him.

"Oh!" she said. "It's a red rose. Is it for Nell?"

"No!"

"Is it for me?"

"If—if you like—you can have it!"

"Oh, yes, please, Tommy."

He held it out to her, a lovely deep red rose with a spray of maiden hair.

"I'll pin it in front of my dress, Tommy, and I'll look so nice, won't I? Janie and Benny Jones are comin' to look at us when we're dressed."

"Sheila Pat! Sheila Pat!"

She slipped away from him.

Presently she reappeared in the Stronghold.

"Tommy, *don't* you think—with my button-hole and all—*I might be seven*?"

Stewart looked at her in her little loose, short white frock; at her long, slim legs and little white heelless shoes.

"Don't look at my *legs*!" she breathed.

"Ten!" he said unblinkingly.

"Oh, Tommy! I do so want to look old to-night! It's very erportant—what I've got to do! And I'll put some cakes in my pocket for you."

Nell ran past the room and upstairs to see how Denis was getting on. He had lost his collar stud. She found it for him; she put it in for him; she sewed the bow on to his shoe; she rearranged his tie; helped him on with his coat, and all he said in thanks was:—

"Oh, Jemima! how I pity the poor chap who marries you!"

Nell pulled her hair a trifle looser, using his glass. She turned on him, young, slim, radiantly

pretty. "Do you?" she laughed. "I'll be an old maid, then!"

"You do look stunning, old girl! Bet I'll have the prettiest sister there to-night."

"Oh, I do believe you carry a chip of the blarney stone about with you. Come down and let Janie and Benny look at you. Denis, there's a most delicious scent in this room. What is it?"

"Eh? Oh, a bit of lily of the valley I thought you might like. It's on the wash-hand stand."

He whistled a bar of "Widow Macree."

"Oh, Denis!" She was holding up a lovely bunch of lilies of the valley to her cheek.

He turned with sudden irritation.

"Don't start about it's being extravagant! It isn't! If you say a word, I'll chuck 'em in the dust-bin!"

She smiled demurely. The flowers had been behind the water-jug, with a suspicious air of having been hidden there.

"They're lovely," she said, tucking them into her soft folded belt. "I must pin them in. Are you coming, twin?"

"If it weren't for taking you two, I wouldn't come at all."

"Oh, yes, you would."

"What's the good? I haven't a ghost of a chance—"

"If you *knew* you were bound to make the worst speech there," her head was up, "you would go. We never funk anything, Denis!"

"Neither we do, old lady!"

He seized her round the waist and ran her downstairs to her room.

"Nell," called out the Atom, "aren't you ready? Janie and Benny have come!"

"O dear, then hurry I *must*! Molly, I wish you were coming, too!"

"I don't! I wouldn't for anything," she whispered eagerly. "I shall go and talk to Aunt Kezia!"

"Molly, you're getting too good altogether for the likes of us! Don't, in your exaltation, forget to shut Jim up. Benny, what big eyes! Janie, how's the cold? Duckies, ask Sarah if we didn't leave two nice cakes at tea. Coming, Denis! Good-bye, Aunt Kezia. Molly, there's a packet of butter-scotch somewhere—find it for them. Good-bye!"

Mark Yovil greeted the Atom as an old friend.

"Of course," said Sheila Pat, anxiously, "I don't know which ladies you've spoke to before I came."

"Oh, that doesn't count," he reassured her.

Nell looked round the room interestedly. There were not many people there yet. Standing by a lounge talking to a girl with an elaborately dressed head of colourless hair, she saw Ted Lancaster. Another girl, younger, sat between her and an older, stouter edition of them both, obviously the mother. Nell had a quick thought of a hairdresser's shop, the three heads were so stiffly held, so carefully dressed. Then she wondered, humorously, whether the husband and father didn't get tired of seeing his wife in three stages of age and size.

"Will you come?" Mr. Yovil asked. "I'd like to introduce you to Mrs. Lancaster. She's Ted Lancaster's aunt, you know—he and your brother are chums, aren't they?"

"Y-yes."

Mrs. Lancaster bent a stiff head, Miss Lancaster and Miss Gertrude Lancaster did likewise. Ted shook hands.

"Is your brother going to make a speech?" Gertrude asked as Nell sat down beside her.

"Yes. When are they going to start?"

"I don't know. The whole thing is an awful bore, isn't it?"

"No; I love it."

"Really? Alicia," turning to her sister, "Miss O'Brien is actually enjoying herself!"

"Really? How queer! We only came because we thought dear Mr. Yovil would be hurt if we refused."

Up came Denis.

"I say, can't you squeeze me in somehow?"

Gertrude unbent and laughed as he sat down between her and Nell.

Sheila Pat, always earnest, trotted gravely at her host's heels till he released her. Even then she watched. He was standing talking to an imposing matron when he felt a sharp little nip on his arm. He looked down and met Sheila Pat's chiding eyes.

"You've spoken to her *twice*! I would have thought you'd remember her—*by her nose*!"

The whisper was loud; he muttered a hasty excuse and fled. But he fled in the wrong direction. After him ran Sheila Pat.

"You haven't spoken *once* to the lady in the bathing dress!"

In her eagerness her voice rose, and several pairs of eyes glanced instinctively across the room to where a lady in a red and white striped silk gown sat amiably looking on, and several people hid smiles.

"Ted isn't a bit nervous," Gertrude Lancaster confided to Nell. "He's quite calm and cool. Now, that poor Cuthbert Pennington who's just been introduced to you is all on wires about it."

Nell looked across to where Ted lounged, talking to an old gentleman.

"Is he convinced he'll win the prize?"

"Oh, I don't know. But nothing ever troubles him, I think. Can you catch his eye? I want to ask him about a dinner-party—I *can't* make him look this way!"

"Isn't it unkind to disturb him? He looks so comfortable."

"Oh, no—oh, that's it. Now he'll come."

He came slowly and stood before them.

"You want me?"

Gertrude chattered about an approaching dinner-party, then she turned to join in another conversation.

Ted stood silent.

Nell glanced up at him. "Nothing ever troubles him," rang in her ears. She frowned impatiently.

"Poor Mr. Pennington!" she said softly.

He glanced across at Pennington, surrounded, the centre of a noisy group, and raised his eyebrows.

"He's nervous about his speech. He," there was the faintest accent on the "he," "doesn't feel sure he will win the Shakespeare."

"How queer! Surely each one in his heart is convinced he'll pull it off!" There was an odd mocking note in his voice.

"Only the conceited ones!" she laughed.

There was a little pause.

She looked up at him, smiling.

"*You* feel as if you will win it, don't you?" she said amiably.

"Thanks. I take it, Miss O'Brien."

"The speeches are going to begin," observed Gertrude, turning round.

"I say," Cuthbert Pennington's dark face was trying to look injured, "they've made me go up first! Wish me luck! I'm a-trembling all over. Shouldn't wonder if I faint away in a swoond!"

His speech was good, bright, and vivacious, and sometimes humorous. There was a good deal of applause at its finish.

Nell felt terribly excited. She glanced often at Denis, who looked gay and debonnair enough.

The two next speeches were not so good; in both there was a stiffness of phrase that made her put them aside with a metaphoric wave of her hand. Then came the poetic Morley's turn. He was inclined to be grandiloquent, he brought in a great many poetical quotations, his metaphors were inclined to run away with him; but he used fervid gestures, he flung back his hair a good deal, and people seemed enthusiastic.

Nell felt uneasy; she did not herself care for his speech, but she recognised a good deal of merit in it.

Ted Lancaster was the next.

He rose and strolled slowly to the end of the room.

"Isn't he at his ease!" laughed Gertrude.

Nell was conscious of a quick, uncharitable wish that his speech should be bad—bad—that he should receive hardly any applause—that that conceited ease of his should be ruffled—upset. He bowed to his audience. A little hot spasm of shame went through her. Surely—surely he was nervous! His face was quite white, and his eyes stared out sombrely from beneath frowning brows.

"The Influence of Music on Mankind," he announced in his deep, quiet voice. He paused, looked down, then straight out before him again.

"It is impossible," he began, "to exaggerate—" his eyes met Nell's, he stumbled, stopped—"to exaggerate—er—er—the important part that—that music—that music—has played in the—er—history of the world—"

Nell was tingling all over with shame and pity; her cheeks burnt; she bit her lip cruelly. She could see his hand, resting on the top of the Grand piano beside him, shake; and then suddenly,

abruptly, in the middle of a sentence, he bowed and strolled back to his seat.

There was an uncomfortable little silence. A few people clapped feebly.

"Oh," whispered Gertrude in Nell's ear, "*poor* Ted! He must have been nervous, after all!"

"You were rather ridiculously out in your opinion, weren't you?" retorted Nell, hotly.

"How could I know? He—"

Some one said, "Hush!" It was a red-cheeked boy with a twinkle in his eye, but it stopped Gertrude. Nell forgot Ted then, for it was Denis's turn next. Head erect, he marched to his place. Nell's hands locked themselves together; she hardly breathed; but when he turned and bowed she drew a sharp breath. Denis was nervous! He stood there, tall, broad-shouldered, his head flung back. His blue eyes looked very dark; his mouth was shut tightly. And he stood there, silent.

No one moved. No one seemed to breathe. The stillness was awful. Nell felt as if she would shriek aloud. Then suddenly his eyes met hers; a little flush rose to his brow: "Early morning—the world gleaming green and wet through the blue haze—all the young things waking and stirring about you—" his voice rang out, musical, assured, and left Nell gasping. Dimly, with his talk of the stream glinting in the sunshine, the scent of the turf fires, there mingled in her ears—"names that still ring throughout all the lands—a grand and awe-inspiring age—the literature of that day—" and the result was bewildering. And then she was leaning forward, drinking it all in—for here was a bit of their old life—of Kilbrannan—home itself. Something caught in her throat, and for a moment Denis shone through a mist.

Others were listening, too,—really listening,—absorbed, interested; grave and smiling by turns, as he willed. He stood there, before them all, unself-conscious, eager, making them see what he saw; and the words came without stumble or pause—easy, fluent, enthusiastic. It was just a bit of the old life he was showing them—a wild hunt made them laugh aloud; the peasants, the scenery, kept them absorbed; and when he stopped, there was a perfect storm of applause. The room fairly rang with it.

He glanced swiftly, anxiously, at Nell, and then he bowed with all his own airy grace, again and again, laughing outright. One of the boys shouted out, "Encore!"

There was only one speaker to come after Denis, and the unfortunate boy was received with yawns behind fans and barely concealed indifference.

Of course Denis had won the Shakespeare. He received it in a storm of clapping. Everyone smiled on him and paid him compliments. Unabashed, he deftly returned them with interest to the ladies. The defeated boys nearly shook his arm out of its socket. Sheila Pat forgot, for the time being, her duties as Social Prompter, and went about informing everyone that she was Denis's sister.

"He doesn't mind me pinching him a bit!" she said proudly.

But she remembered her duty presently, and when Mr. Yovil was talking to Nell, down swooped Sheila Pat.

"It's not her turn! I think you'd better go and talk to the jingle lady now."

He went, meek as a lamb.

"Nell," said Denis, coming up to her a moment, "no, I won't answer any questions."

"But, Denis—"

"I'll tell you when we get home. I want you to be sweet to poor old Lancaster, Nell."

She blushed guiltily. "I'd like to, but he won't come near me, I'm afraid."

"I'll manage. Don't you want some sandwiches?"

"Awfully badly."

"I'll send him along with them. Mind," warningly, "that you're nice to him."

She grew hotter still.

Presently Ted came to her.

"O'Brien asked me to bring you these," he said stiffly.

"Oh, thanks!" She dimpled at him charmingly.

"Don't you want anything to eat or drink? The coffee's awfully good."

"No, thanks."

He stood a moment.

She wondered why he looked so terribly tired, why he was so pale, with such dark rings round his eyes. All the mother in her wakened, and, with her shame, swamped the old sense of antagonism and made her long to make amends.

He turned on his heel.

"I—there's room for you here." She drew her skirt aside with a quick little nervous gesture.

He looked back at her surprised. She was smiling at him anxiously; there was soft

deprecation in her eyes.

He hesitated.

"I—thanks," he said, and sat down.

She began chattering about Sheila Pat; about the Zoölogical Gardens, where they had been that day. She rattled on about their own Zoo in Dublin, in the Phoenix Park. She laughingly owned that the Regent's Park Zoo was larger. "But it hasn't such a beautiful background, there are no mountains, and ours is such a dear little Zoo somehow. The pelicans and peacocks and seagulls wander about in the open. Sheila Pat scorns your Regent's Park because they don't have polo matches there—"

"Oh, Mr. Lancaster," a fair-haired girl stopped before them, "I *was* so sorry for you! It must be *terrible* to be so nervous!"

He stood up.

"Very kind of you."

Her mother joined in: "Oh, no, everyone is pitying you! And Mr. Yovil is *wild* about it! He won't *speak* of it! So hard and unkind of him! As if anyone can help being nervous. Come, Lucy, dear."

Ted sat down again.

Nell looked fierce; her lips were shut tight, her cheeks glowing. He glanced at her.

"Something has vexed you?" he said tentatively.

"Yes."

"Anything I can do?"

"No! Oh, how hateful—*hateful* people are! What idiots! Oh, I'm as bad as they are! I didn't mean to worry you, but it—I never can keep things in. I choke."

"Please don't," he smiled rather bewilderedly. "Say what you like."

"No, I won't. Only how anyone could be so idiotic—so thick-skinned—so *aggravating* as those two just now—"

He looked at her incredulously.

"You're angry with them—for me?"

"Of course!" she sounded quite snappy.

"It's awfully nice of you, you know."

"Oh, no, it isn't. And I'm just making it worse—"

"No, you're not, you—you've made it a lot better."

"Have I?" She smiled radiantly. "Oh, I'm so glad!"

"And you know," in an extremely casual tone, "it serves me right for going in for it! And I was an awful fool, of course."

"You weren't. Denis was only saved by being an Irishman. I'll tell you a secret—he wouldn't mind...."

"Well, he *is* a clever chap!"

"And now do have something to eat. I expect," shrewdly, "you didn't have much dinner."

"But I'm so comfortable here," he pleaded.

"You are to go and get something," she commanded. "I'll keep your place for you."

At that he rose obediently.

Presently up came Cuthbert Pennington.

"I say, Miss O'Brien, don't you feel puffed up—reflected glory, you know, and all that? That young sister of yours says she knew he'd get the prize, because he's Irish. I said, 'Och, begorra, why doesn't his nose try to look at his brow then?' and she boxed my ears! Did, really! I've fallen head over heels in love with her. But she says she's going to marry an Irish breeder of horses. Hard on me, isn't it?"

His white teeth gleamed as he laughed out joyously.

"I say, if I'd known we'd a second what's-his-name amongst us, I'd never have fagged over books and notes till my hair went grey."

She glanced at his crisp black locks.

"What dye do you use?"

"Oh, a family secret! Won't you have some more coffee? Poor old Lancaster looks down, doesn't he? Never nervous myself—"

"If you'll let me get a word in edgeways, I'd like to observe that that seat is taken."

"How unkind you are to me! If you hadn't tempered your words with a smile, I'd have gone out and hanged myself. All right, I may stay here till the owner turns up? Thanks. I won't talk," sadly.

She dimpled mischievously.

Pause.

Someone passing smiled and nodded to him.

"I say, Miss O'Brien, see her? Think she's pretty? Well, my mater beats her hollow! Wish she was here to-night. I'd like you to know her—oh!" He gave a roar of laughter. "I'm talking! Well, I don't care!"

"I like you to talk," said she, sweetly, but rather absently. She was looking across to where Ted Lancaster stood in conversation with some friends. She was wondering when he meant to come and claim his place.

Presently he left the people he was talking to and strolled across to two boys.

Nell's head went up a little.

"Owner of this place doesn't seem to be coming," observed Pennington. "Lucky for me. I'm an awfully lucky chap. Oh, you're not going?"

"Denis is making faces at me. Everyone's gone or going. And we have an aunt who objects to us keeping late hours."

"Going, Nell?" Denis came up, laughing. "Look at the Atom shadowing poor old Yovil! He was just having a chat with that grey-haired cousin or something of his—awful nice old lady—and up came the Atom, 'You *mustn't* talk to her any more. Go at once and speak to the grumpy one in green!' She was pretty autocratic, and he as meek as butter."

"O'Brien," exclaimed their host as they reached his side, "I've been trying to get to you, but," with a whimsical glance down at Sheila Pat, "I'm under orders to-night. I've never been so polite before in all my life. Now shake hands! You'll be heard of some day, O'Brien!"

Denis flushed and laughed.

"I'd like to tell you something—"

"Eh?" The glasses flashed on him quickly. He drew him aside.

"Well? Well?"

Presently they heard him give a satisfied chuckle.

"Good! Good! That accounts for a certain want of polish. The sentences were at times crude—abrupt—rounded off carelessly. There was tautology once or twice. Good! I'm glad you told me! I like your family. Shake again! Ah, there's Lancaster. Young man," gripping Ted's shoulder as he passed, "I have great hopes for you! For you have made just the same beginning as I did myself many years ago." He twinkled humorously and shook hands with great heartiness. Nell thought of the little man's reported "wildness." She had decided that it was very rude indeed of Ted not to trouble to come back to her when she was keeping his place for him. So her good night lacked warmth. But then so did his.

Mr. Yovil turned to Sheila Pat; he tilted up her face and eyed her amusedly.

"Have I worked you too hard, my Social Prompter?"

She shook her head.

"You haven't spoken *much* to the bathing-dress lady!"

"Haven't I? I'd sooner speak to you."

"Would you? Perhaps I'll come and see you all alone one day, shall I?"

"I wish you would. And I wonder if I dare ask for a kiss?"

"Your musstache looks rather prickly, I think," she hesitated.

"Try it."

He lifted her high in the air and kissed her. He put her down gently and turned to bid other guests good-bye. At the door the Atom looked back and waved her hand.

"Good-bye, Mr. Yovil!" her voice rang out. "Don't forget the one in the—you know—" An obvious nod at the red and white striped lady completed the sentence.

When they reached Henley Road the door was opened by Herr Schmidt.

"My brother won the prize, Herr Schmidt." Sheila Pat's tone was full of decorous pride.

"Ach, I am glad! Come in. Hush, your aunt sleeps—"

"You weren't sitting up for us, were you, Herr Schmidt?" Nell asked.

"Nein, nein, Fräulein! I sit up late always, and I tell your aunt I will open ze door to you. You will come in and tell me about your evening, hein?"

Sheila Pat's gaiety had gone; her face looked pale and tired.

Up in the Stronghold Molly lay in the arm-chair fast asleep, but Kate Kearney flew to welcome them.

Nell, looking at the Atom's weary little face, and hearing her sharp responses to Molly's questions, cut the talk short. Molly went to bed bewildered with sleepiness and hearing that

Denis's speech hadn't been his speech at all.

To Nell he explained more fully.

"It was your face, Nell! I stood there, and it had all gone—I couldn't remember a word! Whether it was poor old Lancaster's bad example, I don't know. And all of a sudden I met your eyes. Oh, Nell," with a chuckle, "you did look so agonised, so beseeching! And it was exactly how you looked at me that day when the Colleen Bawn knocked that hole into her foreleg—d'you remember?—and you were trying to stop the bleeding, when I came up. Well, I'd got to stop it for you, somehow, and I did. And to-night I'd got to speak a speech, and I did."

"Yes, you did."

She was silent, gazing into the fire.

"Poor little Atom!" she murmured softly.

"I wish I hadn't done it!" He kicked the fender moodily.

"Oh, don't, Denis! It was splendid. Isn't it a true sign of power to move your audience? Besides—somehow it has done me good—it has made me feel—*know*—that we're going back to it all some day!"

"How?"

Her beautiful eyes were misty; she gave a little radiant smile.

"Oh, how should I know! But it *has*! And I'm sure it's done the same to Sheila Pat!"

But that night she had to turn her pillow round more than once.

CHAPTER XIV

```
Six gold watches at 1d. . . . . .  6
Six gold horses at 1d.  . . . . . .  6
Two dolls at 2d.  . . . . . .  4
Bottle of gum at 1d.  . . . . . .  1
Two drums at 4 ¾d.  . . . . . .  9 ½
\                                  –
Total . . . . . .  2-2 ½
```

Nell handed it over to Denis with an air of pride.

"That's all we've bought for Christmas so far, Denis. We'd better hurry up."

"There's not much to get this year," he said gloomily.

She stabbed the table with her pencil.

"Sir William Harrison will give 'em all their Christmas 'comforts,'" he pursued with a sneer.

She sighed.

"Nora says in the letter I had this morning that they're really very nice people, only none of them can bear to see them in our home. She says they're awfully good to the poor people, and—and haven't altered anything—"

There was a silence.

"There's the hospital," she began; "we must send the box off in good time, and I want to give Sarah's little brothers and sisters presents, and now Sheila Pat has chummed up with that milkman, and he certainly has two of the dearest little chubby girls! There's a good deal to get, Denis."

"So there is, asthore! To-morrow's Saturday. We'll go shopping directly after lunch!"

He picked up a chocolate cake from the table and ate it. It was one of a lot he had bought for Sheila Pat, whose lunch, in punishment for some misdeed, had been meagre and puddingless. Miss Kezia invariably punished the Atom so, and Denis invariably bought her a substitute of cakes and goodies to make up.

"It'll have to be ingenious shopping this year, Denis," Nell said.

He tapped his brow. "Here's an idea now! Surely in big toy shops some of the toys must get broken! Eh? Here's the shopper. We'll buy the broken toys, and I'll mend 'em. See, I'll turn carpenter for the nonce! Oh, we'll drive wonderful bargains between us! What a head I've got!"

The next afternoon they set forth. The first toy shop they came to was a large and fashionable one. Molly elected to wait outside, but the others marched gaily in.

A tall and smiling damsel came gliding towards them, but at Denis's debonair request for damaged toys, the smile froze, and the damsel informed him coldly that it was not a second-hand

shop.

He smiled blandly, and responded that he could see that, but had thought that even in such an elegant emporium things must occasionally be broken.

"We'll relieve you of tailless horses, armless and legless dolls, sailless ships, funnelless engines, neckless giraffes, humpless camels, trunkless elephants, even noseless tapirs," he ended with a flourish.

The damsel's eye gleamed coldly.

"I conclude when things are broken they are thrown away," she observed with haughty nonchalance.

He searched his pockets; his face was very grave.

"Ah, I have not a tract with me bearing on this subject. But, my dear young lady, it is a subject very near my heart. Waste! Ah, 'Waste not, want not!' You have heard the wise old proverb? Waste! In thy name how many sins are committed, daily, hourly, minutely! Think of empty little arms—outstretched, clamoring—empty—while the dust-bin is full! Think of armless dolls smiling in the midst of decayed vegetables! Trunkless elephants sleeping in dust! And they might be hushed on happy little bosoms!"

He turned aside with a gesture of grief and opened the door for Nell and the Atom to pass through.

Outside: "Oh, Nell," cried Molly, "what are you laughing at? Oh! and there are one—two—*three* heads looking out of the door after us!"

They were more successful in the next shop. In a few minutes the shop-walker and three assistants were laughingly crawling about searching for broken toys. Kate Kearney helped too, and demolished a ball in the process.

But the big success of the afternoon was the fourpence halfpenny shop. They were enthralled. Shining pots and pans, gorgeous picture frames, still more gorgeous pictures, vases, tea-pots, and toys, and all for four-pence halfpenny each! What was fourpence halfpenny? Nothing. Joyously they marched in. The tubby little woman who came forward to serve them was delightful, too. When she nodded her head, the bobby little grey curls at the sides of her face nodded too.

Nell said: "Oh, what a lovely shop! Isn't *any*thing more than fourpence halfpenny?"

"No, dearie, that is, miss, all the same price. Twenty-four year 'ave me and Jelks kep' this shop. We find toys and kitching utensils sell best. That doll now is good valley for your money, miss. Will your dog do any damage, sir? Oh," as Kate Kearney lay down at Denis's command, "what a good-beyaved little man! I must fetch 'im a biscuit while you're looking round like."

The O'Briens were hilarious.

Fourpence halfpenny! They had decided that they must only spend two or three shillings more; but two or three shillings was untold wealth in a fourpenny halfpenny shop. No need to be careful now. Gaily they chose dolls, horses and carts, trumpets, Noah's arks filled with weird and wondrous animals that Noah himself would never have recognised. Then a customer came in. He was a small and puny customer, but he marched into the shop with an air of grave importance before which his ragged clothes seemed to fade into an abashed oblivion. Denis flung his hat away, and came forward, rubbing his hands together in true professional style.

"And what can I do for you, sir? Toys? Pots? Pans? Brushes?"

"Ain't Mrs. Jelks in?" gasped the urchin; "'ere, none o' that," recovering with Cockney speed. "You're a gent, you are."

"A distant relative of Mrs.—er—Jelks. I'm taking charge of the shop during her absence. Well, miss," turning to Nell, "have you chosen a doll yet?"

"I think I'll have this one." She seized recklessly upon a particularly ugly specimen.

"That's not such good valley for your money as this lady with the golden locks, madam."

"I'll look about a little longer," she declared demurely.

"Certainly, madam!"

He turned again to the bewildered but now convinced urchin.

"Is it something for yourself you want?" he inquired blandly.

The boy shook his head with an air of deep mystery.

"Whom for, then? If you will tell me, I can help you to choose, you know."

He hesitated, glanced sharply at Denis's face, and suddenly blurted out excitedly:—

"It's for Liz, sir! She's my sister what can't walk, you know. I've got it—look!" opening out a grimy little palm with a penny, six halfpennies, and two farthings on it. "Ain't it fine? And I put 'er off—she thinks I only got a penny! She do, true as I stand 'ere! It'll 'ave to be a secret till

Christmas, too!"

"Did you save it all up?" asked Nell.

"Yes, miss! Every fardin'! And she don't know!"

"You will have to choose very carefully, won't you? A doll, do you think?"

He shook his head.

"Gals are so funny," with a puzzled little frown; "she's got a ole wooden thing, 'as Liz, with no arms nor legs, and she 'ugs it like anythink, and I ses to 'er t'other day, 'Liz,' I ses, that artful she'd never guess what I was up to,—'Liz,' I ses, 'wouldn't it be fine if Sandy Claws was to come and give you a fine new doll with arms and legs now?' And she up with 'er face all red, and she ses quite angry like, 'I wouldn't 'ave it,' she ses, 'ugging 'er old wooden doll, 'I'd throw it in the fire,' she ses, 'my *sweet* Lily Vilet!'"

"Well, then," Nell suggested, "something *for* the doll?"

"Yes, miss, that's it!"

He was studying the treasures around him with solemn gaze.

"This little doll's house?" suggested Denis. "Or this Noah's ark—it seems to be filled chiefly with brown paper, by the way. Or this beautiful cradle? All good valley," twinkling at Nell, "excellent valley."

The urchin looked from one thing to another.

"It's differcult to know which, ain't it?"

"Take your time, take your time. I'll be serving my other customers."

He eyed Molly concernedly.

"Don't you feel well, miss? You look sort of hysterical. Twenty-four year 'ave me and Jelks kep' this shop and never 'ad our goods laughed at before!"

He turned his attention to Sheila Pat, who was rummaging earnestly for broken toys.

"That's a splendid ball you're looking at, miss. Let me show you how it bounces."

In an instant Kate Kearney was after it; there was a crash, a tumble—and a horse, a donkey, a tin pail, and a box of bricks lay on the floor. K.K., unabashed, seized the donkey and shook it.

"Drop it! Drop it, K.K.!"

The little urchin, after one glance round at the crash, went on staring at the treasure of treasures he had found on the counter—a small wooden table with pink and white cups and saucers, plates, tea-pot, milk jug, and sugar basin set out invitingly on a spotless white cloth. The last brick hunted out of the last corner and put back into its box, they turned their attention to their small customer again. Nell whispered quickly to Denis:—

"Quick, before she comes back—pretend its fourpence halfpenny for *both*! *Don't* let him guess —it would spoil it all for him!"

"Chosen anything yet?" Denis queried. "Take your time. We are accustomed to purchasers not being able to decide between the wondrous bargains we display. Now this," he waved aloft a particularly awful tin plate on which was painted in very vivid colours a big-headed little girl caressing a dog several sizes larger than herself, "this is a wonderful artistic product—after Landseer. You might think the animal was perchance an elephant—"

"They're fourpence ha'penny for the table, and fourpence ha'penny for the cups and things, in course," the urchin interpolated with a big sigh, and never a thought for Denis's nonsense. "They beat everythink in the shop into fits!"

"This table? This tea-set? Well, you're a born shopper. Fourpence ha'penny for 'em both! Best valley I've got in the shop!"

"'And 'em over, sir!"

He held out his money in a grubby little hand that positively shook with eagerness. Then his fingers closed on it suddenly. He said with suspicion:—

"Yer sure it's for *both*? I ain't got no more money, so it's no use trying to bluff me into buying more'n fourpenny 'a'penny worth!"

"My dear sir, this shop is above suspicion. Twenty-four year 'ave me and Jelks kep' it!" He had seized a newspaper and was rolling it round the toys. "For twenty-four years has it stood in conscious rectitude—"

"'Ere, don't I git a box to put 'em in?" the urchin interrupted, unimpressed.

"A box, is it?"

Nell interposed, stern disapproval in her tone.

"Of course you should have a box! He's a most careless young man! There's the box that the tea things fit into just at his elbow!"

She watched delightedly his vain efforts to fit the cups and saucers into the shaped spaces

cut into the cardboard.

"Really," she observed to the urchin, "I wonder Mrs. Jelly has such a very foolish young man to attend to her shop!"

"J-Jelks," came from the background in Molly's voice and with Molly's giggle.

In dignified silence Denis sought valiantly to ram the sugar basin into the place where the milk jug belonged; he put a cup into a plate hole, the cup disappeared and ran about under the cardboard.

"That ain't where it belongs! New to the business, ain't yer?" scoffed the urchin.

"That is where it is going to stay," Denis said firmly. "I never tempt Providence."

Nell came forward with an air.

"Young man, hand them over to me! I really am surprised at Mrs. Jel—Jelks! I will arrange the tea things."

As the urchin took the parcel from her, he said in a confidential aside:—

"Tell yer wot it is, miss, 'e's too 'igh and mighty for 'is business!"

"I expect so. You can see that he is consumed with conceit."

The urchin nodded his head towards Molly.

"That young lidy's just laughing at 'im, ain't she?"

Nell declared with an airy recklessness, "Oh, they're all maniacs!"

He trotted off, parcel under arm, and the maniacs sent "Happy Christmasses" after him.

"Nell O'Brien," Denis exclaimed, "that for your impertinent pate!"

The woolly rabbit bit her brow. A dog followed, a ball, an elephant, a brush—then Molly burst out, "Mrs. J-J-Jelks!"

Mrs. Jelks received a fur monkey on her plump shoulder. She was wiping her eyes, but her laughter was dying, killed by her disapproval of the toy storm.

"Please, sir, I—couldn't afford to pay breakages! O dear! Well, it was as good as a play, I do declare. I only come back because you was getting too free with my goods. 'Ere's your biscuit, doggie." She bent down slowly to K.K. Denis gazed at her back.

"Jelly, valley, and twenty-four year 'ave Jelks and me," he murmured serenely.

Molly fled.

"Were you list'nin'?" Sheila Pat demanded.

"Did you think I'd leave my shop all that while, my dear? I've been a-watching you through the spy-'ole. You've broke one or two things, sir!"

"Oh, we'll buy them. We like 'em broken."

"Well, now, I've never 'eard anyone say that before. And you sold that table and tea-set at half price—"

"Oh, that's all right! We'll pay the difference."

"I thought that was what you'd do, sir."

They began choosing toys again. Sheila Pat, on whom the fever of bargain-hunting had descended, asked earnestly if Mrs. Jelks hadn't any broken toys.

Mrs. Jelks nearly subsided on to a piled-up heap of pots and pans, under the impression that they were a chair.

"Well," she gasped, "*more* broken toys! Well, I never did!"

Molly crept back and took part in the choosing.

"I think that's all," Nell said at last.

"Yes, miss. I've kep' count. That'll be eleven and threepence."

"*How* much?"

"Eleven and threepence, miss."

They began to laugh.

"Denis, we didn't mean to go beyond two or three shillings! I wouldn't have thought if we'd bought *pounds'* worth of fourpenny halfpenny things, it could have come to that!"

Mrs. Jelks did not deliver goods at houses, and she had no brown paper. So the O'Briens marched forth laden heavily with weird-shaped newspaper parcels. It happened that Ted Lancaster, in a silk hat, long fawn coat, and immaculate patent-leather boots, came strolling across their path. Over a large and bulging Noah's ark up went Nell's head.

Hat in hand, he greeted them.

"You'll let me carry those parcels, Miss O'Brien?"

"No, thanks."

"Please let me; and you'll let me carry yours, too," to Molly, "won't you?"

"Thank you," said Molly, shyly.

"Good for you, old chap! I did my best, but I've only one pair of arms, don't you know," observed Denis.

"Newspaper parcels seem incongruous with you, somehow," said Nell, unkindly.

He flushed up.

"Hand 'em over, Nell!" said Denis, frowning. "Don't keep us all standing here!"

Nell walked on quickly.

"I like to carry them myself."

Ted spoke to Sheila Pat.

"Gigantic Atom, I bet anything you, too, prefer to carry your own parcels?"

She nodded.

"But I'd like to hold your arm."

"Honoured, I'm sure."

Laboriously she freed her right hand and tucked it, and a lamb that had escaped from a parcel, beneath his arm.

Nell had grown penitent. She turned a charming and rather pink cheek towards him.

"I'm tired of carrying my parcels," she said plaintively.

"You'll let me? *Thanks*!"

They told him of their morning's shopping, and he listened with absorbed interest.

Then Nell, who hated to have a grievance hidden away, brought hers out reproachfully.

"I do think it was awfully nasty of you to go away and forget I was keeping a place for you the other night."

He promptly dropped a parcel.

"Forget!" he exclaimed, standing on Noah, and surrounded by his relations and his horses and his cows and his elephants and his trees. "Why, Pennington took my place!"

"Oh, but that was only till you should come back."

"Fool!" he muttered savagely, and kicked Noah's aunt.

"Be careful, boy!" shrilled the Atom, who was picking up Noah and his impedimenta.

"Sorry!" He stooped and helped her.

"So," said Mistress Nell, "you thought I broke my word!"

"I—I'm awfully sorry. I thought you'd forgotten."

"I never forget a promise."

"No, of course not! That is—I mean—I thought—hang it all, I was an idiot!" He flung Noah's patriarchal oak into the box. "But when I saw that fool of a Pennington—"

"He's not a fool. I don't see why you should call him names. And hadn't you better hurry? We're obstructing the pavement."

"This—er—lady in the blue dressing-gown won't go in."

"I'll take her," volunteered the Atom.

Nell looked down into his face and laughed.

"Oh, that's all right!" he exclaimed, relieved.

"I say," Denis and Molly reappeared, coming back to look for them, "aren't you ever coming?"

Ted, once more clasping the newspapered Noah's ark and other toys to the bosom of his fashionable coat, walked on.

"Been to a concert with my aunt and cousins," he volunteered to Denis.

"Like it?"

He frowned.

"I like going to concerts alone," he observed ungallantly.

And Nell dimpled, as she mentally drew pictures.

He could not come in with them, as he was due somewhere else, but the real regret in his face and voice prompted them to insist that he should come very soon.

Up in the Stronghold Sheila Pat turned to Denis.

"I'm thinking you make very unrespectful friends, Denis O'Brien," she remarked austerely. "That boy—" pause—"*pulled—my—pig-tail*!"

CHAPTER XV

Nell stirred energetically.

"Molly! Molly!"

"Yes!"

"Come and stir my toffee a minute. I want to run down and look at my cakes."

"Oh, miss," Sarah greeted her with a relieved and beaming smile, "I'm so glad you've come. I'm that afraid they'll burn! And I darsent open the oven door, 'cause you told me not to."

"Don't they look good, Sarah?"

"'Aven't they risen splendid, miss?"

Sarah looked at the little golden cakes admiringly. "You can cook beautiful! Those pitaters you showed me 'ow to do—they were beautiful."

"Oh, potatoes!" She laughed. "They're our national dish, you know. Sarah, is your mother better?"

"Yes, miss, and those books did cheer 'er you wouldn't believe, with all the beautiful pictures of the birds and animals and flowers and trees and reading about 'em; not," honestly, "that she reads all of 'em, her not being a scholard, but there's one or two about the little birds and 'ow they builds their nests and all that that she's just read over and over again, and she does enjoy the pictures—such a one she is for the country ever since she went to Margate for a week on 'er 'oneymoon! And she's that careful with them, miss!"

Nell nodded.

"Yes she is. I'm so glad—I do hate to have books mauled about."

Sarah grinned delightedly.

"This is how she does, miss. She gits out 'er black-edged handkercher what she 'ad for father's funeral and Walter's and Gladys's,—what died, you know,—and she puts it across the back of the book and round the edges so as her fingers don't touch the pages at all, and she keeps the book wrapped up in that funeral handkercher, and she says to the children, 'If ever I ketch you a-touching of that handkercher, I'll beat you till you're black and blue from head to foot!' So you see, miss, that's 'ow it is."

Nell, twinkling over the contrast between Mrs. Jones's fierce words and herself, a meek little thin woman with watery blue eyes and no control over even her baby, gravely declared she did see, and then hurried up to the Stronghold again.

"It really looks charming!" she said, standing on the threshold and looking round the little, overcrowded room, with its pictures, its books, its various treasures, its photographs, a good many of them in beautifully carved Irish bog-oak frames, its two bronze jars with pink chrysanthemums in them, its collection of bog-oak pigs of all sizes.

Jim O'Driscoll sat thoughtfully in the large cage that Denis had made for him. He had discovered that, by stretching out his arm to its uttermost length, he could reach a cushion on the sofa; that, by wriggling in a finger, he could pull the feathers out, and he was very happy.

"Poor Jimmy," Nell said as she passed him sitting innocently gazing before him, "I wonder if you're getting used to earthquakes and tornadoes that seize up your house and hurl it into darkness behind the sofa! Aunt Kezia never used to come up here as she does now!"

Molly shouted out, "Oh!" and a crash drowned her voice.

In trying to fix some holly in a pot on a shelf, she had knocked the shelf down, and with it a collection of pots, curious stones, photographs, pigs.

Nell prognosticated, "Now Ted Lancaster will come," and dived under the table after a curious old fossil she had found one day in the little stream at the foot of Belmarknock Hill. She picked it up, and sat back on her heels, lost in a sudden dream of that misty day when she had found it. The dear mist! She remembered what a vivid emerald green the grass had been—and the golden shafts of sunlight that fell athwart the mist—and the deep blue sky behind it. She remembered how clearly the reflection of herself and her red tam-o'-shanter had shown in the stream—and down the hill Denis's voice, singing and shouting to his dogs, had come to her....

Ted Lancaster stood within the doorway and looked round the room with bewildered eyes.

Emerging from the lounge were a pair of long legs and a bit of skirt. Up on a step-ladder, in the corner, he discerned the Atom. From beneath the table trailed a piece of bright blue pinafore; that was all.

"I've told the handmaiden to hurry up with tea," came Denis's voice behind him.

The legs beneath the lounge wriggled spasmodically, and out came Molly, red and abashed. From the step-ladder descended the Atom, but Nell sat on, serene and absorbed, beneath the table.

"Where's Nell?" shouted Denis. "I say, bet you knocked that shelf down, old muddle-head! What ever's Nell sitting under the table for?"

Brought to the present, she crawled out.

"How-do-you-do?" she said in an absent sort of voice.

Ted looked at her. Her eyes were soft and looking far away; she quite forgot to remember how queer he must have thought it to find her sitting under the table. The suddenness of the change from the stream with its music in her ears, and the hills and the mist before her eyes, to the Stronghold was harsh, and made her feel bad. From her face he glanced to the queer old fossil to which her fingers were clinging with something of desperation in their hold, and he understood suddenly. He turned his broad shoulders on her.

"What were you doing under that lounge, Miss Molly? And you, Miss Sheila Patricia Kathleen O'Brien—surely you should not have been at the top of those steps?"

Sheila Pat's great eyes fairly glowered at him.

"Sure, thin, I was never dhramin' you were a—a spoilsport! Go away! It's easy to see now that you've never been in Ireland!"

"I've forbidden those steps to her," declared Denis, striving to look severe. "Let's take them out, old man."

"I—I wish you wouldn't call me 'Miss Molly'!" blurted out Molly, suddenly.

He looked at her surprised.

"It's awfully good of you," he said in his quiet voice, and Molly's hot cheeks cooled. "I shall be awfully pleased to call you 'Molly,' Molly."

"You're not to call me Sheila Pat," declared the Atom, her pig-tail at an acute angle.

"I should not think of taking such a liberty, Miss Sheila Patricia Kathleen O'Brien."

"I've made some toffee," said Nell. "Are you fond of it? It's too soft to eat yet," digging a knife into it.

"Oh, I say, is it at the stage where it pulls into long strips when you try to bite it, and catches on your nose and mouth and everywhere?"

She nodded.

"Let me have a bit, will you? I haven't had it like that since I was a kid and my old nurse used to make it."

Presently, with his teeth stuck together and his fingers all sticky, he seemed supremely happy.

"*I* prefer toffee the proper way," observed the Atom, nose in air. "*I'm* not a baby to want it all soft for my teeth!"

"Ah," said Ted, "you will soon, when your milk teeth begin to wabble before they fall out."

The Atom was observed surreptitiously feeling her little white teeth.

"Nell," quoth Denis, "I've just washed my hands. Feed me, asthore. Think I'm a little, little birdie—ah!"

He stopped abruptly, and his cheek shone round and tight over Nell's liberal interpretation of his request. But, liberal as it was, it did not seem to affect his appetite for tea. Nell's cakes all vanished; more toast had to be made, and Ted called down a good deal of laughter at his clumsiness over the business of toasting. Once Miss Kezia sent Sarah up to request that there should be "less noise." Ted's face of whimsical amusement delighted Nell.

Denis issued a mandate that it should be a "rhyming tea." He explained to Ted:—

"You mustn't speak except in rhyme. Everything you say must rhyme somehow—twig?"

"Oh, I say," Ted's eyebrows were stuck up. "I can't, you know! Never made a rhyme in my life!"

"That's the fun!" declared Nell, and he pondered her cryptic utterance ruefully.

It was "fun." Ted's awful and desperate rhymes made them shout with laughter. He mournfully dubbed Denis a beastly poet, and eyed him with reproach. Then suddenly his face cleared. With a bland gravity he asked Nell to have a cake, and left the request rhymeless. To the chorus of "Rhyme! Rhyme!" he responded amiably that he was speaking in blank verse, and from the refuge of blank verse they could not move him. In vain the Atom, her metre waxing wilder and wilder, as her indignation grew, in vain she strove to shame him into rhyming. He gazed at her with ever increasing enjoyment. To her madly rhyming vituperation he responded with gentle obstinacy. And he stuck to his blank verse like an Englishman, and a very unpoetical one.

"Oh!" exclaimed Nell, later on in the evening, "I want to show you something. Now, you remember our broken purchases the other day? Behold the legless doll!"

Ted gravely took it and examined a pair of somewhat shapeless, but plump white linen extremities stuffed with wool.

"The shaftless cart! The paintless boat! The one-armed doll! The headless lady! The three-legged cat!" One after another he examined them. He was a good deal amused, but full of

admiration; seeing which Nell dragged out further examples of their art.

"Tell me what that is."

She held up a very corpulent, grey stuffed pincushion on four legs.

Ted stared uneasily.

"Be careful, old chap," warned Denis, from the armchair. "It's Nell's pet admiration, and made by herself."

"A pig?" he queried uncertainly.

"Oh, 'tis the broth of a bhoy you are!" exclaimed Nell, in impulsive triumph. "Now, then, Denis! Didn't I know all your scoffing was just jealousy?"

"It's a splendid pig!" declared Ted, with enthusiasm. "Look at its tail!"

"Do English pigs grow their tails on top of their off-hind legs?" queried Denis.

"No; but little Irish girls grow 'em over their left shoulders!"

There was a spurt of appreciative laughter from an unwilling and would-be dignified Atom.

"Look at my bear!" said Nell; "and oh, do look at Denis's effort!"

"Um! Is it an Irish animal?"

"No; you know what it is, you duffer!"

"An elephant, old man?"

"Try again!" dimpled Nell.

"A kangeroo?"

"You're getting nearer. It's something that hops."

"Hops? A lame giraffe?" He caught the cushion aimed at him by Denis.

"It's a—*robin*!" cried Nell.

"Great Scott!"

"What's this?" he picked up another work of art.

"That's a needle cushion," observed Denis. "It was going to be a cat, but Molly's broken five needles into it already! Say, Lancaster, you come over here and I'll show you a genuine work of art as compiled and invented and built entirely by your humble servant!"

"Did you really make it?" He knelt down and studied the doll's house. "Um—might be worse!"

"Four rooms," said Nell, thoughtfully. "Bedroom, kitchen, dining room, drawing-room, or nursery?"

"Nursery," Denis decided. "Girls are always cranky over horrid wobbly babies!"

"That's true," said Nell. "I mean," hastily, "girls do have the sense to like nice little chubby babies, so a nursery it shall be!"

Kate Kearney came pattering softly up to Ted, and stood gazing into his face. He picked her up.

"What d'you want, old girl?"

She lashed her tail; she wriggled her head into his shoulder; she eyed him with innocent adoration.

"She's been up to something," observed Denis.

"Oh!" ejaculated Nell. "Oh, K.K.!" She held up a half-demolished grey pig.

"'Oh! should you e'er meet this Kate Kearney,
Who lives on the banks of Killarney,
Beware of her smile, for many a wile
Lies hid in the smile of Kate Kearney.
Though she looks so bewitchingly simple,
Yet there's mischief in every dimple;
And who dares inhale her sigh's spicy gale,
Must die by the breath of Kate Kearney,'"

sang Denis. "The poor piggy inhaled her sigh this time."

When Molly and Sheila Pat had gone to bed, the others sat around the fire and talked. Jim came down from the curtain rod, sat on the hearth-rug, and gazed into the fire. Occasionally he glanced up with his bright little eyes from one to another. He obviously took part in the conversation. Nell began to feel that she had known Ted for years and years. She discovered that he had no near relations except his father and the aunt and cousins she had seen. Filling the gaps he left, she made out that his father was absorbed in the game of speculation; that he was always going to and fro between London and New York on business; that Ted often did not even know his address.

When Ted departed, Denis went with him to the corner. Coming back alone, he lifted his beautiful voice in "The Wearing o' the Green," and, oblivious of the heads thrust from windows, strolled slowly towards his gate.

Whereupon Miss Kezia was wroth on three counts: his being so absurd as to have gone to the corner; his going with no coat or hat on; and his singing in that disgraceful manner at that time of night in the streets. Poor Denis! He had been used to sing always when he felt inclined at Kilbrannan. Nell had often listened with delight to his voice as it rang and echoed amongst their beloved hills. She had often joined in, too.

All his excuse now was—"It's such a glorious moonlight night!" And he went up unabashed to Nell. She was standing staring thoughtfully into the fire.

"Denis," she said slowly, "all he could find to say good about his father was that he 'gives him a jolly good allowance!'"

"Yes, poor beggar."

Silence.

"Denis, he seemed to enjoy it all so!"

"Yes."

Longer pause. Then, tragically:—

"Denis, he—*doesn't hang out a Christmas stocking*!"

CHAPTER XVI

"Oh, Denis!" said Nell.

"What have you been up to now?"

"Jim and I have been dodging Aunt Kezia all the morning. He's very exciting. Of course because I was with him in the garden she chose to want me for some deep purpose of her own. Molly told her I wasn't in. She said she wouldn't say I was out, because it didn't seem truthful. Then she waved the red flag from the Stronghold window, so I knew I was to lie low. I sat down on the path behind the dust-bin. I don't like dust-bins, and Jim does, which makes it awkward. He persisted in stretching out and picking out horrible bits of dirty paper and cardboard and tin. Then Aunt Kezia, out of pure, native cussedness, decides to come into the garden to mend that bit of broken lattice. I heard her saying so to Sarah in the kitchen doorway, and I simply fled over the wall. Denis, now I ask you, why couldn't the dust-bin be against Mrs. Barclay's wall? I daren't cross the garden, so I had to take refuge in the garden of the enemies of our aunt! And there Jim and I crouched behind an inadequate laurel bush. At intervals I'd look up, but always I could see the red handkerchief dangling from the window. Sometimes I could see Aunt Kezia's head, too! I was frozen so stiff I couldn't move. And Jim ate two buttons off my blouse. And that awful old Mrs. Ponsonby next door kept appearing at one of the windows. Hair by hair I felt my head going grey. But Jim must be exercised. That's four times in two days Aunt Kezia has almost caught him!"

"I'll mend the catch of his cage this very moment. We're going to St. James Park this afternoon, you know, and we'll make sure he's safe."

Sheila Pat suggested, "I think Tommy would like to come, too."

"We'll ask him."

That afternoon Sheila Pat was ready first.

"Nell, may I go and ask Tommy?"

"All right, only don't dawdle."

Sheila Pat trotted off.

Mrs. Barclay hesitated; she looked worried.

"Please may he come?" Sheila Pat repeated.

"I should like him to go, dear, but—but—" Suddenly she bent down and kissed the serious little face passionately. "Be good to him, Sheila Pat! He isn't strong—he has a good deal to bear. Sometimes he gets into a bad temper, because he can't be quite like other boys. To-day he won't speak. He hasn't spoken since breakfast."

"Please may I go up to him?"

"Yes, dear. He is in the schoolroom."

She turned and walked staidly out into the hall, and opened the schoolroom door.

Stewart was huddled up in the window doing nothing.

"Good mornin'," she said.

He took no notice.

She tiptoed across the room, an oddly worried look on her small face.

"Tommy, will you come to see the horse guards with us?" she almost whispered.

He stared out of the window.

"Denis is comin', too. And we're goin' on an omnibus, and you and me will get front seats, and—and it's very windy," the soft little voice went patiently on, enumerating all the delights of the expedition. "Do come, Tommy, won't you?"

He drummed on the window pane with thin little fingers.

"I 'spect our hats will blow right off, and the horses and soljers are grand, and—and p'raps it will rain, too—and—and—and Mrs. Barclay says she would like you to go—"

Suddenly he turned on her, the brilliant colour leaping to his cheeks.

"*You*!" he cried stormily. "*You*! Why don't you sneer at me? Why don't you call me names? *You*!"

A little puzzled frown settled on her brows.

"I—don't—know why I don't," she said slowly.

"Go away! Go now! Go *at once*!" and before she could move he had burst into a perfect storm of tears. Sheila Pat backed across the room till she reached the opposite wall, and stood staring, wide eyed, at the shaking little figure in the window, at the fair head prone on the outstretched, despairing arms.

Presently he raised his head.

"Why don't you go, you hateful, beastly little pryer? Why don't you? Oh, I don't mean it," he added wildly, "only—you—you'll despise me—more'n ever—" His voice dropped dejectedly. He began fumbling vainly for his handkerchief. Sheila Pat produced a clean folded one of her own, and came across the room and handed it to him. "You'd better go—they'll be waiting for you won't they?"

"Please come, too, Tommy."

He turned wondering eyes on her.

"Look here, I—I'm going to tell you! It was a beastly boy—I went to post a letter for mother this morning, and he—" his face flushed scarlet, "he imitated me—he pertended to be lame like me, and I—I tried to go for him, but he just ran, you see—and he—laughed—"

Sheila Pat's face quivered. There was a little silence.

"And—and he made me feel—wild—"

"Please, Tommy, don't talk about that boy," her voice shook, "please don't."

He stared moodily out of the window again. She stood by, a queer little motherly look on her serious face.

"Will you come now, Tommy?"

A loud rat-a-tat-tat-tat-*tat* echoed through the house.

"That's them!" exclaimed the Atom, with ungrammatical excitement.

"Oh, Tommy, please be quick!"

A minute later they ran down to the hall, where they found Denis declaring he wouldn't wait any longer.

Stewart gave his mother a shy little nod, and they started.

CHAPTER XVII

Nell hardly paused to breathe. Standing before her easel, the easel dragged into the window, the curtains tugged back, she worked away with a rapid brush.

"Mr. Lancaster, missansir!" Sarah announced with an air.

"Oh, how are you? Do you mind waiting a minute?" She did not even glance round.

Silence reigned.

Then she flung down her brush with a sigh, stepped back and into Ted Lancaster's arms.

"Oh!" She gave a little laugh and turned round. "I've been rude, haven't I? But I did so want to catch that bit of grudging daylight. Denis is out with the others. He got off early to-day."

"Yes, I know. I thought I'd catch him. I wanted to ask him if he'd come round this evening."

She held out painty fingers.

"I can't even shake hands! And why did you stand there all the time?"

"I've been watching you."

"I hope you found it interesting."

"I did. I like the little dabs you do with your brush on the front of your pinafore up at the right-hand side."

She laughed.

"I make myself very painty."

He was studying her painting earnestly.

"It's just a study of an old white horse a milkman—a friend of Sheila Pat's—has. I spent the morning in his stable. He's invalided home on account of a lame leg. I was just putting a few finishing touches from memory."

"He's splendid."

"He was a glorious model—but difficult. There's any amount of drawing in him. I'm going again to-morrow, only you see, if Aunt Kezia were to find out, I feel sure she'd forbid me, and—well, I suppose there would be ructions then, because she'd forbid me to go, and I'm going to finish him down to the last hair on his tail. I know she'll catch me. I walk out, canvas and easel, paint-box and all, as bold as Larry Hoolahan himself. Only Aunt Kezia's worse than any shape the fairies ever took!"

"Who's the gentleman?"

"Oh, he was a piper who was afraid of nothing." She picked up her brush again, and worked a little on the head. "He wasn't afraid even of the fairies, and actually won the good-will of the chief of them on Knocksheogonna."

"Would you mind saying it again?" he suggested.

She smiled.

"It means 'the Hill of the Fairy Calf.' I'm spoiling this," she put down her palette and brush. "I'll show you my rendering of some of the shapes the fairy took to scare the poor herdsmen away. They resented cattle being herded on their ground, you see."

She started rummaging in a big old untidy portfolio. She handed him a sheet of paper covered with rough sketches in water colour.

"By Jove, that Hooligan must have had a good nerve to stand those."

"You're not to call him that. I like him. That's where she turned herself into a man with a lame leg and a bull's head, with flames playing all round it. There she's a big horse, with eagle's wings and a dragon's tail, with fire coming out of her mouth."

"This beats them all, I think!"

"Oh, yes, she's a huge ape with a turkey's tail and duck's feet, there."

"I don't need explanations, thanks," he observed with dignified politeness.

"No? What is that, then?"

She pointed to a sketch.

He studied it earnestly.

"Er—it's a conglomeration—boots—" he paused, reddened, "and a collar."

She laughed.

"It's meant for a salmon with a cravat round its neck, and a pair of top-boots, only I can't draw a salmon to save my life!"

He looked injured.

"I knew what all the rest were!"

She took the sheet from him. He moved towards the door.

"Will you give O'Brien my message?"

"You're not going! Please put up with me till the others come in. I'll just go and wash my hands. Sit down."

She came back presently, gave a piece of coal a poke with her foot, sat down, looked into the red heart of the fire, then across at him.

"Do you really like a motor better than a horse?" she said.

He stared at her, astonished.

"A motor—better than a horse? Great Scott, no! What made you ask?"

"Well, you drive about in a motor."

"Oh, yes, the governor has a ripping car. And for getting about the country—real long trips, you know—they're splendid. But of course, they don't come under the same heading as horses at all."

"I've been hoarding that up against you," she declared frankly.

"Have you?" He looked amused. "It seems so queer to me—I never look upon them in the

same light at all."

"Motors are horrid things."

"I don't think so."

"The dust—the smell—"

"Don't affect you when you're in one."

"But they affect other people."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"They're real selfish things!" he laughed. "When you're motoring, you don't care a hang for that sort of thing. You just go tearing along—monarch of all you survey."

"And—dogs?"

He smiled. "I've never run over one yet, unless they die like martyrs without a groan."

"Well, they may be *useful*," she conceded. "But the feeling can't be anything like the glory of a gallop—a canter—"

"No, it isn't. Nothing can come anywhere near a decent mount, and a good stretch of country before you."

They fell silent for a while.

Nell, furtively studying him, as he sat forward in his chair looking into the fire, broke out at last.

"Mr. Lancaster, you've no business to look so—so pale—so done up!"

He flushed.

"Do I? Overwork, perhaps."

She bent toward him; she said softly:—

"Do you mind my noticing? Denis always lets me fuss if he cuts his finger or anything like that."

"I was riding this morning," the words seemed to be dragged from him against his will; "I expect I overdid it."

Her pretty eyes opened wide.

"You needn't think I'm just a weakly idiot," he burst out angrily.

"I don't. You've had an illness?"

He nodded.

She sighed suggestively. He looked at her, and smiled unwillingly.

"It was nearly six months ago now." He frowned and paused. "Accident—horse had to be shot."

"Oh!" She waited.

"It was a beastly motor omnibus—poor old Pilot bolted. We had a fight—I'd nearly got him under—and a fool of a boy came tearing round a corner yelling and waving a hoop in the air. Pilot bolted straight into a shop window—had to be shot."

She shivered. "And you?"

"Oh, I broke a leg, and cracked my skull, and broke a few ribs. Went to bed for a while. Then got up—went out for a walk—got drenched through—pneumonia and pleurisy—eternal bed. Hard lines, wasn't it?"

"Who nursed you?"

"Two of 'em. When I was a bit off my head you wouldn't believe how they worried me. You see, one had a red face and a blaze of red-gold hair, and the other had a great, pale moon-face and black hair, and the red-gold one was the night nurse, and the pale one the day nurse. I got sort of mixed and thought one was the sun and the other the moon, and I yelled and shouted and made such a row that they had to change! I couldn't stand having the sun blazing at night, and the moon by day. Funny, wasn't it?"

Nell was looking into the fire.

"Where were you?"

"House in Gowan Square, you know."

"But who—nursed you?"

"Those two poor things. I believe I led them an awful life—when I wasn't off my head, too! I got so beastly sick of it—" He stopped abruptly.

"Wasn't there anyone—I mean—your aunt—" But her voice died on the word, as she pictured that lady, with her bangles, her chains, rattling in a sick room.

A twinkle crept into his eye.

"They hate sick rooms, and," gravely, "they excited me."

She smiled.

"So you just had those two nurses?"

"And the doctor. I've got an awfully decent cousin—second cousin—down in Cornwall. She's married—has two little girls—she'd have come up, but one of them was ill."

She was silent.

"I'm awfully strong, though," he protested anxiously. "Yesterday I whined to the doctor because I can't do things same as I used to, yet, and he said, 'If you weren't as strong as a horse, you'd have been dead twice over by now!' He's got Irish blood in his veins, I fancy!"

She smiled absently.

"Why aren't you down in the country?"

"I did go for a while, but you see—well, I'm going up to Cambridge as soon as Dr. Murray will let me, and I don't want to get too far behind. So I'm attending classes and that sort of thing—as much as I'm allowed," with a rueful smile.

"I think," said Nell, in her charming, softest voice, "you're just a hero!"

"A—a *what*? Good Heavens, what have I done? What have I been saying?"

She turned suddenly, unheeding his ludicrous dismay, and stretching across, opened a little drawer in the table. She took out a bundle of photographs and handed him one.

"That's Acushla!" she said with a queer little breathless note in her voice. "I had to sell her."

He glanced at her swiftly, and looked down at the photograph. Nell was making amends. In her rush of disgust at all the unkind things she had thought of him, in the pity that made her heart ache, she instinctively took him close as a friend.

"That is the Colleen Bawn. She belonged to all of us. Dad bought her for fourteen pounds of an awful old pedler! She looked dreadful; you could count all her ribs—and dirty—and her tail! Well, it isn't very grand there, but I don't believe it had more than fourteen hairs in it when dad bought her—pound a hair, we always said. She was lame, and had a great bare patch on her right shoulder. But we fattened her up, and groomed her, and you wouldn't believe how she could go! And jump! She'd jump anything, if she saw anything in front of her. That was her fad. She couldn't stand anyone's getting in front of her. She's taken me clear over a wall that even Denis's best hunter can't manage without knocking down a stone or two. She's rather big and bony, but there's something rather fine about her head, I think."

He nodded.

"That's a jolly colt!"

"He is Sheila Pat's. We haven't sold him. We dared not. I believe it would have made her ill—really ill, I mean. The parting nearly did, in any case."

She showed him all the photographs—even the dim ones that needed to be looked at very closely, when, with time and patience, a horse, perhaps several horses, mostly jumping or galloping, and riders would slowly disentangle themselves from the surrounding gloom.

"I confess that our climate isn't an ideal one for taking photographs!" she laughed. "Most of those were taken in the rain or a mist." She rose. "I want to show you something else."

She fetched a little oil painting of Acushla.

"By Jove!" he said, and studied it in silence.

"Mr. O'Neil—my master—says it's the best thing I've ever done."

"It's splendid! She's a beauty! Just look at her legs—and the colour. What a glorious little beast she is! I don't know when I've seen a more beautiful head and shape."

"Mr. O'Neil came upon me just when I'd done that, and he burst out, 'Good! Good! Good!' He doesn't believe in praise, you know, and directly he'd said that he pulled himself up. 'But might be better!' he said, and he glared into my face, and groaned out: 'I believe you're pleased with it! I wash my hands of you! You'll never be a painter! Go away! You should be weeping that you can't do better!' It took all my eloquence to convince him that I didn't think it was good, only better work than I had been doing. But I made him laugh, by representing how pleased he'd be if he always came upon me sitting weeping into my pinny, and then he cheered up, and slanged my poor little painting with tremendous energy!"

"Beast!"

"He's a dear old man, but he has a theory that complacency is the curse of art. He declares that talent is choked by it, and so never rises. You should always be dissatisfied with your work—always feel you *must* do better, or die in the attempt. Now, if I were to listen to your praise, it would do me incalculable harm, according to him."

He smiled whimsically.

"I don't think even he'd mind my praise!"

"I don't agree with him," she pursued thoughtfully, "unless, of course, a person is naturally

conceited and complacent, and then I don't think it matters one way or the other; the person will remain complacent anyway. But I think a little praise cheers one up! I'm just delighted you think that good!"

"It's more than good," earnestly.

"Oh, if he could hear you! And me!"

She stooped to pick up from the floor a sheet of foreign note-paper scrawled over with large uneven writing.

"Sheila Pat," she said, "to-morrow's mail day. We write an awful lot. But we can't get any letters from them yet."

She took the photographs from him and put them away in the drawer.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

She turned to him with a little laugh, and held out her hand.

"I've been awfully mean—had mean thoughts about you—been rude to you." Her words tumbled out in a soft little jumble. "I'm sorry."

He grasped her hand.

"Not you—I say—" he stammered.

"I'm going to call you Ted, and you may call me Nell. I feel as if I've known you for ages, and the other's so stiff, and we'll be friends 'till the sun has burnt itself down to the bigness of a farthing rushlight,' shall we?"

"Er—yes—"

She teased him, her dimples dancing.

"Say, 'Yes, Nell!'"

"Yes, N-N-*Nell*!"

CHAPTER XVIII

Christmas was drawing very near. The stock of stuffed animals was growing large; toys overflowed the Stronghold. A pillow-case, purloined from the bed in the spare room, did duty as a bag to hold some of them. In a spasm of artistic joy Nell had painted a rough sketch of a hunting scene on it, and they lived in terror that Miss Kezia would see it.

The doll's house was furnished throughout; in the bedroom two little dolls in white night-dresses lay in bed. In the dining room three sat at the table. They had intended to dress two more for the nursery, but Nell, having put in the last stitch on the fifth doll, flung it down on to the table, jumped up: "Denis, come dance with me! Not another hateful little doll will I touch! They drive me crazy! Little, fiddley things! I'm doing enough sewing lately to canonise me as Saint Eileen of the needle!"

They waltzed out on to the landing and down the stairs, improvising fancy steps to a tune Denis carolled out as they went. Into the kitchen they came, round the table they danced, while Sarah gaped.

"Bet I can do an Irish jig on the garden wall!" declared Denis suddenly.

"So can I!"

It was in the height of the jig that Miss Kezia and a friend who was paying her an afternoon call looked forth into the garden. All along, back windows were up, and heads looking out. For Denis had a beautiful voice and he sang as he danced—rather spasmodically, as one foot and then the other landed on space instead of the wall, but very heartily.

Miss Kezia's friend was a somewhat prim and stiff-necked matron, and she was a good deal scandalised. Miss Kezia was considerably annoyed; but before she could open the window, the jig stopped abruptly, Denis leapt from the wall and after him Nell, and both started in chase of a small figure which had come out into the garden and defied them to catch it.

Mysterious shopping expeditions took place about this time. The Atom, not allowed to go out alone, chose Sarah as her escort while she purchased Christmas presents. Miss Kezia unexpectedly gave her sanction to the arrangement. A queer sort of mutual recognition of worth had grown up between the Atom and Miss Kezia. Sheila Pat discussed her gravely with Nell.

"I do think she's worthy, Nell. Sarah says she is, and she says she wouldn't leave here because you never know what you might get. She's very *just*, you see. Some mistresses are awful; they blame you for things like the taps leakin' and the chimney smokin', when they're cross. Aunt Kezia never does. I think she's rather nice to talk to sometimes," thoughtfully, "and she's very

honest—she told me she was always quite ugly, and she's got some beautiful animals all worked in silk that her mother did when she was quite young, and you see, she can't help bein' borned Scotch!"

On her part Miss Kezia went so far as, "I do not understand Sheila, but there is a solid layer of goodness beneath her eccentricities." The truth was, Miss Kezia, angry, bewildered, worried, as she so often was in these days, nevertheless found an unexpected partiality developing within her for the young O'Briens,—an unexpected recognition of their charm.

What with finishing presents, buying them, packing up the hospital toys, and fighting various little imps who whispered things about this time last year, they found those days before Christmas pretty full.

One evening some carollers came and sang lustily in the road outside the house. As they began, the front door was opened and Miss Kezia's grim voice bade them begone. But upstairs there was a wild scamper to a bedroom window—it was flung up—and pennies came hurtling through the air—"Go on! Please, go on!" and voices at the window joined lustily in. For the song the carollers sang was "Rory O'More."

"Young Rory O'More courted Kathaleen bawn,
He was bold as a hawk, and she soft as the dawn;
He wish'd in his heart pretty Kathleen to please,
And he thought the best way to do that was to tease.
'Now, Rory, be aisy,' sweet Kathleen would cry,
Reproof on her lip, but a smile in her eye,
'With your tricks I don't know, in troth, what I'm about;
Faith, you've teaz'd till I've put on my cloak inside out.'
'Oh, jewel!' says Rory, 'that same is the way
You've thrated my heart for this many a day,
And 'tis plaz'd that I am, and why not, to be sure?
For 'tis all for good luck,' says bold Rory O'More."

The voices at the window started the next verse:—

"'Indeed, then,' says Kathleen, 'don't think of the like,
For I half gave a promise to soothering Mike;
The ground that I walk on he loves, I'll be bound.'
'Faith,' says Rory, 'I'd rather love you than the ground.'
'Now, Rory, I'll cry, if you don't let me go;
Sure I dream ev'ry night that I'm hating you so!'
'Oh!' says Rory, 'that same I'm delighted to hear,
For dhrames always go by contraries, my dear.'
'Now, Rory, leave off, sir. You'll hug me no more;
That's eight times to-day, that you've kissed me before.'
'Then here goes another,' says he, 'to make sure,
For there's luck in odd numbers,' says Rory O'More."

As the last words rang out Nell flung down a sixpence.

"A Merry Christmas!"

"Shure and 'tis afther the same I'd be wishing you entirely, at all, at all!" came the sonorous response. "Shure and 'tis the Oirish are afther being the gradely folks on this earrth, me beautiful honour, your leddyship!"

"You're not Irish!" shrilled out an indignant little voice.

"Och, begorra, and would yez be insulting us now, at all, at all, your honour? Shure 'tis the Oirish we are, thin, and long may they live, hoots toots! Ochone!"

Nell flung down a piece of holly she was wearing in her waist belt; she flung it waveringly, overcome with mirth.

Denis shouted aloud. Of all of them the Atom alone refused to even smile.

"I object to hypocrites," she said dignifiedly.

"I wonder how they found out we are Irish?" pondered Molly.

"I suppose it was just an odd coincidence—their singing 'Rory O'More,' and then they found out by our brogues!" laughed Nell.

It was that same evening that, fired by "Rory O'More," they left their toys and trooped down to the cold drawing-room and sang and played. Sheila Pat, leaving the room for something, found Herr Schmidt on the mat outside the door, listening.

"I lof ze music so much!" he excused himself hurriedly. "It was so beautiful—the lovely voices—full of music! You will pardon me, Fräulein?"

Sheila Pat bowed.

"With the greatest pleasure. Please come in."

Later on he begged them to use his piano any time they wished.

"We *must* finish packing the hospital toys to-night!" said Nell, and sped up the stairs.

A few minutes later Ted came in.

"How are you, N-N-Nell?"

"Quite well, thank you, T-T-Ted."

"Sheila Pat," tweaking her pig-tail, "don't they grow straight pig-tails in Ireland?"

"Please don't be foolish," said Sheila Pat, ramming a fur rabbit into the box.

He looked at Nell and raised his eyebrows.

"Sheila Pat's cross still, aren't you, Atom?" Nell said.

"I'm innoyed."

"Tell me about it," he begged.

Denis glanced up from a letter he was writing, then bent his head again.

"Two wicked hypocrites came and they told stories, too. He said he was Irish! *Irish*, was it? Sure 'twas sooner goriller-monkeys they'd be! They sang outside, and we gave them some money. Did they think we were unborned babies that they'd be sayin' they were Irish?"

"What a double-dyed villain!" Ted said with grave disapproval.

"I'd knew *you* wouldn't be laughin' and thinkin' it funny." She paused to watch Nell.

Nell was coming straight at Ted; once in front of him, she pointed a tragic forefinger first at a sixpence that dangled on his watch-chain, and then at a spray of holly in his button-hole.

He gazed back at her amusedly.

"Sheila Pat! Molly! Out on him! Oh, the thraitor! The wicked thraitor! Don't you see? It was Ted—*Ted Lancaster*! Behold, the holly! Behold, my ill-gotten sixpence! Mine own familiar friend! What shall we do to him? Girls, what shall we do to him?"

Sheila Pat, her face scarlet, ran at him, and tried futilely to shake him. He seized her and swung her aloft. From her lofty perch she scornfully attacked him. "Sure I would have thought you'd be spakin' it better than that! *How* old are you? O dear, what great boobies these English boys are! Hoots toots, indeed! And who was the other monkey-kangaroo, then?"

"Little Foster. You don't know him. Thought it looked better to have two, and, you see, I was too shy to sing all alone! Aren't you going to forgive me, acushlums? Och, begorra, I've been learning that 'Rory O'More' a whole week all for your benefit!"

"Nell,"—he began presently.

"Bravo, Ted!" she interpolated.

He flushed and laughed.

"Well, Nell," he resumed, "how did you find out so quickly?"

"That gossoon," nodding at Denis. "I saw by his face. He never can keep anything in. And to think he *knew*! And let me waste my substance on a wicked fraud of a Ted!"

"I recognised him almost at once," observed Denis.

Nell's eye had grown suddenly absent, preoccupied with thoughts of something else. She rose and sidled, with what she thought deep artfulness, but which a child could have seen through, toward the artistic pillow-case. She had caught sight of the deep emerald green silk tie she was knitting for Ted sticking up in full view, gazing brazenly at Ted himself, she declared.

Fortunately he was engaged just then with the Atom, so saw nothing of Nell's transparent manoeuvring.

"Sure the very babies themselves," said Sheila Pat, earnestly, "speak it better than that!"

"Do they, Sheila Pat? How clever the Irish must be!"

"Of course they are," said Sheila Pat.

CHAPTER XIX

Christmas came with a rush in the end.

"Santa Claus," said Nell, "has not a well-regulated mind. For the weeks before Christmas he rides at a leisurely trot, looking about him, smiling. Then suddenly he finds there isn't time for half he's got to do, and off he gallops—over hedges of toys—ditches of sweets—up hills of mince pies and puddings—sends us all scattering here and there on his errands—I wonder why he always muddles it like that?"

"Perhaps the old chap's Irish," suggested Ted.

Christmas eve found her with the painting of Kate Kearney for Sarah not finished; with Ted's tie in the same condition; with Denis's present still unbought; with half Molly's not got yet, and innumerable little bits and things to do. The others were in much the same case.

But all the hospital toys had been sent off, and Mrs. Jones presented with the doll's house and other presents for Benny and Janie and Susan. On that last day Sheila Pat went out with Sarah. (Never had Sarah enjoyed herself so much as on these shopping expeditions, during which sometimes a smug-faced young man of an infinite respectability met them, nearly overcome with surprise at the strange coincidence of his being just there while they were just there, too.)—Sheila Pat went out with Sarah and bought Ted's present. She came home, fairly glowing and clasping a small parcel tight in both hands.

"Oh, Nell!" she said.

Nell bundled something under her pinafore and tried to look innocent.

"What is it, Atom?"

"I've got a present for Ted—I've been lookin' and lookin'—oh, Nell!"

"Show it me."

The Atom was unwrapping the paper. Beneath was a little cardboard box; in it lay a vividly green painted shamrock with a large diamond in the centre. It represented a tie pin, and had cost a shilling and a halfpenny.

For Stewart she bought two large cabbages. "Won't Peter have a lovely Christmas dinner?" she queried ecstatically. "And he'll be so sad, you see, with Tommy and his mother away a whole week!"

That afternoon Nell and Molly came suddenly face to face in a draper's shop, and exactly as they did it, up came the bland shop-walker to know what they wanted. He stared with dignified disapproval, as they stood there and laughed and laughed. Nell wanted a charming little useless fancy box for Molly that she had seen in the window, and Molly wanted a little handkerchief for Nell.

"I—er—oh!" Nell laughed ridiculously and Molly turned, giggling, and fled from the shop.

Nell made a valiant effort, "I want a little bancy fox—oh!" and she fled after Molly.

Outside she stood and laughed helplessly. A little way farther up the street she could see Molly, and the knowledge that she too was trying to overcome her giggles made matters much worse.

Neither she nor Molly alluded to that meeting till after Christmas. There was a very strict O'Brien etiquette on such matters.

On that Christmas Eve they gave pennies away recklessly to poor children. They treated a whole family—mother two little girls, a little boy, and a baby, all eminently clean, but hungry-faced—to a hearty tea at a confectioner's, and presented them with a bunch of holly, and a shilling over and beyond the tea. They bought an old man with crutches half a pound of his favourite tobacco, because he was gazing longingly at it in a tobacconist's window. His poor old eyes grew very watery as he accepted it and declared with shaky fervour that "King Edward himself couldn't have given him anything he'd like better."

The account-book was thrust to the back of a drawer, and to the back of everyone's mind as well. They locked themselves mysteriously into their bedrooms; and there was a sudden dearth of paper and string. The whole day was rush and hurry and bustle and fun.

In the evening Nell put her last stitch into Ted's tie.

"'Tis done! 'Tis done! Denis, go forth! Bring thy friend to our hospitable portals and bid him enter. Guide him to this our Stronghold, and leave him with us. Retire thyself to thy bedroom, where, secreted beneath thy bed, thou shalt find a fair fat stocking, once a foot-ball stocking that clad thine own unworthy leg. Take it to thy manly bosom, creep down the stairs, and hie thee to the house of that same Ted Lancaster, our very good friend. Crave speech with the stately butler —"

"Halt! Is thy servant without his proper complement of brains that thou giv'st him his

directions twice over? Or is it as thy servant with humility suspects, merely to give exercise to the pendulum within thy coral lips?"

"Oh, hurry up!" Molly expostulated. "It's getting late!"

"I go to fetch the British Ted!" Denis vanished.

They found paper and pen, and Nell wrote, "Not to be looked into till the morning;" then they began to collect their various presents to Ted, and poke them well down in a foot-ball stocking of Denis's.

"Now for the trimmings!" said Nell. "The rattle—in you go! Farthing dolly. Packet of my toffee. Six little pink jube-jube mice. ABC bricks. India-rubber tailless donkey. *Is* that all?"

"Pin a piece of holly on to it, Nell," adjured the Atom.

"I can't find room for the donkey. Out you come, box of bricks—oh!"

Her gasp was echoed by two other voices. K.K. pattered across to the door, wagging her tail. There was a burst of smothered laughter; they all knew that rap on the door. Then Nell reached out impulsively and turned out the lamp. "Come in!"

Ted Lancaster stumbled into the room, which was lit only by the glow of a very small fire.

"Oh!" he ejaculated. "Am I in the way?"

A wild giggle from Molly. An ecstatic thrill in the Atom's voice as she responded, "Sure you're always welcome, my boy!"

"That's my acushlum, *I* know! Any mistletoe about?"

"It's nice to sit in the dark sometimes, don't you think?" Nell suggested.

"Oh—ah—yes. Are you telling stories?"

At that Nell grew helpless; she couldn't keep her gravity any longer.

"Oh, Ted—I feel so silly—I can't help it—"

"I love to hear you," he replied with funny earnestness.

"Do sit down," she said. "Oh, not there—that chair is—"

He sat on the edge of the table, which was worse.

"Oh," said Nell, "the table's rather crowded—"

"Sorry!" Down he sat on another chair, and there was a fresh giggle from poor Molly, who was really suffering a good deal.

"Won't you come nearer the fire?" Nell suggested desperately.

"No, thanks, I'm warm. It's a beastly night—all slush and wet."

The door was pushed open.

"I say, can't find him anywhere! What on earth shall we do if we can't get—"

"Ted's here, Denis!"

Three frantic voices gave him the information at the same moment.

"Oh, by Jove, is he? Why on earth are you sitting in the dark, eh?"

Nell could hear the laugh in his voice.

"It—it's nice, sometimes."

He punched Ted on the back. "Beg pardon—thought you were the easel, old chap!"

Ted punched back. "Awfully sorry—thought you were the sofa cushion!"

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Denis, with overdone dismay. "Won't be a minute—forgot—" and he strode from the room.

Nell sat down suddenly, and hid her face in her hands. She knew quite well that Denis was now crawling about under his bed in search of the stocking.

Presently he reappeared, and worked his way round to her. Ted was urging a political argument with the Atom. Under cover of it Denis began.

"Beastly stocking isn't there!"

"If it were, why would the lamp be out, you goose?"

"Never thought of that!" He gave a chuckle.

"It's under the table! It's not packed properly yet. Get Ted up to your room. I'll put it in mine."

"Right you are."

"I say, what on earth am I kicking under here?" came from Ted suddenly. "Ugh, it feels like a corpulent corpse." He stooped to peer under the table. Molly cried out; he dropped the cloth and turned round.

"Did you hurt yourself?"

"I say, old man," Denis flung his arm round his shoulders and dragged him towards the door, "you might come up now and look at that book of Heller's I was telling you about. It's in my room."

"All right, but I've a conviction it's Herr Schmidt under that table!"

When they returned to the Stronghold all was light and innocent and calm. Denis made some excuse and went away.

Nell glanced several times at Ted. She guessed he had been doing too much; his face was pale and there were dark rings round his eyes. All the mother in her surged up; she smiled whimsically as she wondered if he would be astonished if she were to go and stroke his head, as she felt inclined to do. She went and sat on the rug by the fire and looked at him softly.

"Ted," she said, "I wish you were going to spend to-morrow with us."

"Do you really?" He looked tremendously pleased.

She nodded. "You'll spend New Year's day with us, won't you?"

"Rather. But the Governor and I always spend Christmas with my aunt. They have a large house party every year."

"It'll be more fun for you than here."

"Will it?"

She pulled Kate Kearney on to her lap, and stroked her long ears thoughtfully.

"When did your mother die, Teddie?"

"When I was four."

"Do you remember her?"

"A little. I can remember hiding behind a curtain and watching, with all my head stuck out, a lady all in pale yellow hunting in the vases and under the table for me. Other bits I can remember, too. And I remember screaming and howling because I didn't like the black frock they put me into."

She gazed into the fire in silence. Then impulsively she stretched out her arm and laid her hand on his knee.

"Teddie, will you promise me to go to bed at ten to-night?"

"At ten?" He lifted his eyebrows in surprise.

"Yes. *Please*," she coaxed.

"But why?"

"If I tell you, you'll get grumpy."

"No, I won't."

"Well, then, you're done up."

He frowned impatiently.

"I'm not!"

"There, I knew you'd get grumpy!" she replied pathetically; "boys are so prickly."

He smiled. "I'll promise, Nell."

She dimpled joyfully.

"That's a good boy!"

"Nell," wailed Molly, "this trumpet for the milkman's little boy has gone wrong! It won't make a sound."

"Let me try," said Ted.

Denis reappeared with winks and nods. "Let's have a concert," he suggested. "Where's the milkman's drum?"

They mustered between them the trumpet (which wheezed a good deal, but did squeaks as well), the drum, and a mouth organ. Nell and Denis procured combs, put paper over them, and led the concert.

Ted sat through it bravely, even contributing squeaks and wheezes from the trumpet; but Denis gave a yell suddenly.

"I forgot he was real musical—a composer and all sorts of things!"

"Stow that!" Ted came at him, blaring the trumpet.

When he had gone Nell began at once:—

"Did you hang the stocking up, Denis?"

"I did."

"I hope you put it so that the paper showed?" said Molly.

"I did."

"I hope you told that butler to tell everyone not to touch it?" said Sheila Pat.

"For the third time—*I did*!"

"What are you laughin' at?" the Atom demanded.

"I bought something for Aunt Kezia this evening."

"Oh, Denis, you know her strong objection to Christmas presents!" exclaimed Nell.

"She thinks we're wild savages because we hang out our stockin's," observed Sheila Pat. "She said she thought no one older than three years did it."

Denis had gone across to his overcoat, and was rummaging in a pocket.

"Behold!"

He held forth a long white canvas stocking filled with little infantile toys and sweets.

"Oh, Denis!"

Nell and the Atom were gleeful; Molly's glee was tempered.

"She'll be awfully cross!"

"I'm going to write that it's from Santa Claus with compliments and respect, and then I'm going to hang it on her bed."

At about half-past ten they prepared to go to bed. The "this-time-last-year" imps were rather busy, but found themselves combated fiercely.

Nell hugged Sheila Pat a little harder than usual.

"Good night, asthore."

"I like you in your nightie, Nell," the Atom said.

Nell put out the candle and got into bed. She lay very still, straining her ears in the dark; but Sheila Pat made no movement. Dimpling with glee, Nell at last slipped out of bed, slid her feet into her bedroom slippers, flung on her dressing-gown, and took various parcels from beneath her bedclothes. Then she felt her way, pausing to listen, scarcely breathing, across to the Atom's bed. Reaching out for the stocking she knew would be hanging there, she seized a foot. She held a parcel up tight against her mouth to keep her laughter in. The foot had not moved. Nell felt an admiration for the Atom's self-control. She was quite sure she would have called out if someone from out the darkness had suddenly caught hold of her foot. She found the stocking and bundled in her parcels; then she crept across to the door, went out on to the landing and straight into Denis's arms.

"Bother these balusters!" ejaculated he. "One can't walk comfortably in one's sleep for the beastly things!"

She fled recklessly through the dark back to her bed. She had left the door ajar. She lay waiting, determined to try again presently. It was very still; her eyes tried to pierce the darkness. Suddenly something seized the sleeve of her night-gown; she gave a scream.

"Oh," giggled Molly's voice, "I thought it was a stoc—" The giggles fled from the room.

Nell thought how the Atom must be despising her. She determined that, happen what would, she would, next time, make no sound. But when the next minute something lit, with a thud, on her chest, she called out involuntarily. A warm little tongue licked her cheek. "Oh, K.K.! You've given me palpitations of the heart! And you know you're not allowed on beds!" she whispered.

She gave her a kiss and lifted her down to the floor. Then she slipped off the bed, gathered up her parcels once more, and made another attempt, K.K. trotting delightedly at her heels. She got a little way along the passage and was suddenly confronted by Molly, outlined dimly against a window.

"Oh!" gasped Molly, and stumbled noisily back into her room.

Nell drew herself up flat against the wall and waited. Presently something brushed past her knees. She knew it was not K.K.; it was too tall. She gave a little shiver, then stooped and softly put down her hand; it fell on a tight little pig-tail, and Nell drew back with a smothered laugh. So the Atom was crawling about her business! Presently there echoed a frenzied scream from Molly's room; then wild excuses.

"I don't care! You shouldn't crawl! You nearly scared me to death! K.K.'s nearly killed me once already! Why don't you speak, Sheila Pat? I *know* it's you—I felt you! Oh, you little *beast*—*why* won't you speak? *Do* just say it *is* you, Atom! *Do*!"

Kate Kearney barked suddenly; a door opened downstairs. Miss Kezia demanded what was the matter. From overhead came Sarah's quivering voice, declaring that she had a poker and they'd better look out. Then Denis's voice soothingly: "It's all right, Aunt Kezia! Christmas time, you know—excitement—nightmare—so sorry you were disturbed. Good night."

In Molly's room there was sudden silence. Nell had not moved. Presently she crept along by the wall and went in. Just as she found the stocking Molly's voice quavered out: "I know someone's in here! I never minded at home—but—but it's different here—who is it?"

To Nell's utter surprise a voice just behind her answered and made her jump.

"I am Santa Claus!" it said, deep and low. "What you felt was the breeze my beard made as I flew past your bed. Do not be afraid, maiden; I am the friend of all, and more especially am I the friend of the Irish people! Now close thine eyes, and sleep till morning! Fare thee well!"

Nell heard the sort of relieved, happy little chuckle Molly gave. Then she slipped out on to the landing, expecting every moment to bump into Denis, and upstairs to his room. The door was open; she crept in, turned to the left, and stretched out her hand. It encountered only space; she moved forward, hand outstretched, till suddenly it hit against the wall. She stood still, bewildered. Where was the bed?

"Turn round three times
To clear a Paddy's brain!
Once more to make sure
And now for luck again!"

"Five times is beyond me—in the dark. *I* know! That horrid Denis has moved his bed!" She groped round the room till she found it; she put her last parcels into his stocking and prepared to go back to her own room. On her landing, just in front of the window, she came face to face with a big and shadowy Denis.

"Ah," he said, "I thought I heard you moving. I've just been to your room to see if you wanted anything. I was afraid you might be ill."

"How queer! That's just what I heard and thought about you!"

"Very queer!"

"Yes, isn't it?"

"Such coincidences do occur in the best-regulated families. You're sure you *are* all right?"

"Quite, thank you. And you?"

"Oh, quite. Good night."

"Good night."

They passed each other; he looked back over his shoulder. Nell had stopped. He turned, went back, swung her up into his strong arms.

"I'll carry you back to your bed, young lady, and lock the door on you!" He took her and plumped her down on to her bed. He bent and rubbed his cheek against hers. "Strange we should both be walking in our sleep to-night, old girl!"

"Very strange—*duckie*!"

"Nell! I won't be called names. Atom asleep?"

"I think so."

Soon after he had gone the door was opened with a laborious care and creakiness that proclaimed Molly. Nell smothered a laugh. "Of course! Forgotten something."

She could hear her creeping round the room; she heard K.K.'s tail go thump, thump on the floor; then there was a pause—then thud! Something fell on the carpet—thud! thud!

"Oh!" came a breathless gasp—thud—thud—thud!

"She's knocked my stocking down!" Nell shook with laughter.

Thud! Scrape—bang—she could hear Molly crawling about the floor picking up various parcels. Finally Nell was shaken up and down while Molly adjusted the stocking once more. Then she crept away. Just as she reached the door she blundered into a chair, and sent something crashing to the floor.

From Sheila Pat's bed came an irrepressible, long-suffering, "Sure I *knew* she'd do that!"

CHAPTER XX

"So this is the best they can give us for Christmas in London!" observed the Atom, gazing frowningly out upon a yellow fog.

"Get dressed and give poor old London a rest, Atom! We shall end by being late."

There was a knock at the door. "Come in!"

In came a beaming Sarah, carrying a tray laden with parcels.

"Oh, miss! Oh, miss Shelerpat!—Same to you and many on 'em—I'm sure the picture's lovely—it just might be the dog 'imself—and the scarf too—I shall wear it on my Sunday out, and I'm sure it's very kind of you young ladies—thank you, miss—and mistress told me to bring these round to your rooms—" So Sarah, in a breathless rush of excitement. "Two for you, miss, and two for you!"

"Well!" ejaculated Nell. "To think that Aunt Kezia—" She stopped abruptly, with a little catch in her breath. She had caught sight of the writing on the parcels; one was her mother's and the other her father's. There was a long letter from each as well as the Christmas present. Nell smiled as she read her father's plaint: "We wanted to leave directions with your aunt to put these little presents into the various stockings she would be sure to find waiting if she were to look. But you see, mavourneen, she wouldn't look! And I'm rather frightened of her, so I dared not insist. I tried to coax your mother into bearding her about presenting these to you at any rate on Christmas morning, but she (is she a dutiful wife?) pleaded her ill health, and declared she could not stand the stony disapproval she would see in Aunt Kezia's eye. So I threw back my shoulders and twirled my moustache, and faced the enemy myself. I had to listen to a lecture on Irish thriftlessness, but perhaps I deserved that. Poor Aunt Kezia, she's very dry and hard, and very opposite to all of you. But she is a good woman, and wants to make you all comfortable. But she doesn't approve of Christmas presents. A twinkle comes into your mother's eye (but she sternly represses the dimple you used to dig your baby fingers into) when I conjecture over her aspect on Christmas day this year! For we're a very Christmasy lot, aren't we, asthore? Be just as Christmasy as ever you can this year, my dear, and when you think of dear old Kilbrannan and us —as I know you will be doing—(a conceited old father, amn't I?)—well, just remember too that the months soon skip by, and we'll be back, please God, in a few months, and that Kilbrannan is still ours, and we have only kindly and hospitably lent it to the Harrisons for a while! But there, am I preaching? And to my brave little Nell! Don't I know she'll be making herself and others see all the bright bits?"

At breakfast Miss Kezia did not allude to her Christmas stocking. She was very amiable, and had had fish cakes added to the porridge. But in the middle of the meal Kate Kearney came into the room, looking seraphic, and carrying jauntily in her mouth a limp white muslin stocking. It was torn, and nothing remained in it now but a little wooden whistle, three or four pink and white sweets, and the china head of a doll. She carried it to Nell, and dropped it at her feet.

Miss Kezia flushed a little, and drew down her upper lip.

"I did not wish to allude to what I considered a foolish and disrespectful joke, as it is Christmas morning, but you see now what a disgraceful mess that dog must have made. I expect the stairs are strewn with sweets and toys—"

"She'd eat the sweets," interposed Sheila Pat.

"Please go and pick up the debris!"

Joyfully they all rushed from the room, and crawled about the stairs, picking up splinters of wood, wool-stuffing, china legs and arms, but no sweets. Kate Kearney had eaten them. She brought the stocking, with its few little sweets rammed into the toe, and begged them to get them out for her.

"Sweets," said Nell, "are bad for you, but 'tis Christmas morning!"

After breakfast the chief event for which everyone was waiting was the advent of the postman. Miss Kezia exclaimed surprisedly:—

"Surely there can be nothing else coming by post! The postman has been laden for you for this week past!"

Before the postman came Ted appeared. He was surrounded in the hall, and a babel of noise enveloped him. Miss Kezia's eyebrows went up, but she smiled a grim little smile of uncomprehending amiability. Ted was wearing his new tie, and valiantly flaunted the pin with which Sheila Pat had presented him.

"Come up to the Stronghold."

On the stairs he hung back and turned to Nell.

"I say, Nell, I haven't half thanked all of you—need I?"

She laughed out.

"You have—heaps and heaps!"

He shook his head.

She looked at him with a worried little frown.

"You've no *business* to be so grateful for silly little things!"

He was mute.

She laughed again.

"Ted, I do think you're nice!"

"Er—awfully good of you—" His face was flushed, his eyebrows up.

Nell tucked her hand under his arm.

"Escort me up to the Stronghold, Mr. Lancaster."

At the door of the Stronghold Denis pounced on him.

"Here, what are you up to?"

"I say, old man, it's a gorgeous stocking, but—you might have given me a pair!"

"Come and look at everything," Molly besought.

"Fripperies and all," laughed Nell.

He took out his watch with a hurried gesture.

"Afraid I can't stay long—"

"Why not?" demanded the Atom.

"Er—I've got to get back—"

"I hoped you had come early so that you could stay a little while," said Nell.

"Oh, I say, did I come round too early?"

"Ted, don't be a goose!"

"Friend, do not put such a horribly inhospitable construction—" began Denis.

"How much?" interrupted Ted.

"Come on!" cried Denis, doubling his fists. "You have insulted me! *À outrance*!"

"When you're quite finished, Mr. Lancaster," called out Nell, "perhaps you'll condescend to look at this box!"

He gave a final thrust and turned to her.

"It is made of bog oak, and carved by a friend of ours—"

"Was that the postman?" exclaimed the Atom, and scuttled out of the room.

No one heard her save Ted.

"Isn't it a glorious design? Do you see how—"

"I—I must go! Awfully sorry! Good-bye!"

They stared after him in astonishment, then started in pursuit. In the hall they caught him. He was standing looking rather red and foolish, talking to the Atom.

Denis seized him by his collar.

"Search him! Search him!"

"Don't ass, O.B.!"

"Why did you run away like that?" queried Molly eagerly.

"If it weren't Christmas morning, I should be deciding to be offended," Nell declared.

"I'm awfully sorry. I've to go to my aunt's, you know."

"Aren't you in rather a sudden complexity of hurry?" Denis inquired. "That's a favourite remark of an old Irishwoman I know!"

"I am rather, old chap! Er—so sorry—"

"Here comes the postman!" squealed Molly, flinging open the door. Ted hurled himself through it, leapt down the steps, and with a vague flourish of his hat turned to the left and disappeared. The postman laughed as he handed package after package, letter after letter, into various eager hands outstretched for them. "You'll lighten my load a good deal, sir!"

"Happy Christmas, postman!"

"Same to you, miss."

"To the Stronghold!" went forth the cry, and up they swarmed, all heavily laden, K.K. gravely bringing up the rear with a parcel someone had dropped. Everything was tilted on to the table, and then each one pounced on various parcels—tearing of paper, cutting of string, noise, delight, exclamations!

Nell opened Ted's parcel last of all. It was an old ivory paper knife, with a little hunting scene beautifully carved on its handle.

"*Denis!*"

He turned at her tone.

"Isn't it lovely, Denis?"

He nodded.

"He knows what's what! It's ripping, Nell."

She was examining it delightedly.

"It's such a beautiful old thing—just look at the carving—that leg, Denis, isn't it wonderful? And the manes and tails—"

"*Do* look what he's sent me, Nell," cried Molly.

"And me—"

"Are you ready for church?" Up the stairs floated Miss Kezia's voice.

"A minute, Aunt Kezia!"

There was a wild scattering and scramble.

Church was a good deal of a trial: but once Nell smiled suddenly, irresistibly. A thought had struck her. She whispered to Molly, "*I* know why he rushed off!"

"Why?"

Nell shook her head virtuously; and Molly went back to her own thoughts, which made her eyes water and smart uncomfortably. Once back at No. 35 Henley Road, Nell observed:—

"Oh, you dullards, don't you see why Ted rushed off? It was because he was afraid of the postman—his *presents*!"

"By Jove, so it was!"

"He wasn't wantin' to be thanked," said the Atom.

"O dear, won't we make him blush next time we see him!" cried Nell. "I'll thank him and thank him and thank him!"

"Nice way of showing your gratitude," observed Denis. "You know, it *is* trying to a chap to have a pack of girls hanging around thanking you! I know I felt it this morning," he added bashfully.

There was a perfect storm of laughter, and the pack of girls made for him with one accord.

They had an early dinner of turkey and plum pudding; and after it Sarah went off home, wearing the new scarf, and a smile from ear to ear. They roasted chestnuts, and actually prevailed upon Miss Kezia to eat two. They played games, sang carols, and to please her, a Scotch one, whereupon she remarked there was nothing like them, and a fine argument ensued between her and Sheila Pat. They all set the supper table and all cleared away. They allowed the Atom—a sleepy Atom, who desperately tried to appear a very wide awake one—to sit up till eleven o'clock, and then with big hugs they all went off to bed.

CHAPTER XXI

One morning, about a fortnight after Christmas, Miss Kezia was called away suddenly to the bedside of an old friend in Tunbridge Wells, who was ill. She packed and got ready in a perfect hail of her own counsel which she poured into Nell's ear. Molly, in valiant endeavours to help her aunt, hid everything she specially wanted, and poked things she didn't want into her box, till she was banished from the room. When Miss Kezia had at last taken her departure, Nell made her way to the kitchen, smiling over Denis's last words, "I say, Nell, make us some cakes for tea to celebrate the hap—mournful occasion!"

Sheila Pat queried earnestly:—

"Is the friend *very* ill?"

"No; influenza—low-spirited—wants Aunt Kezia."

"Aren't these Scotch people *queer*?" mused Sheila Pat.

Ted looked in after a ride, hoping he would be in time to catch Denis. The sight of his riding things brought a lump to Nell's throat, but she smiled on him brightly.

"I'm going to make some cakes, Ted, and you're to help eat them this afternoon!"

"Oh, I say—er—I'm always here—"

"If you're tired of coming—"

"You know I'm not!"

"Well, then, don't be a goose."

"May I watch you make the cakes?"

She laughed.

"You're like the lodge children at home. So sure as I went into the kitchen to make cakes, yellow and black heads would appear round the door, and beaming mouths would wait for bits! Come along!"

He amused her greatly by wandering after her round the kitchen with a chair.

"You could sit down to do that!"

"I'm never tired!" she declared, laughing.

He eyed her admiringly.

"I do like that! I thought girls were always feeling tired and faint."

"Oh, Ted, how old-fashioned you are!"

"You see, I haven't known many girls."

"Your experience must have been very unfortunate," she said, and then she thought of his cousins, and blushed.

He smiled; he was thinking of them, too.

"You see these tricky little channels through these long cakes? Well, they're going to be filled with a little jam, and a great roll of thick cream!"

"Five hours to tea-time!" he sighed.

Down the stairs floated a wail of woe.

"I've upset the ink!"

"That's Molly. Do go and help her, Ted!"

To Nell presently there came the sound of Herr Schmidt's piano. She propped the kitchen door open, and prepared to listen while she worked. Hitherto she had only heard Ted play dances and jigs for them, but now it was different. It drew her slowly from the kitchen up the stairs to Herr Schmidt's room. She stood by the door and listened. He did not see her. His legs were twisted contortedly round the old-fashioned piano-stool; he was wrapt in his music. He was playing a waltz—soft, dreamy, with a beautiful, pathetic refrain that made Nell's breath catch in her throat.

When the last note had died away she went softly in. He glanced at her with a far-away look in his deep-set eyes then he flushed, and stood up, frowning.

"It was beautiful," she said softly.

"Er—glad you liked it. Piano's a good one. Finished the cakes, Nell?"

She shook her head.

"They're all burning and spoiling, I expect, but that waltz just drew my feet up here! What is it, Ted?"

"Oh—that? Just a little waltz, you know," digging his hands into his coat pockets.

"Well, yes, I know so much. But what is it called?"

"Oh—er—I don't quite know—"

"Who composed it? It was lovely!"

"Glad you liked it. I say, hadn't you better rescue your cakes?"

"Edward Lancaster, *who composed that waltz*?"

"Er—oh, I didn't see the composer's name—"

"It doesn't by any chance begin with an E and an L? Oh," she laughed out at his fiery face, "how funny you are! What is there to be ashamed of? You should be proud—*proud*! Are all the English like that? Shake hands, Ted! It's lovely!"

"No—it's nothing!" But he looked delighted all the same. "You see, I got this part," sitting down and softly playing the sad little refrain, "I got that at home this morning;"—he had forgotten his shyness in his interest,—"but I couldn't get a setting for it, and then suddenly down in the kitchen just now, amongst the cakes, I got it!"

"I'm glad it was the happy part that came to you while you were with me!" she laughed, and fled down to her cakes.

At tea that afternoon she nodded at Ted. "You're to take that burnt one, please!" she said mischievously.

"Honoured," he declared, and they both laughed.

They had an evening of music, singing, and dancing down in Herr Schmidt's room. They moved his table and chairs close to the walls, and danced to their hearts' content.

It was in the midst of a rollicking chorus that Herr Schmidt returned unexpectedly. He stood in the doorway, unseen, unheard, while the chorus rang out:—

> "'Mush, mush, mush, tooral i-add
> Mush, mush, mush, tooral i-ay!
> There was ne'er a gossoon in the village,
> Dare thread on the tail of me coat!'"

"By Jove, the owner!" ejaculated Ted, as Denis started on the next verse.

Denis nodded with gay insouciance at Herr Schmidt, and sang on.

Nell went forward, laughing:—

"Oh, Herr Schmidt, we knew you wouldn't mind our using your room—*do* you?"

"Nein, nein! It is a great unexpectful bleasure, Fräulein! It is so goot of you, meine liebe! I am so bleased, so very much bleased!" He was patting her hand and beaming round his crowded room. "Ach, zere is my little Miss Sheila! But zere is no fire!" His face fell ludicrously. "How inhospital! Why did not ze maid light ze fire? Fräulein, we must light ze fire at once!"

They persuaded him to sing, and his great rolling bass amused Molly so much that she had to retire to the stairs to hide her mirth. Then he joined their supper party, and his broad, red, beaming face, with its kind little eyes twinkling over his glasses, was certainly indicative of enjoyment.

CHAPTER XXII

"On, Denis!" said Nell, looking up from a letter from Miss Kezia. They were at breakfast. In the middle of the table there was a great jar of jonquils. In a tiny glass bowl were some precious snowdrops from home. The room wore a rakish air somehow. Perhaps it was the different arrangement of the furniture, which, instead of standing stiffly in set places, was clotted about haphazard just wherever it happened to find itself. On one chair lay a smock of the Atom's, with a needle and cotton stuck into it where Nell had begun to mend a rent. On another lay Molly's gloves. Books and papers were scattered about—James O'Driscoll wandered about and picked out all the furniture buttons that he could find. The sun peeped in and laughed and danced to think what Miss Kezia would say.

"Oh, Denis!" said Nell.

He looked up from a letter.

"What's up?"

Nell bit her lip.

"What's *up*?"

With eyes cast down, she began rather tremulously:—

"It's—it's Miss Hadlow. She has it worse than Aunt Kezia thought. She doesn't think she'll be able to be home for some days yet."

"How many days, Nell?" queried the Atom, anxiously.

"She doesn't know, but she says Miss Hadlow won't take proper nourishment unless she's there to make her; and it is essential that while the influenza runs its course, she should take sufficient nourishment to keep up her strength. Denis, you're *not* to laugh!"

"How long does it take running its course?" asked Molly.

"I don't know. A week—"

"Oh, more than that," said Denis, cheerfully.

"Poor Miss Hadlow!" said Molly, dutifully.

They all began to laugh and laugh.

"Aren't we h-h-horrid?" gasped Nell.

"I don't see *why*," argued the Atom; "if she were *really* ill, we'd be sorry—I suppose."

Denis shouted with laughter at her tone.

"She isn't ill, you see," pursued Sheila Pat. "She's just like a baby and won't take this and won't take that! So I don't see why we should be sorry yet awhile—we will be when she gets worse, perhaps."

"Denis," said Nell, "I'm going to give Sarah a holiday!"

"To celebrate the joy—melancholy occasion?"

Nell had been waving Aunt Kezia's letter with its reams of counsel and advice over her head. She laid it down demurely.

"Don't be silly, Denis. I consider Sarah deserves a holiday."

"Prunes and prisms! So she does!"

"And it's Saturday, so you can help after lunch."

"I'm at your service, fair Eileen."

When Sarah came to clear the table Nell waved her away.

"Sarah, go and put on your outdoor apparel! You are to have a holiday. We—the O'Briens—have decreed it so."

"Yes, miss—*what*? A 'oliday? What for, miss?"

"For general good conduct, Sarah."

"But—"

"Away! We stand no 'buts' in our family. Once a ram was slain for butting, you know, Sarah," observed Denis, absurdly.

"You're just wasting your time and you might be with your *sweetheart*, Sarah!" put in the Atom, practically.

Scarlet-faced, Sarah fled.

Nell pursued her.

"Sarah, you are not to return before ten o'clock to-night."

"Oh, if you'll hexcuse me, miss, I must—there's 'Err Smitt's dinner!"

"What were you going to give him, Sarah?"

"A steak with boiled potaters and a cauliflower, and a jam tart," said Sarah, dejectedly.

"All of which I can manage," said Nell. "He has coffee after it, doesn't he?"

"And who'll answer the door, miss?"

"Any of us. Now go and get ready, Sarah."

After clearing away Herr Schmidt's breakfast Sarah took her departure with many injunctions: "Leave the dirty plates and things for me, miss, and would you please tell the baker to shut the gate after 'im, as mistress do object so to it being left open, and 'e always forgets—"

She went at last, joyful but full of anxiety.

Denis had gone off to the bank.

"Now," said Nell, "I'm going to concoct a dream of a lunch! Chicken—oysters—jellies—such sweets! And we'll get hold of Ted, somehow—he must be here!"

He was there. They had the luncheon in the kitchen. "It saves carrying things into the dining room," said Nell, but it was more for the fun of it than anything else. It was a very successful lunch, and the cook received quite an ovation. When the meal was over, she observed:—

"I do hate to give a person a holiday and then make her do her work when she comes home."

Ted looked at her inquiringly.

Denis gazed at the ceiling.

"I do," reiterated Nell, severely.

"Of course," said Ted, vaguely.

"Careful, old man! Any statement you make now will be used against you. Nell's pathetic observation, translated into cold English, means that we've got to wash up."

"I will!" cried Sheila Pat.

Denis looked at her enviously.

"What it is to be young and energetic!"

"I'll do it," said Ted.

"Leave it to us," sighed Denis.

"Oh, indeed," she laughed. "I wonder how many plates Aunt Kezia would have left by the time you'd done?"

Denis looked at Ted with an injured expression.

"That's how I'm thrated in the bosom of me family, Lancaster! But we'll heap coals of fire upon her ungrateful pate, and won't let her soil her nasty little hands."

"We will—we won't."

The Atom carried the last plate into the scullery.

Nell tilted her chin, and held out her hands.

"Indeed, then, I *will* wash up. These hands were made for work, and not for play! Edward, what are you doing?"

"Trying to see them," peering close. "I see them! So they were made for work?"

"That grin does not become your naturally saturnine countenance, Edward. I wouldn't think of intrusting Aunt Kezia's china to two great clumsy boys."

Denis looked at Ted, then strolled towards the scullery.

"I say, O.B.," said Ted, and followed him in a casual sort of way. The next minute the door between scullery and kitchen was banged to, Denis turned the key in the lock, and he and Ted stood grinning through the upper part of the door, which was made of glass. Nell sprang forward, but was too late. Then suddenly a twinkle crept into her eyes.

"You watch!" she adjured Molly. "I wish the Atom would finish giving her Pearl his dinner!"

The two boys took off their coats, rolled up their sleeves. Denis hauled down a big sauce-pan from a shelf.

"*Dirty* boy!" cried Nell, through the door. "Things are *cooked* in that!"

Ted proudly brought forward a bowl for mixing the ingredients of cakes and puddings.

"It's for *cakes*! Put it away!"

They found the right bowl at last.

Nell's dimples deepened.

Denis took the pan to the sink, stopped short, and looked at Ted.

"No hot water!" they heard him say. "Tap's gone wrong!"

"Won't cold do?" queried Ted, innocently.

"Suppose so."

"Oh," cried Nell, clutching Molly ecstatically, "you wait and *see* the grease!"

They filled the bowl, then seized plates, big, little indiscriminately, and plunged them into the water.

"Oh, they'll make the pudding plates as greasy as the others. And they haven't thought of the dish-cloth."

Denis took a meat plate and bobbed it up and down in the water. The grease refused to come off. He bobbed energetically, and whistled "Widow Malone" airily.

Then Ted bent forward and heroically put forth a finger and rubbed. He made a long smear, and that was all.

We studied his finger disgustedly. Nell tripped across to he fireplace, lifted the steaming kettle, and carried it to the scullery door.

Ted was valiantly rubbing now with two fingers.

"Denis! Ted!"

They saw a pompous, steaming kettle, hot, inviting.

"Hand it over!" said Denis, advancing. "But promise not to come in!"

"I suppose you don't think you need me?"

"Most assuredly we don't. Do we, Ted?"

"N-no."

"I won't promise."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"As you will, my dear. Cold water's a lot fresher, anyway," and he seized a plate with a savage shake. Ted put up his hand and ruefully rubbed his head. Nell nearly dropped the kettle in her glee. He had used his greasy hand, and his smooth hair stuck up in front in three jaunty wisps. Denis turned and seized a tray-cloth, lying neatly folded on the table, and dabbed it into the water.

"Oh, you *dirty* boy!" She pommelled excitedly on the door, but was presented with two dignified backs, the dignity of Ted marred a good deal by his airy locks, of which he was blissfully unconscious. She watched the horrid smears they were chasing round the plates with the poor little tray-cloth, and succumbed suddenly.

"You may have the hot water! Oh, yes, unconditionally!"

Truth to tell, she hated the idea of washing the greasy plates, and was glad to get out of it so easily.

"Mayn't I just come in to show you how to set about it?" she queried sweetly.

"We don't need showing, once we've got the hot water, do we, Ted?"

"N-n-no," said Ted.

Of course Denis burnt himself, but nothing was broken. Nell called directions through the door, and the washing up was finished at last. When Ted emerged into the kitchen, carrying some plates, she accosted him demurely:—

"Have you *really* finished? I want Denis to go down into the cellar and fill the coal-box."

"I will," he said, seizing on the scuttle.

"No, really, Ted—it's horrid to let you do things—"

"It's ripping, Nell!" he declared with an earnestness that somehow sent her thoughts longingly to Kilbrannan—to have him there!

He paused in the doorway, coal-box in hand.

"What's wrong, Nell?" he asked uneasily.

"Wrong? Nothing. Why?"

"You—you looked—sort of—" he stammered, and fled.

She stood a minute looking thoughtfully into the fire. A loud and prolonged rat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-*tat* on the front door sent her flying into the scullery.

Denis was putting on his coat.

"Royalty at the front door, Denis! You so! Hurry up!"

Denis went to the door. No one was on the doorstep, but a tall footman stood at the gate, holding it back for two white cloth and fur visions to enter.

"By Jove! Ted's relations!"

His hospitable instinct prompted him to greet them as genially as he could. He cast a whimsical glance at their hats pondering on the relative size of them and the hall.

"How-do-you-do? Is our cousin Ted here?"

The hats sailed successfully into the hall, and then stopped abruptly with a little jerk and flutter of chiffon, feathers, and velvet. For before them stood an Object—a dirty Object in smeared shirt-sleeves, with a black smudge across one brazen cheek, and hair sticking up in three jaunty wisps over a coal-dust speckled brow. Moreover, the Object—the Dirty Object—was carrying a very full coal scuttle, swinging it gently to and fro, rather as if he were enjoying the situation and found it funny. And it was their cousin! It was Edward Lancaster!

"Sorry I can't shake hands." He held forth his free hand, unabashed, and it was very black.

"Come in here, will you?" Denis flung open the door of the drawing-room.

Ted deposited the coal scuttle in the hall and followed them. Then coldly came Miss Lancaster's voice:—

"Are you acting charades or what?"

"Neither," said Ted, "work—real, honest work, you know. Have you come to fetch me?"

"Yes. Your father wants you. He's starting for South Africa to-night."

"All right. I'll put on my coat."

Nell came in, very pink, very demure. The response to her greeting was very cold. She turned to Ted.

"I see you've filled the coal-box. Thanks so much."

"Governor wants me." Ted's face had grown grim, frowning.

"We suggested he might be with his Irish friends," pursued Alicia, with a nasty little emphasis on the two last words, "and as we were just starting for a drive, we offered to—er—"

"Look for Ted?" finished Nell.

"Er—Ted?" Alicia said.

"That's me," explained Ted, gravely.

"If," said Alicia, "you can spare our cousin now, we should like to drive him back."

Nell turned to him.

"Hurry up, *Teddie*!"

"Let me see," observed Denis, thoughtfully, "can we spare him yet? He's washed up—and filled the coal-box. There're the boots to clean, old man, but if your pater wants you, you'll have to go!"

"How kind of you!" sneered Alicia, angrily.

"I shall have to go, Nell," Ted said; "my father's off to-night to South Africa."

"Oh, hurry, then! Denis, take him to your room."

"There's the scullery sink. I saw a bit of saffron-hued soap there, and a beautiful brush in a pail. Come on, old chap."

Ted glanced frowningly at Nell and then at Denis.

"Don't you come. I can find it."

Denis nodded.

"All right."

Ted left the room.

"What a good thing you thought of coming here for him," observed Nell, politely.

"Yes."

"Mrs. Lancaster's well, I hope?" said Denis, cheerfully.

"Yes, thank you."

Nell dared not meet his eye. She bit her lip in terror she would begin to laugh.

"Is it the custom in Ireland to use one's friends as one's servants?" inquired Alicia.

"Oh, yes, invariable custom," he responded. "It's a good idea—does away with the servant problem, you see. When you invite people to dinner, the husbands go off to shoot pheasants, and the wives come in to help cook 'em. When dinner's over they all help wash up; Ted's new to it yet, but he's getting on!"

"We'll soon be able to give Sarah a week's holiday, and have him in every day," annotated Nell.

"Oh, *have* you a servant?" said Alicia, and Nell's eyes lit with contempt of her petty ill-breeding.

"Well, I wouldn't like to call her that," pondered Denis, thoughtfully, "servantette would be better."

"Will you have some tea?" Nell asked. "I won't be a minute getting it."

"No, thank you."

Ted came in, immaculate in long fawn coat.

"Coming?" he said curtly.

They rose, bowed coldly to Nell, and rustled from the room, accompanied by Denis. Ted stood a moment, hesitating. Nell held out her hand.

"Good-bye, Ted."

"Good-bye."

He turned and strode from the room.

"Come early to-morrow!" she called, following him.

"Say, Lancaster, you might have given these steps a rub if you'd been able to stay," came Denis's musical voice.

And Nell ran back into the drawing-room, subsided into a chair, and laughed.

Denis came back fairly shouting.

"Oh, aren't they rich? Their faces!—I feel quite exhausted—have I swelled with compressed laughter, Nell? Let's open the windows! I can't stand that scent."

She sat up, wiping her eyes.

"I think it's horrid to laugh! Poor Ted!"

"Hard lines for him. Sarah's more refined than they are."

"I'm afraid he felt awfully bad, Denis. He looked so horribly grim. I'm worried about him."

"That's why you're weeping!"

She began to smile again.

"I can't help it. They were so horribly, rudely funny! Poor old Ted."

CHAPTER XXIII

"I was thinking, miss," said Sarah, "as 'ow the bit of beef would 'ash nicely."

"Beef bone, you mean, Sarah?"

Sarah looked uncomfortable; she picked up a corner of her apron and pleated it uneasily.

"Well, you see, miss, we've been using up a lot of things lately—"

Nell laughed lightly.

"Sarah, are you telling me I eat too much?"

"No, miss." Sarah sighed, hesitated. "But it do run away with things 'aving folks to meals!" she blurted out. "Oh, miss, I beg your parding!" she gasped, aghast at the change in Nell's face.

"We will have the beef bone for lunch, with potatoes and bread!" said Nell, tragically, and marched upstairs to the Stronghold, where Denis was mending a shelf before rushing off to the bank.

"Denis,"—her soft voice rushed it all out in wild indignation,—"we have been insulted! We're not to invite Ted here to meals any more! Nor anyone else! We're to bundle them off without letting them eat or drink beneath this hateful, mean, petty little roof! That's what it has come to now!"

"By Jove, Nell! what's it all mean?"

"It means that we've been using up too much of Aunt Kezia's money! The accounts were to run till she came back, whatever that means! But this morning Sarah warned me—*me!*—that having folks to meals do run away with things so!" She ended with a shaky little laugh.

"That all? What on earth does it matter what a well-meaning but silly little hap'orth says?"

"But—Denis—it isn't our money, you see!"

He banged a nail into the shelf. "I may be a thief, but I'll never turn my friends away, Nell O'Brien!"

She laughed gaily. "I know! I'll make Sarah tell me the exact amount Aunt Kezia spends in a week, and we'll keep horrible accounts, and never go beyond it! At least, with her money. When we get to the end of that, we'll pay for the things with our own money, and live on bread and water and all that sort of thing!"

"We will, my twin, we will! You're a genius."

He took out his watch, then frowned. "Good-bye, Nell. Hustle me out, or I shall never go!"

"Poor old Denis!"

"That's not hustling. If you sympathise, I shall begin to cry, and refuse to budge."

She went down into the hall to help him into his coat.

"It's poor old Tellbridge, too," he observed comically. "I don't fancy I'm much of a bargain. Oh, Nell, aren't letters immeasurably more interesting, more human, than hard and dry figures? That Pennington," he added, "can tot up—subtract—fly around with figures, till he makes my

head spin. He's helped me out lots of times."

"I'm going to figure, too, this morning—with Sarah! So you can think of me drowning in a sea of curly threes and twos and fives, and noughts—heaps of noughts."

Ted did not appear that day. But the next morning Nell was standing in the dining-room window, snipping off the dead jonquils from a bunch in a bowl, when, glancing up, she saw Ted coming in at the gate. She nodded and smiled, and he raised his hat. She dropped two or three dead jonquils and ran out into the hall to open the door.

"Well—" she began; she stopped abruptly—no one was there. She looked to the right; she looked to the left; she gazed up at the sky as if she thought Ted might have become possessed of wings and had flown away. Then suddenly she gave a quick little nod, and off she started in pursuit, clad in blue painting pinafore, and clasping the large pair of old scissors. A good way in front of her there was a broad-shouldered figure striding along at a terrific pace. Up the road went Nell, and after her came an open-mouthed butcher's boy. Nell was a splendid runner, but Ted's pace was swift and his strides long. He turned the corner and disappeared.

"Ted! *Ted!*" But he was too far off to hear. She rounded the corner in her turn, and collided with a respectable old gentleman going citywards.

"So—sorry!" she gasped, not stopping. "Did I hurt you?" she called back.

"A—pleasure!" ejaculated the respectable old gentleman, who was little and very rotund. He gazed dazedly after her and the butcher's boy. Then—for he was a chivalrous old gentleman—he trotted after them.

"If I—can help—" he observed breathlessly to a lamp-post as he passed it.

"*Ted!*"

He heard at last, and turned and stood staring. Then he approached stiffly, hat in hand. The butcher's boy and the little old gentleman drew nearer.

"Ted—" Nell clutched hold of his coat-sleeve.

"If I—can help—" The little old gentleman had reached her side now. The butcher's boy stood listening, mouth agape.

"Oh!" Nell gave a breathless little gurgle. "Thanks, but—"

"There's no necessity for anyone's help, thanks," said Ted, coldly.

"It was very kind of you," she interposed charmingly, "especially after I butted into you like that. But I've caught him, you see. That was all I wanted."

The old gentleman raised his hat, and retreated.

"You'll catch cold," said Ted. "You must have my coat."

"I'm not made of sugar! I *won't*!"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"You're to come back with me at once," she said imperiously.

Dr. Hildersley, from the corner house, looked forth admiringly: "What eyes! What a colour! I wouldn't mind betting the aunt isn't at home!"

Mrs. Denbigh at No. 41 looked out and shrugged her shoulders and smiled: "One of those mad Irish people! But *what* a pretty girl she is!"

Once back in the dining room Nell faced him.

"Now!" she said.

"What is it you wanted me for?" he asked.

She leant, half-sitting, against the back of a chair; she swung herself gently to and fro, and looked at him thoughtfully.

"Ted, you've got a horrible temper, I believe!"

"If that's all, I may as well go!"

She made a dart toward him. "Oh, don't make me run after you again! And Aunt Kezia has expressly forbidden me to leave the house in my pinny. I've just remembered it."

"Ted," suddenly, "what did you do yesterday?"

"Rode."

"What did you ride?"

"Rowena—then Peter."

"How long did you ride?"

"All day."

She nodded.

"Sit down."

"I don't want to, thanks."

"Ted, tell me why you began to come in, and changed your mind."

"Remembered something. Is O'Brien at the bank?"

"Oh, no, he's reading in bed!"

There was a little pause.

She began suddenly: "You may go if you want to! If any little stupid thing can make you never want to come near us any more, go! I shan't run after you again, anyway. We don't understand that kind of thing, but then we're not cold-blooded Englishmen!"

"I say, Nell!"

He had grown very red, but he looked rather amused.

"Why don't you go? I'll tell Denis not to come round worrying you—" Quite suddenly she stopped. The pink colour leapt to her cheeks; she gave a little, shamefaced laugh, "Oh, Ted, it's just like—that—that first night!"

"Just what I was thinking."

There was a little silence.

"Nell, why *did* you come after me?"

"Because I wanted to ask you something."

"Well?"

"I wanted to know where you got that waistcoat," demurely.

He glanced down at it.

"Well, I was afraid it was rather gorgeous," he said slowly, "but I didn't think it would shine through my overcoat!"

"Oh, yes,"—she was quite unabashed,—"I saw the glow of it on thy manly bosom."

"I—I want to apologise for—"

"Oh, no, you don't! *Please* don't, Ted!"

"They were so beastly rude," he said.

She searched for excuses. "It really was rather—rather startling for them! You see, they're different from us—I mean," catching sight of his expression, "we're always having fun and that kind of thing—"

He smiled at her.

"Give it up, Nell," he said gently; "it's awfully good of you, but it's no go, anyway."

"Well, but—why *did* you come to the gate, and then turn away?"

He flushed.

"I don't know. I was coming in. I saw you, and—I funked it suddenly! I was so beastly ashamed. It was awfully good of you to come after me like that, Nell," earnestly.

"Oh, now he's a nice, sweet Teddie again, and he'll let me tell him to come and sit up in the Stronghold while I paint, won't he? There's that 'Adventures of an Irish R.M.' you're halfway through. You can read that."

He opened the door for her.

"I can hear my acushlum," he said.

CHAPTER XXIV

"Aunt Kezia says she hopes to be home in a few days, and that she trusts we are all behaving ourselves, and she hopes I'm looking after Sarah, and seeing that she uses up all the crusts and bits of bread for bread-puddings and bread-crumbs, and that she doesn't go up into Aunt Kezia's bedroom to look out of the window at her young man—"

"By Jove, I *never* knew Aunt Kezia had a young man!"

"And she hopes—"

"And she might let poor Sarah just look at him—he must be a curiosity. Fancy Aunt Kezia being so jealous!"

Nell put down her letter.

"She gives a great deal of advice, and is very anxious, but since Denis is so frivolous I won't tell you any more."

"*I've* got a letter from Tommy, and he sends his love to my snowy-breasted Pearl," observed the Atom, "and he thinks they're comin' home in about a week."

"Oh, missansir," exclaimed Sarah, coming in to clear away the breakfast things, "let me shut the winders! You'll catch your deaths of colds!"

"Oh, it's a lovely morning," said Nell, leaning out.

"When I die, plant a shamrock o'er my corpse, Sarah," begged Denis.

Sarah sighed heavily.

"It's a great responsibility me having to look after you all!"

Nell put her head down on the window-sill and laughed.

"Sheila Pat," said Molly, "what are you doing?"

The Atom was standing, with absorbed countenance, one foot extended, balancing a pin-cushion. On her head was the slop basin.

"Don't—speak—to me!"

The whisper was earnest and intense, but at that moment Kate Kearney crept up, picked off the pin-cushion, and frisked away with it. The slop basin fell with a crash.

"Oh, we shall catch it," said Nell, eying the pieces.

"I was tryin' to do the balancin' clown."

On the previous Saturday Ted had appeared very casually with a box at a circus going begging.

"Pity to waste it," he had observed uncomfortably.

He had not explained that he had booked for that box three weeks before, and had never summoned up courage to mention it till the very day itself.

They had enjoyed every moment of that circus; and Sheila Pat had striven to do many things since that she had witnessed that day.

"Next time," advised Denis, from the hall, "you practise the clown, do it with sofa-cushions, Atom. It will come more economical in the end."

That evening Herr Schmidt went into his bedroom, and found a small burglar walking off with the two tall candles from his toilet table.

"Good evenin'," the burglar said calmly. "I'm glad you've come in, because now I can ask if you've any injection to lendin' us your candles, Herr Schmidt."

"Not at all, my dear; it is a bleasure."

He followed her into the hall. Suddenly she turned, looking gnomish.

"I invite you to join our little party, Herr Schmidt!" she said with a good deal of effect.

"A barty? But I am old—"

"Please come! I do so *want* you to come!"

He smiled delightedly.

"You are a nice little girl! Ach, yes, I will come if ze rest wish it also."

"Oh, yes, they will! You see, it's to jump over candles!"

"To joomp? Candles?"

She nodded.

"Nell," entering the dining room, which was cleared for action, "isn't it lovely—Herr Schmidt's goin' to jump them, too!" Her wicked little voice trembled with glee.

"Oh!" said Nell, "oh, it's very good of him!"

Herr Schmidt looked on with benign interest as they arranged twelve candles, big, little, thin, fat, in a row on the floor, some in candlesticks and a few stuck on pieces of wood. He listened earnestly to Nell's explanation.

"Yes, yes, I understand. Every candle represents a month. Yes. I joomp—so!" He gave an elephantine leap in the air that sent Molly flying from the room. "And if I blow out any, I shall be onhappy zat month—ach, yes!"

"And all you jump over without blowing out will be happy and prosperous months."

"So! I understant. Shall I begin?"

He did begin. He stood before the first candle drew his feet together, and—thud!—he was over and beaming round, breathless but triumphant.

"Ach—he not out!"

He smiled seraphically upon his rude, convulsed audience, which was strewn around helplessly on chairs and sofa.

Then he prepared to manipulate the second candle. With a thud that shook the whole house, he cleared it triumphantly.

"January, February! Ach, it is so easy!"

"You're a fairy, Herr Schmidt!" declared Denis. "I believe you've got gossamer wings hidden in your toes!"

"You're a bit muddled, O.B., aren't you?" observed Ted.

But the hackneyed and stale old saying that pride goes before a fall held good now. Herr Schmidt, overconfident, leapt buoyantly at his third candle and came down with a horrible

squelch straight on it.

"Ach, I've put—him out!" he ejaculated dismally.

"No, have you?" said Ted.

"Yes, I haf," he responded in all good faith, eying the flattened mass of wax. "It is March; I shall be unlucky."

Then warily he started once more. He surmounted successfully April, May, June, and July. By that time his beaming smiles had given place to a deep and solemn earnestness infinitely more ludicrous. His face was very red, and his breath was very short. But on he went; came to grief over August; on again, over September, October, successfully, put November out, and leapt December with a bang that Denis declared made his teeth rattle in his head.

"Zere!" He looked round on his audience much as a conqueror might have looked on the worlds he had conquered—with pride tempered by sadness for losses. "I shall be unlucky in March and August and November, but I joomp zem well, eh? Zo many not out, hein?"

"Oh, beautifully," said Nell, wiping her eyes, "only three out!"

They replaced flattened March, then Sheila Pat went earnestly at the candles; bright and airy as a sprite, she skipped over them without putting out one. Molly was not so lucky. Her skirts were longer than the Atom's, her giggles more helpless. Her jumps were wild, hopelessly crooked. She put out February and March, then stood on one leg, her skirts all bunched up in front, shaking with laughter.

"*Don't* look at me! Oh, *mayn't* I begin again? *Denis*—don't make me laugh!"

She gathered her skirts together—thud, thud, thud, thud! In a wild rush April, May, June, July, were jumped triumphantly.

"O dear!" She stopped again, breathless with giggles and frantic little squeals at each candle. Denis was shouting aloud at her desperate hops.

"You're like a one-legged frog, Mol! Go on! You mustn't stop!"

"I'll *never* do the rest! *Oh*!" She stumbled—kicked August over, trod on September, and fell headlong on October, November, and December. A horrible smell of burning arose. Herr Schmidt, with a torrent of guttural exclamations, rushed to her assistance. Ted also helped her to rise. The others simply collapsed and laughed.

Two burnt holes in her skirt, and grease—grease—grease—were the extent of the damages. Molly lay on the lounge and groaned out:—

"Oh, I *ache*! *Stop* me laughing!"

They cut a long candle in two and procured two fresh ones; then Nell went forward, light as Sheila Pat but not able to control her laughter so well, and jumped all successfully except February.

A friend called to see Herr Schmidt and he went regretfully away. Denis skipped airily over the whole twelve candles, without a pause, and without putting out one.

"Come on, Ted! It's as easy as sleeping with your eyes shut!"

"Wait a moment—I've an idea!" exclaimed Nell.

"*No!*"

"It's not fair for you boys. How do you think I put out February? Why, with the whiff of my skirt! *You shall wear skirts*!"

They draped them artistically with rugs and shawls, pinning them up till Ted declared ruefully that he moved in terror of his life.

"Come on!" shouted Denis. "What's a rug when you've got a good pair of legs! Houp la!"

And he was staggering and stumbling helplessly, with January and February both out.

"Where are your good pair of legs now?"

"*I* can do better than that. It requires a calm dignity and caution," observed Ted. "You were too rash, O.B., too Oirish altogether."

He dragged his rugs and shawls together.

"You've lit them again? Thanks. Now!"

He jumped slowly, heavily, without any spring, cleared January successfully, and put out February with a fliff of his draperies.

"Hang it all! That's not fair. Why, it's out before I've jumped the thing!"

"Of course!" cried Nell, gleefully. "You're too English altogether, Ted! You should be more careful with your skirt!"

"Um." He eyed the candle reflectively, then cautiously stepped round it.

"I'm not going to jump it for nothing," he declared; "it's out and it can't be outer. Now for March."

He rolled his draperies into a ball in front, jumped blindly, the ball projecting too far for him to be able to see the candle, and peered round complacently.

"He's all right!"

But a storm of expostulations arose.

"You jumped right on one side!"

"You didn't jump over it at all!"

"You must do it again!"

He sighed.

"I do call that jolly hard!"

He looked appealingly at Nell, but got no sympathy.

At that moment Denis gave a war-whoop behind him.

"Go on! Let's rush 'em! I'm coming! Hurry *up*!"

"Oh, I say!" He clutched wildly at his draperies, heard Denis clear the candle behind him, and leapt forward desperately, his rugs held up anyhow.

Over March, April, May, June, July, August, September, October, November they careered without a pause to view what success they had achieved, stumbling, kicking, making the most awful noise; then Ted did not take December quickly enough—Denis, unable to stop himself, with a yell collided into him, and over they went, squashing December as flat as the proverbial pancake. They lay, kicking, struggling, all muddled up.

"Give us a hand!" shouted Denis. "Here, you idiot, you're hanging on to *my* rug!"

"I'm not! A pin's digging into my calf!"

"I tell you, you *have* got hold of my rug!"

"I haven't! It's my shawl you're pulling at."

"Nell, I'll disown you as my twin forever if you don't come and separate this fool from me!"

Ted groaned dismally. "There's another pin—in my shoulder!"

"Pooh, I've got 'em digging into me everywhere! I'm the latest thing in pin-cushions! Nell O'Brien, when at the post mortem the verdict is 'Death due to an overdose of pins,' you'll repent, perhaps—"

"O.B., *will* you let that bit of shawl go? Or tear off the corner you've taken such a fancy to!"

"Oh, no, it's Aunt Kezia's," squealed Molly, "oh—*do* be careful!"

"Oh, *Lor'*," gasped Denis, in exhausted tones, "I'm done! And with my last breath I maintain 'tis *my* shawl."

"There, now, I've let everything go. Twirl me—twist me—do what you will with me," said Ted. "Get up, O.B.! I say, ware shins, old man!"

They stumbled to their feet and stood and surveyed the row of dilapidated candles—bent double, lying full length on the ground, squashed flat, and one only still alight.

"Ted, shake hands. In face of the sad and gloomy year I see before us, I can harbour no ill feeling towards you; though *'twas* my shawl, yet let us be as brothers in misfortune."

"January, February, March, April, May, June, July—July is to be our one and only joyful month, O.B.!"

"And now," pursued Denis, "let us bow to the ladies of the company. Our awe and admiration —always intense—have increased by five hundred yards, four inches, during the last half hour of sad experience. Amn't I right, sweet brother?"

Ted bowed; then his eyes twinkled as he fixed them on the Atom's long legs.

"My awe and admiration for Sheila Pat remain as they were," he announced firmly.

The Atom sat down suddenly on the floor.

"Oh, the mess!" sighed Nell, "the awful mess!"

"Who is it who speaks?" inquired Denis, in tragic tones. "I have no twin. In my direst need she deserted me—her one and only twin—her Irish boy—her brown-haired brother—oh, by Jove!" with a sudden shout of laughter, *"suppose Aunt Kezia were to walk in now*!"

CHAPTER XXV

Nell conned her accounts and sighed worriedly. They were in a hopeless muddle; the only clear thing about them was—the unexpectedness of the size of the total. Then she turned to Aunt Kezia's books and her own separate account of what they were spending. Finally she took a long letter from the pocket of her pinafore, and studied it anxiously. Then she rose and went slowly

downstairs to the kitchen.

"What'll you 'ave for lunch, miss?" queried Sarah.

"There was some chicken left, wasn't there?"

"Nothing to speak of, miss."

"You might get it up and let me see it Sarah."

Sarah left the kitchen, and Nell sat on the table and studied the butcher's account, and her brow grew puckered.

"There, miss, not more'n enough for two."

Nell eyed the diminutive wing and leg and bit of breast anxiously. Then she laughed.

"Sarah, we'll have it curried—with plenty of rice!"

"It'll never do, miss."

"I shall be quite content with rice. It will have to do, and that's all about it. We're spending too much, Sarah!"

"Well, miss, it's the little things somehow. I don't know 'ow it is, but you have such a *lot* of extrys—pretty jim-crams I calls 'em to myself."

"And the baker's account is so much larger too, Sarah." Nell wandered over to the bread-pan and looked in. Some words in Miss Kezia's letter were in her mind: "Keep a strict watch on the bread, and see that the stale is all used up. Servants never will trouble to do this."

"Oh, Sarah, what a heap of stale bread!"

"Well, miss, I can't help it. You all like new bread. Mr. Denis said only t'other morning at breakfast when I tried to use up a bit o' stale, 'e said, 'I *wondered*, where that old pair of shoes of mine had got to!'"

Her tone was full of admiration of Denis's wit.

"But—I don't understand—couldn't we order less, or something?"

"Oh, no, miss, sure as you did that, you'd come short."

"I know! I read once of a way to make stale bread new, Sarah, and I tried it for fun, and it acted beautifully."

Sarah looked sceptical.

"I'll show you with a small piece. Now let me see—first you pass it under the cold-water tap—like this—then you put it in the oven for about ten minutes."

At the end of the ten minutes she brought it forth triumphantly.

"Well, I never!" exclaimed Sarah, admiringly. "I must tell mother that! And oh, miss, I meant to tell you butter's gone up tuppence, and we do use such an orful lot!"

Nell sighed. "I've noticed we spend much more on it than Aunt Kezia did."

"Oh, yes, that's because you none liked the second best, miss, so I hordered the best. Even Miss Sheilerpat said she would as soon 'ave her bread buttered with candle grease, a little bit of a thing like 'er! You see, miss, you've been used to country butter and the best, living in a castle as you did—"

Nell hardly smiled.

"But which does Aunt Kezia have, Sarah?"

"The second best. She's a Scotch lady, you see, miss, and different and—it seemed to grow worse lately—"

"It can't be helped, Sarah. Candle grease or lamp oil, we must have it, if Aunt Kezia did. And—don't you think you could use less butter in your cooking, Sarah?" She felt distinctly mean as she said it, but it was only in accordance with strict injunctions in Miss Kezia's letter.

"Oh, well, miss," Sarah's tone grew ruffled, "I couldn't cook proper with less! And as for dripping—*you* wouldn't like that!"

"But you must use it if you do when Aunt Kezia is at home, Sarah," said Nell, preparing to flee. Now dripping was to Sarah as a red rag to a bull. Nell was pursued across the hall and into the morning room with an avalanche of excited eloquence, the refrain of which was: "Castle folk to eat dripping! Why, you'll turn sick at it, miss!"

Nell, in a perfect excess of goodness, went up to the Stronghold once more, and averting her eyes from a study of foxhounds on her easel, took up the account-book once more. She sent Molly and the Atom out with Kate Kearney, and then she wrestled. The end of it was flushed cheeks, angry eyes, worried brows, and a ruffled head of hair. Then Nell flung the book into a corner of the room.

"That's where you ought to be, you nasty, sordid, money-grubbing little worm!"

"Hulloa," cried Denis, suddenly appearing with Ted. "Whom on earth are you talking to, and swearing at, what's more?"

"How-do-you-do?" said Nell to Ted.

"Been washing your head, twin?"

"No."

"It looks like it, and you look pretty warm."

"Oh, do leave my looks alone!" petulantly.

Denis's eyebrows went up.

Ted looked out of the window and whistled with soft energy to himself.

"Silly old bounder wouldn't come in for ages," observed Denis, sitting astride a chair; "says he was here to lunch yesterday."

He paused, and waited for her to speak. She gave a little gasp, as she remembered the curried chicken, and was silent.

Denis's brows drew together in a great frown.

Ted broke in with a laugh.

"I'm not going to stay now! I only came in to pacify O.B."

With a little flush of horror all her instincts of hospitality awoke.

"Shut the door, Denis! Guard it! Don't let him go, except over your dead body!"

His brow cleared at once; laughing, he placed himself before the door.

"Oh, but," expostulated Ted, "I—er—I—really, you know, I just *live* here!"

"Wish you did, old man!"

"It's awfully kind, you know, and all that, but—"

"Oh, Ted, what a lot of breath you do waste!" ejaculated Nell. She spoke heartily, because she felt that if he went away, she would be shamed forever; but she was still cross, and inclined to make molehills into mountains.

She took her place at the table and watched Denis moodily as he peered into the dish before him.

"I say, Sheila Pat, fetch me the fairy spectacles of Karring Glen! I'll need 'em! Bothered if my own unaided mortal eyes can find any meat or snails or puppy-dogs' tails here!"

"It's curried chicken," said Nell, austerely.

"*Thanks*, my dear! But are you sure 'tisn't curried rice?"

"I'm in luck," Ted observed quietly; "I adore rice."

"Glad to hear it, old man! It's pretty well all you'll get to-day. Sarah, are you trying to starve your youthful charges?"

"It is my fault; I said it would do," Nell said clearly.

"How awfully nice of you," Ted cut in; "you must have known I was coming along."

"Denis, I don't want any chicken—only rice, please."

"You've got to have it, anyway."

"I don't *want* it!"

"Leave it, then."

She knew that tone. She frowned and bit her lip, but rather than make more fuss, she gave in.

"No one's cut any bread," observed Molly.

Ted seized the loaf. Nell glanced at him, saw his face was red and puzzled, looked at the loaf, which wore a somewhat grimy and cindery appearance, leant forward, and gave it a squeeze. Then suddenly she began to laugh and laugh: "Oh—it's an experiment!" she gasped. "I'm—afraid—it isn't—a success!"

Ted was smiling amusedly.

Denis seized the loaf.

"Great Scott, it's as hard as stone! Shake her, Ted, shake the explanation out of her!"

"I—I told Sarah—to wet it and put it in the oven—to make it new! O dear!"

He rang the bell.

"You might experiment on lump sugar next time, old girl, 'twon't affect me, you see!"

"The rest's all the same, miss! I did it all at once just as you told me to, and you said as I wasn't to horder any more till the stale was used up—"

"All right, Sarah," Denis broke in impatiently; "go to the nearest baker's, and get a loaf at once."

"Mistress won't 'ave nothink to do with Brown, sir; she says they give short weight—"

"Then go to Smith or Robinson's!" he shouted impatiently.

"I don't know either of them, sir, if you'll hexcuse me—"

"Go to the next nearest to Brown's, Sarah," he said in a gentle, lamblike voice.

"Yessir. I 'aven't any money."

He found a sixpence and handed it to her with a bow.

Ted was calmly eating his lunch.

"Servants," observed Denis, "are born without brains, and with the bump of unconscious aggravation dumped in the place where the brains ought to be."

Later, they found that the butter was rank. Before Nell knew what he was going to do Denis had attacked Sarah about it and out came a voluble and injured explanation about the best butter being so dear, and Miss Nell had said they were to have the second best because they ate such a lot and were spending too much money. Nell sat quite calm and quiet; she made no attempt to stop Sarah. She had got beyond that. Ted meanwhile had helped himself to the rank butter, and was heroically eating it, his face stolid.

Denis's brow was thunderous; in a curt voice that set poor Sarah weeping in the kitchen he told her to go.

Then there was an uncomfortable pause.

Ted broke it with an anecdote. He told it, and Nell smiled politely. Sheila Pat sat and considered awhile, then she observed clearly, "I don't see anythin' to laugh at in that story at all!"

Ted grew scarlet.

"I—I believe I left out the point, acushlum!"

"Please tell it me!"

He did—laboriously, and with none of the dry humour that usually distinguished his stories.

Nell looked at him, heroically retelling his poor little anecdote, and heroically eating his bread and rank butter, and she burst out laughing.

"Oh, poor Ted, do give K.K. the rest of that crust!"

"Should think it would poison her," said Denis, moodily.

"I like it," declared Ted, with obstinate mendacity. "You're all so particular!"

And he ate it down to the very last crumb.

After lunch Denis went off to the bank, and Ted went with him.

"Nell," at the end of the afternoon Denis burst in, "I'm all bottled up! Let me explode! Wasn't it a beastly lunch, old girl? I know we've got to be poor,—horribly, beastly poor,—but I can't stand making a show like that before a guest—making him think he oughtn't to be there at all—hang it all, to be stingy to one's friends!"

"You see," said Nell, in quite a weary old little voice, "poverty isn't so picturesque out of books as in them."

"Rice and rank butter—bricky bread! It's all rot! We can stint more when we're alone."

"I didn't know Ted was coming."

"Good Heavens, are we to live like pigs, that we can't ask anyone to lunch without an elaborate warning beforehand?"

"You just said we could stint—"

"I don't care what I said! It was a ridiculous and needless fiasco! And you know it! Why are we living so much worse all of a sudden? When Aunt Kezia's here we do have something decent to eat, though it *is* plain."

Nell sprang up. She flung her palette, her brush, down.

"Why don't you telegraph for her to come back since you miss her so terribly? *I* can't do any better! It's so beautifully easy to stand and look on, and then grumble because you can't live on the fat of the land! What do you care if the butcher's bill runs to a disgraceful total—if we're spending six times as much as we ought—if we have, in the end, to beg money of Aunt Kezia, because ours has all gone—if the bread-pan is full of stale bread? No, you're the lordly male creature who ordains impossibilities and expects them to be carried out with a smiling face! Oh, I'm sick—*sick* of it all! And I loathe and *abominate* housekeeping on farthings! It's sordid and hateful!" And she fled from the room.

Denis stood and stared at the door; then he gave a low whistle, and walked slowly up and down the room. Finally, he strode out and banged on to Nell's door.

"May I come in, twin?"

"Yes," said a very small voice. He rushed at her and butted his cheek against hers, which was suspiciously wet.

"I was a beast, mavourneen! I'm sorry, Nell—all through. By Jove, to think I'm growing into a grumpy old curmudgeon all along o' these London fogs! Why didn't we just laugh at it all, I wonder? I'm sure it *was* funny! You're not cross with poor bad-tempered old Snarly-Jaw, are you, Nell?"

"No! You know quite well that it was *I*—"

"I say, Nell, stick on a hat! We'll go and get some kippers for tea! Savory and economical and charmingly vulgar! I'm pretty hungry—I am. And we'll haul Ted along, shall we? To get the taste of that grumpy lunch out of him, eh? Here's a hat!" He seized one up from the bed and stuck it on her head. She looked up at him from under its brim, her pretty eyes still wet, her dimples dancing.

He seized her face in his hands, and gave her cheek a great, hearty kiss.

"Denis," she said, "suppose Fate had given me Patsy O'Neil for a twin!"

"You desecrate the annals of our house by such an infamous and unalluring supposition."

Ted was easily persuaded to come back to tea: he jumped at the invitation before it was finished. He would have agreed to come and stay for a week, a month, so terrified was he that he should betray remembrance of that luckless luncheon.

The Stronghold greeted them with a great, glowing fire, before which Jim O'Driscoll sat eating a biscuit; the table glimmered in its light, set out with a special daintiness; poor Sarah also was doing her best to obliterate memories. There was a raid on the kitchen for forks; a hustling and pushing for places at the fire in the Stronghold. Ted pushed and hustled Denis with all his strength, but his politeness stood in his way with the others. There was a food deal of noise and a good many tumbles as they fought and elbowed each other, and of course Molly's kipper fell into the fire.

"Oh! Oh, *Denis*—get it out!"

"I will!" cried Ted, and gallantly hied to the rescue.

They shouted with joy at his wild plunges after the kipper, and when he at last held it proudly aloft, minus a tail, and scorched and shrivelled into a sprat, it was met with a torrent of rude remarks.

Ted handed Molly his own kipper with an air of offended pride; in vain she protested.

"Here—catch, old man!" Denis flung a fresh kipper to him. "The burnt one will do for your second help!"

And sure enough it did. Ted found kippers, cooked by himself and eaten for tea, so good that he ate up every blackened bit of the luckless burnt fish, and declared he regretted the lost tail.

He looked round on the scorched cheeks and smiled benignly. "Isn't it good?" he said, with the simplicity that made Nell so fond of him.

"Oh, Ted, what a dear old man you will make some day!"

"Cantankerous old beast, I think!" observed Denis.

"Isn't it funny that things one cooks one's self are always so much nicer than kitchen-cooked things?" reflected Molly. "But I wish I hadn't cooked my nose quite so much."

"A cape is a promontory projecting from the land," suddenly declaimed Denis, and they all laughed.

"Ware noses!" exclaimed Ted, tenderly fingering his own.

"I like big noses," Sheila Pat said thoughtfully. "There's a more—sort of—*understandin'* look about them—for boys."

"Acushlum, *what* made you think of big noses just then?" he urged reproachfully.

"Let's play hide-and-seek all over the house!" exclaimed Molly. Sheila Pat slid from her chair.

"The benighted Englishman shall be seeker first!" she decreed, and with a little squeal of laughter darted from the room.

CHAPTER XXVI

"Seen any Irish pictures?" Ted's tone was labouredly casual.

They were talking about the various picture galleries they had revelled in. Nell turned a suspicious eye on him; she was beginning to know that casual tone. He had used it when he had suggested that Denis might exercise Rowena for him—"Pity to let her eat her head off in the stable, and I'm off for the day to a cousin who's passing through town on her way to Paris." He had used it too in connection with flowers and sweets, and on appearing in a dog-cart one day had observed—"Struck me—room for all—squeeze acushlum in anywhere—pity to waste it."

So now Nell responded with a "Why?"

"Oh, nothing. I was thinking—chap sent me tickets for private show—pity to waste 'em—Neil O'Donoghue's pictures, you know—"

"Oh, Ted, the Irish landscape man?"

He nodded.

"Teddie, you angel! Oh, I'll use your tickets. There's no false modesty about me, when you hold out a bait like that! Can we go now—*now*?"

"Rather! Look here, Nell, you—I mean you *will* let me— Jolly place just close by—give you ripping luncheons! You will all come, won't you?"

"Oh! Well, you know—"

"Oh, I say, be a brick, Nell!"

She laughed out.

"I was only hesitating because I felt I *ought* to! I won't be polite with you ever again, Ted! You do look so abjectly miserable. I'd love to end up like that!"

"That's all right. I'll just scoot round to the bank and tell Denis to meet us outside at half-past one. Will you all be ready when I get back?"

"I should think we will indeed."

When he came back they met him at the gate.

"I'm not coming, Ted," said Nell, buttoning her glove.

He smiled.

"Good-bye, then."

"You see, we've given Sarah a holiday, and Aunt Kezia would faint if she knew we'd left the house unguarded."

"There's Kate Kearney."

"Oh! You cruel boy! Why, Sheila Pat took her into the maids next door. You don't think we'd leave her all alone, do you? No, I'm going to stay and guard the house. Do hurry, we're missing precious moments."

Sheila Pat led the way into the picture gallery, lured on by a glimpse of a large water-colour painting—just a bit of her own Emerald Isle. How they enjoyed those pictures!

"Oh, Teddie, they're beautiful—beautiful! Can't you see how he *loves* every bit he paints? He's got the spirit of it all—the meaning—so beautifully! Look at that dear, misty bit, over there, with the sun breaking through! Isn't it glorious? She never cries without a laugh at the end of it, you know! And those mountains there—so mysterious—so *silent*! And the little stream laughing up at them—it's such an impudent little stream—all laughter and ripples and sun-flecks—no awing *that* —" Her breath caught suddenly and she stopped.

Sheila Pat said never a word from the moment she entered the gallery to the moment she left it. She studied the paintings alone, her odd little face absorbed. But when they left the place, and saw Denis just coming towards them, she made a sudden, wild little run at him, and caught hold of his arm. He lifted her up.

"Take my hat off for me, asthore!"

It was rather a silent luncheon party at first, but Denis soon altered that.

Ted insisted on presenting them with a huge box of chocolates at the end of lunch.

"Now for two hansoms," he said, when they came out. "There's the horse for me!"

"Um," observed Denis, as the cab drew up, "don't think much of him. Forelegs a bit groggy. Hi! Here!" he shouted to another driver. "Now that's a cute little beast if you like!"

Ted preferred his own choice.

"Race you to No. 35!" Denis exclaimed. "Bet I beat you!"

"Done!"

Nell, the Atom, and Ted hurried into one hansom; Molly and Denis into the other.

"Double fare if you beat that!" Denis shouted.

"Same here!" yelled Ted.

Off they went.

It was a close and very exciting race. Denis's horse seemed the likeliest to win at first. He led all along Regent Street; then in a block at the Circus Ted's driver manoeuvred cleverly and got in front. Then for a while they raced neck by neck. Round the corners they rocked.

"By Jove, this chap can drive!" ejaculated Ted, as they rocked round a corner, shaving the curb, and gaining a yard or two on the other hansom. From that came fragments of angry shouts. "Idiot!—drive a cow!—afraid of— 'Tisn't a *funeral*, man!"

"This is Henley Road," cried Nell, "and we're still leading!"

There was a final mad and unlawful spurt, and Ted's hansom leading by a yard or two, they dashed up in style before a pair of incredulous, horrified eyes watching their mad approach from Mrs. Barclay's drawing-room window. Moreover, the window was open, and a pair of ears, as

incredulous and horrified as the eyes, listened to a babel of laughter and talk, to arguments on the horses' and drivers' merits.

Nell broke in suddenly, "Good gracious, *how are we to get in*?"

There was a pause.

"Allow me to scratchulate my head and ruminate," Denis observed.

Ted suggested: "How about the old German? When does he come in? I suppose he has a key?"

"He's gone away till Monday!"

"I have it," ejaculated Denis; "I, even I, will climb that passage gate and effect a burglarious—oh, my prophetic soul, my—*aunt*!"

A voice—an awful, laughter-killing voice, smote upon their startled ears.

"So," it said, in accents hard and cold, "this is the way you behave in my absence!"

She came slowly down the steps of the next-door house. Denis strode to open the gate, hat in hand.

"How are you, Aunt Kezia? Quite an unexpected pleasure!"

Ted raised his hat.

She took no notice of either salutation.

"May I ask how you intend to enter the house?"

"With your key, Aunt Kezia. Could things have happened more fortunately?" The twinkle in his gay blue eye was irresistible. "You arrive at the crucial moment—a ministering angel—a fairy godmother—"

"Be quiet, sir! You are impertinent! And my latchkey," a dull pink spread slowly over her face, "is packed in my box, and my box is coming on this evening. I could not dream that I should need my key at half-past two o'clock, the time I arrived home!"

He winked at Nell.

"Do you always pack your key, Aunt Kezia?" in an innocent little voice.

"No! Once more, may I inquire how you intend to enter the house?"

"You see that wooden gate? I will climb it—Excelsior—or perish in the attempt! Once over that, I can enter by the kitchen or the passage door."

"So you did not even trouble to lock them?"

"Sure, then, how would we be getting in if we had?"

"It was me!" burst out Nell, and her voice trembled.

"I!" said Miss Kezia.

"Fare thee well! I go to attack bolts and bars for you!"

He made for the gate, which only opened from the inside, swarmed airily up, and disappeared with a wave of his hand.

"Is Miss Hadlow quite well now, Aunt Kezia?" queried Nell, breaking the awful silence.

"No! When I read in your letter that still Mrs. Barclay had not returned, I considered it my duty to come back! *It is well I did so*!"

"I must be off," said Ted, turning to shake hands with Nell.

"Will you please to remain, Master Lancaster? I wish to have some questions answered once we get into the house."

That emphasised "Master" tickled him hugely; he gave Nell's arm a surreptitious pinch as he responded courteously that he would be pleased to stay.

"I'm sorry we kept you waiting, Aunt Kezia," began Nell again, valiantly.

"Eileen, I do not wish to speak to any of you till we get inside the house!"

Nell gave a little helpless gurgle, and tried to turn it into a cough. So they stood in dead silence and looked at each other. Nell felt that in another moment she would shriek aloud with mirth. Sheila Pat's small shoulders shook every now and then, and Sheila Pat's eyes studied Miss Kezia's face with a most unholy glee in their wicked depths. Suddenly Molly, in a paroxysm of nervousness, burst out:—

"Did you enjoy yourself, Aunt Kezia?"

There was a little dreadful pause.

Then—"I do not go to nurse my sick friends for *enjoyment*, Molly!"

Nell clutched Ted's arm despairingly, and then suddenly, glancing wildly about to keep her eyes from the comical little group, she caught sight of Denis's wicked face peering at them from Herr Schmidt's window. He met her eye, winked, and rolled away from the window in roars of laughter.

She struggled—she pinched Ted's arm cruelly—and she glared, fascinated, at that window. In a minute he reappeared, his eyes wet, studied them a moment, and rolled away again, roaring.

His face was irresistible. She could see how he was roaring. She gave one last frantic pinch of Ted's arm, and burst out into wild laughter—hopeless, unmistakable, helpless laughter.

Ted looked at her, then at Miss Kezia's crimson face, and leant helplessly against the front door. Poor Molly made the most awful sounds in her agitated efforts not to laugh, and Sheila Pat's face grew momentarily more impish. Then the front door was opened with a suspicious suddenness, and Ted went headlong in—Denis dodged—he stumbled and staggered into the wall, where he recovered his equilibrium, and stood ruefully rubbing his head.

"All right, old man, I'll remember it!" he declared.

Nell fled ignominiously, laughing and shaking, up the stairs and into the Stronghold, and banged the door. Down to the others there floated a long ripple of helpless laughter.

They followed Miss Kezia into the morning room, and there she turned and faced them.

Ted looked about him interestedly. He was distinctly amused; to be held up like this and lectured as if he were a naughty little boy was new to him, and he enjoyed it immensely.

"One of you go up and fetch Eileen—no, not you, Denis! Or you, Master Lancaster! You go, Molly."

Molly hesitated, in distress. She knew that, once alone with Nell, she would never be able to regain her seriousness.

Ted took a step forward, "*Mayn't* I, please?" he asked meekly.

"Did you not hear me, Molly?"

"Y-yes, Aunt Kezia."

She hurried from the room, banged her elbow against the door, and went upstairs. She opened the door of the Stronghold about an inch, and called through, all in one agitated breath:—

"You're to come down, and oh, *don't* laugh, Nell!"

"I *can't*, M-Molly! I s-simply *can't*!"

"You must! Oh, *do* be serious!"

There was a pause.

"What are you all doing down there, Molly?"

"Standing—"

There was a ripple of laughter from the other side of the door.

"Oh, don't! I can see it! I—I can't come."

Molly had started giggling directly Nell's laugh reached her.

"Oh, Nell, don't be—so mean! You—you're making me laugh!"

"Why don't you come in?"

"I daren't!"

Inside and outside the door there was laughter then. Then a despairing—

"You go down, M-Molly! I'll come in a minute!"

Molly fled.

"S-she's coming, Aunt Kezia." She gave a terrified giggle, and took her place next to the Atom.

There was a pause. All heard a light pattering step outside and glanced towards the door. Nothing happened.

Miss Kezia stood gaunt and grim; no one spoke. Denis's head drooped low; he had folded his hands meekly before him. The door handle was touched—there was another pause—then it was turned abruptly, suddenly, and Nell marched in. Head back, looking straight in front of her, biting her lip, frowning, she marched in, took her stand beside Ted, and implored him in a shaky whisper not to make her l-laugh. Then Miss Kezia began. She started on the vulgarity and danger of racing in hansoms in London. She pointed out the trouble in which they might have involved their drivers. She emphasised the scandal there would have been had they been pursued by the police, and Sheila Pat's face grew full of longing. From hansoms she went on to the awful iniquity of having left the house unguarded; from that to Sarah's holiday, of which she disapproved strongly. From Sarah's holiday she ranged austerely to grease stains, untidiness, foolish hilarity, and hysteria. She threw in various uncomplimentary remarks on feather-heads, untrustworthiness, rowdyism, and other things of a similar nature, and then in a final tone she wound up:—

"I shall forbid all intercourse between you and Master Lancaster for a month!"

There was a sudden movement, an uplifting of heads, a very definite and unmistakable change in the faces confronting her.

"Aunt Kezia—" Denis began, and his tone left nothing to the imagination with regard to the nature of the thing he meant to say. Miss Kezia cut in with sudden and very wise haste:—

"No, I shall not do that, but I shall write to your parents by this mail, and tell them how you failed to behave with any decorum in my absence. Now you may go."

They did go. They fled.

CHAPTER XXVII

Nell rose with a headache.

"I never," said she, "owned such a thing at home!"

She went to the window and looked out. A dingy grey fog hung over everything; the garden walls were wet.

"The fourth day that has been foggy and raw and liquid with mud!"

Sheila Pat trotted back into the room, her small face pinched, her teeth shut tight to prevent their chattering.

"Sheila Pat, you've had a cold bath!"

"I let the hot tap run a minute."

"And the hot water was tepid. Come here."

"I'm busy, Nell."

Nell went across and seized the shivering little body. Even through the bath-robe she could feel how cold it was. She started rubbing her down with a rough towel.

"You're awfully tiresome, Sheila Pat. If you will be such a baby, I shall have to come and get your bath ready myself."

"Y-you all have cold s-sponges!" sulked Sheila Pat, with chattering teeth.

"And so will you when you've grown bigger and stronger. Didn't Dr. McCarthy tell you so?"

"Is it s-strong? Feel my muscles! I j-just *love* icy-c-cold baths!"

"You look as if you do!"

"I think you're v-very rude, Nell O'Brien!" The Atom, after this dignified retort, relapsed into a cold silence.

"Now go and get Molly up, there's a good Atom," Nell said when Sheila Pat was clothed. "I can hear she's not moving."

The Atom departed.

"She's up now," she announced on her return.

"*Well* up?"

"I dipped her sponge in the jug, and squeezed it on her feet. She's very cross."

"I daresay she is. You're an ingenious little torturer, Sheila Pat."

Presently a wild-haired Molly burst into the room.

"Oh, Nell, I *can't* find any hair-ribbons, and my comb has tumbled down—I stuck it in the window to stop it rattling, and it's tumbled out—"

Nell interrupted, "Here's a comb and here's a ribbon."

"And Sheila Pat's made my bed all wet!"

"Hurry up! You've only three minutes, and you were late down yesterday, you know."

"Oh, Nell, *do* wait for me! I simply *can't* come into that room with Aunt Kezia's eye on me and grim silence!"

Sheila Pat had shut the door on her.

After breakfast the fog deepened, yellowed; Nell, with her mouth set obstinately, got out her canvas and brushes, and began to paint.

"Nell, you *can't* see to paint!" exclaimed Molly.

"I know I can't."

"Then what are you painting for?"

Nell squeezed out cobalt blue recklessly.

"My dear child, if we're to live in a place where it's always foggy, I've got to learn to paint in a thick yellow atmosphere, with the gas alight one minute and out the next. D'you think I'm not going to practise for the next hundred years? Sheila Pat, *don't* go near K.K.! You'll rouse her! Oh, *why* is she black? Do go on with your copy."

"I don't wish ever to write like my copy," said the Atom, stiffening her straight little back, "so what's the use of doin' it now?"

"Well, you've got to!" said Nell.

Sheila Pat arose.

"Sheila Pat, where are you going?"

"To fetch my snowy-breasted Pearl. I'm afraid he'll be breakin' his heart, all alone so long."

"You're to come straight back, then."

"I don't want to, Nell!"

"Well, you are to."

"I want to take him to visit Herr Smit, Nell."

Nell eyed the little heavy black mass that on ordinary days was Kate Kearney, and savagely harked back with, "I don't think a lodger's landlady's belongings should worry him at all times of the day!"

She blushed and dabbed angrily at her canvas.

Sheila Pat paused, and thought.

Intolerable, biting irritation possessed Nell. The room cramped her unbearably; painting drove her mad; everyone worried her; sick anger at it all goaded her.

"Sheila Pat, go and fetch your Pearl at once, and bring him straight back here!"

Sheila Pat eyed her interestedly.

"Eileen O'Brien, you got out of your bed the wrong side this morning!" she observed, and walked from the room. Molly looked at Nell commiseratingly.

"*I* know," she said, "we never have these horrid yellow fogs at—"

Nell stopped the word before it left her lips, with a wildly impatient:—

"Oh, *be* quiet!"

"I only meant—"

"I know you did! Go on with your history."

"But—"

Nell looked at her.

"If you say another word, Molly O'Brien, I shall yell!"

Denis came in.

He looked at her with her hair pushed up and laughed.

"Golliwog, what's happened to your hair?"

She looked away from him, fighting a weak inclination to go to him and cry.

"Nothing," she said.

"Painting in this light! Why, Nell, you must be crazy!"

"I daresay I am. I'm sick of never being able to paint—"

"But a dense fog!"

"It's always dense fog in London."

"Headache?" he queried.

"It's my temper that aches, I think."

She put down her palette, and gave a little laugh.

"Head, too?" he persisted.

"That I should have to own to such a thing! A little."

"It's boiled mutton for lunch; Sarah just told me so. I'll go and tell Aunt Kezia you must have something else. What would you like? Chicken? Sole?"

She laughed helplessly.

"Denis, I see her face! No—really—"

She stopped him. "I couldn't touch either. I'm not hungry. I'll have some pudding."

"It's rice puddin'," put in Sheila Pat, her words annotated by protesting squeaks. The Pearl objected to being taken from his cage.

Nell, feeling momentarily more sane, declared valiantly that rice pudding would do nicely.

Aunt Kezia was sorry that boiled mutton did not meet with her approval, so she said.

The Atom was the first to answer her.

"Approval, is it? And would you be approvalin' it with a headache, Aunt Kezia?"

It was a Saturday. Denis had suggested Madam Tussaud's for the afternoon. Now he declared he didn't think Nell was fit to come with them. She did not feel fit herself, but she wouldn't own it. She was very prickly, and somehow he rubbed her the wrong way,—"Oh, very well, if they'd rather go without her!" Up flared one of those quick Irish outbursts. Nell found herself alone. She sang loudly, listening intently for the shutting of the front door.

"'Twas down at Ballina Fair,
Cailins and boys were gaily tripping it there,
And I the soul of the spree,

When I set eyes on Kitty Magee.
Her smile so sweet, her step so neat,
Hide and seek her two little feet;
Gliding just like a swan at sea,
Handsome, winsome Kitty Magee.

And now I'm dreaming all day,
Sighing from dark to dawn, and wasting away,
Like a lone bird on a tree,
Pining the long hours through for Kitty Magee,
At dance or wake no—"

Bang!

The song died abruptly.

The hopeless muddle on the easel was dabbed at, made more and more oily.

"Eileen!"

Nell went out on to the landing.

"Yes, Aunt Kezia?"

"Please clean your brushes and put away your paints and all that smells so horribly, at once! The house reeks, and I have a friend coming to see me this afternoon!"

Nell said, "Yes, Aunt Kezia," and a gleam lit her eye. She went back to the Stronghold, and washed her brushes with slow care in turpentine. There was an air of waiting about her. She lifted Jim into his cage, and dropped it behind the lounge. Presently an irate voice rang up the stairs:—

"Eileen! *Eileen*!"

Ah expression of grim satisfaction overspread her features. The voice ascended with its owner.

"How dare you, Eileen? What is this horrible smell?"

"Smell, Aunt Kezia? Do you mean the turps?"

"I suppose so! It is *filthy*! I told you I expect a visitor. It is positively disgraceful—"

"You told me to wash my brushes, Aunt Kezia."

Nell's tone was as soft as butter.

"Certainly I told you to! You are being unwarrantably impertinent! You—"

"But I am only washing my brushes as you told me, Aunt Kezia!"

"What do you mean?"

"You have to wash them in turpentine, Aunt Kezia."

Miss Kezia had a moment of hesitation; her face reddened.

Nell dipped a brush into the tin washer.

"Then cease washing them at once! Open the window, and keep the door shut."

She closed the door behind her with such a very decisive click that it might almost have been designated a bang. Nell smiled wryly. She cleared up a little, then went to the window and looked out. Kate Kearney came to her, and begged to look, too. Nell sat down, and K.K. jumped into her lap.

"They don't allow dogs at Madame Tussaud's, K.K. Bad taste. But they do allow Nells—even bad-tempered ones; but she wasn't wanted, you see. Oh, K.K., you must get off!"

She rose restlessly. She looked down at a pathetic Kate Kearney, and exclaimed suddenly:—

"We'll go for a walk!"

The pathos of Kate Kearney vanished in a black whirl of ecstatic body and tail.

Nell went to put on her boots.

"We'll go for a long, long walk, and we'll come back on top of an omnibus, K.K. It's such a glorious day for a walk, isn't it? Oh, heavenly! But we'll go."

In the hall they came upon Miss Kezia. Nell's slim body stiffened suddenly; a feeling of desperation seized her.

"You are going to take that dog out on a day like this! I cannot allow it! Think of its feet when it comes in!"

Nell found that she had to moisten her dry lips; she took a moment or two to choke back unexpectedly rude words. She said then in an even tone:—

"I'll carry her upstairs, Aunt Kezia."

"But when it gets there! The carpet! Ruining my carpet!"

"I'll put her on her rug till she's dry."

"Microbes!" Miss Kezia said.

There was a little, pregnant silence. Nell's face had grown suddenly hot; she felt she dared not trust her tongue to speak again; she was shaken with longing to be very rude to Miss Kezia.

Miss Kezia hesitated, then she said:—

"Very well. And make her *stay* on her rug, and you had better not go far; the fog is deepening again."

Nell went out into the street. At the corner she met Ted.

"You? Where are the others?" he asked innocently, showing faint surprise.

"At Madame Tussaud's. Good-bye," she said.

"Where are you off to, Nell?"

"A walk—-a long walk—" Something prompted her to add, "just me and Kate Kearney."

"You needn't be afraid that I shall offer my escort. Am I allowed to suggest that it's beginning to sleet, and that the fog is getting thicker?"

The deadly politeness of his tone afforded her a small satisfaction.

"You may suggest what you like," she assured him, "only—do you mind suggesting it to the lamp-post? It's cold standing here."

"Oh, certainly. I've never come to embracing a lamp-post yet, but I daresay it's better to talk to than some people are!"

The grand sweep with which he raised his hat, and the dignified sarcasm of his tone, lifted the words above mere childishness.

Nell walked on down Gardiner Street. The fact that she could not help feeling that it would be comfortable to have Ted's sturdy figure beside her irritated her.

She felt a touch on her arm. Through the yellowing fog Ted smiled at her.

"I say, Nell, I can't stand it! You'd be on my conscience. You know you don't know your way about a bit, and if the fog comes down—"

She began to smile warmly.

"Since Denis has deserted you," cheerfully he blundered, "you'll let me order you about, eh?"

The "eh" held a suddenly surprised inflection, brought about by the change in her face.

"You're downright impertinent!" she stormed. "Do go away! How can you thrust yourself where you're not wanted?"

She hurried on, leaving silence behind her.

The lamps were alight; they shone pale and blurred through the fog. The lights from the shops made little pathways of misty light across the pavement. It was very raw, the air was bitter, wet, laden with sleet. She had not brought an umbrella with her; she was so unused to umbrellas. She turned up the collar of her coat, and valiantly suppressed a shiver. Kate Kearney trotted dejectedly at her heels.

"We will go for a long walk, K.K., won't we? And then we will take an omnibus back again. There are always omnibuses in London to take one everywhere.... Some people are so fussy and frumpish, aren't they?"

She was in dull, quiet streets; the effect of the tall houses, wet, ghostlike in the fog, was gloomy, weird. They got on her nerves, set them jarring. A deep depression seized upon her; she ceased trying to fight it. She was too cold, too wretched. She found herself suddenly in a dirty, noisy street, amongst innumerable barrows, innumerable ragged children. Everyone was shouting, it seemed to her; their voices were hideous. Everyone jostled her. She was afraid, horribly afraid. It was all so squalid, so inexpressibly sordid. She shrank back appalled. The noise set her head throbbing and aching. Through the fog she could discern an unending stream of traffic; she could see omnibuses. But to get to one she must slip between two barrows—venture into that muddy road. She hesitated, went on nervously, at a loss. She walked up the Hampstead Road, and came out upon Euston Road, where numberless omnibuses were drawn up. The noise was worse than before. She tried to find out which was her omnibus by listening to the conductors' raucous voices. She was deafened by the din.

"King's Cross! Baker Street! 'Ammersmith! Victoria!"

She approached the nearest conductor, and asked if he went to Henley Road.

"What road, miss?"

"Henley Road."

'"Enley Road? Where is it, miss?"

"It,"—she faltered, at a loss,—"oh," brightening—"it leads out of Gardiner Street!"

"Never 'eard of it, miss."

"It's not very far from Horton Square."

"Oh, we don't go anywhere near there."

He hopped on to his step and rang the bell.

She stood on the curb, looking at the other omnibuses with a weary disinclination to ask again. She held Kate Kearney in her arms, in terror of the traffic. A boy was shouting almost in her ear: "*Star*! Daring burglary by d'ylight! *Star*! Murder in the West End! *Evening News*! Duke of Oldchester run over by a motor! Great Strike in Nottingham! Families starving!..."

She turned from him with a sense of physical repulsion. She went forward and accosted another conductor.

"That dawg with you, miss? Can't take a dawg in a 'bus! Not allowed, miss!"

He shouted as a consolatory afterthought: "'E can run alongside, you know!"

She gave a sudden hysterical little laugh. She glanced at the crowded road, and down at Kate Kearney, cowering in her arms. She moved forward slowly, not knowing which way Henley Road lay. She was tired out; she had never felt so tired and forlorn in all her life. The sea of people, of traffic, the noise, the shouts, bewildered her, dazed her. She moved away hurriedly from the newspaper boys, who seemed, to her shrinking fancy, to be gloating with aggressive noise over endless horrors.

"We—we've got to walk back, K.K. I've only sixpence, so we can't drive at all. Oh, K.K.—I—I'm going to cry—"

"Expect you'll bite my head off, but you've just got to put up with me!"

Out of the yellow fog—out of the chaotic nightmarish hubbub—a broad-shouldered figure, a gruff, sulky voice, suddenly became clear to her.

"Oh!" she gasped.

Ted took hold of her elbow and shouldered his way through the crowd. She submitted weakly, occupied chiefly in swallowing ignominious tears. She found herself being helped into a hansom. She heard him say, "Fuller's—Regent Street." Then he seated himself beside her.

"Is it—a station?" she asked.

"No. You're going to have some tea before you go home."

"Oh!"

There was a silence. She cudgelled dull brains for something to say, then having found it, turned it over and over in her mind, distrusting her voice, till it grew silly and meaningless, and she let it go. The silence got on her nerves; she almost began to laugh helplessly; she burst out in an odd voice:—

"W-what a funny action the horse has!"

"Took the first that came. Couldn't wait to pick and choose."

"Of course not," she hurried to agree with meek haste.

The silence fell again. She cast a swift glance at Ted's profile; it was very grim and very cross. She couldn't let the silence last; it worried her past bearing.

"Kate Kearney is getting perky," she said.

"Yes?" said Ted.

She began wildly:—

"Ted—I—I—" and stopped.

He did not help her, and she said no more.

Presently the cab came to a standstill, and he helped her out. They went in, past the tempting sweets, on to warmth and lightness. The rush for tea was over, and there were not many people left now. They secured a little table and sat down.

"What'll you have?" he said curtly.

"Oh—anything."

He ordered tea and tea-cake. The band struck up with a selection from a popular musical play. She looked round quickly.

"Oh, how lovely!"

She poured out tea; he accepted his cup with a brief "thanks." She bent across the table to him.

"Would you mind listening? I'm sure I'm purring all over."

There was a tentative smile in her eyes.

"Tea-cake?" he said.

She took a piece with a sigh. Suddenly her laugh rang out, deliciously gay and glad. Coaxingly she bent towards him.

"Don't be cross, Ted! I'm so happy!"

He frowned.

"It was ridiculous of you," he began.

"I know it was!" with gay insouciance. "But this isn't the way to punish me, is it?" Her voice sank softly; she was radiant in the joy of the reaction. "You wouldn't be spoiling it all, Teddie?" she coaxed.

Unwillingly, his mouth relaxed into a smile; he caught it back with a quick, bad-tempered indrawing of his lips.

"You'd better know—first—I followed you! Now bite my head off!"

Her eyes opened wide.

"All—the—way?" she said slowly.

He nodded.

"Why, Ted, how awfully *sweet* of you!" in a soft and very unexpected rush. "Fancy taking all that trouble! Bite your head off? Why, I think it was just lovely of you!"

His glum face cleared.

"And my head's gone! gone! gone!" she laughed.

He glanced at it inquiringly.

"Oh, well, the ache thereof."

Presently she sighed loudly and with suggestive reproach.

"To think that all the time nice, cross, comfy you were there behind me! I wish I'd known!"

He compressed his lips humorously.

"Don't be mean!" she laughed. "More tea?" As she handed him his cup:—

"Ted, you're not to be feeling superior just because I got into a muddle and you pulled me out! If it had been a bog now, it would have been the other way about! But yellow fog, and—" she gave a little shudder—"the newspaper boys! But I ask you, how was a sane person, in other words, an Irish person, to guess that omnibuses would refuse to allow dogs in them? All the same," softly, "I'm feeling just now that man is a noble animal, and woman a mere headless and rudderless cipher. But I warn you it won't last."

"Wish it would," he said, giving K.K. a piece of cake.

"Ah, then, you are feeling superior! Ted, what would you have done if I had had hysterics when I caught sight of you? Oh, I'm so happy!"

"Eat something," he urged.

She looked round the room, then out at the fog, and smiled on him.

He looked at her with sudden seriousness.

"Nell, remember another time if you're in a hole—"

"The hole doesn't exist that'll ever get a chance of seeing me again!" She dismissed it airily.

"Well, anyhow, when that frame of mind's worn off—"

"You mean when I'm in a howling temper again," she interpolated, pursing her mouth.

"Perhaps. Well, remember, *take a hansom*!"

"But I couldn't. I'd only sixpence with me."

"Doesn't matter. You pay up the other end. You could get it when you arrived."

"Oh, do you? I didn't know. You don't in omnibuses."

"No, you don't in omnibuses."

She rested her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands.

"Shall I try to thank you, Ted?"

He flushed in horror.

"Good Lord, no! I say, have another cake."

She laughed softly.

"I don't want any more, thanks. I—"

"Do have some more tea."

She shook her head.

"If you'll let me speak—"

"You might give me some more, will you?"

She poured it out.

"I'm only trying to assure you I won't thank you!" she managed to say. "I won't, really. You've been too nice. I'll do just whatever you wish."

"Um!" he grunted.

She settled her elbows on the table again. She looked out straight before her, and her face grew thoughtful. There was a little silence. Then she looked at him and smiled; it was an odd

little smile, half-humorous, half sad.

"I'm getting like that," she said, "all bad-tempered and horrid and cross! I was horrid to you, and to Denis,—to everyone. I—I used not to be grumpy and nasty. I'm just growing that way. In books they don't. When there's trouble and things all go wrong, they get sweeter and sweeter. I don't. I feel sometimes all shuddery with snappishness. I never used to feel like that—" Her voice died away in a plaintive little murmur.

"Books are all rot!" he declared vigorously.

"Oh, Ted, all of them?"

She was laughing again, but the shadow of wistfulness still clouded her eyes.

"All those with goody-goody heroines hanging around like dying ducks in a thunder-storm!" he asserted.

"You don't mind if I'm horrid and grumpy, then?"

"Not a bit," he declared cheerfully.

She rose.

"You know you ought to have said that I never am horrid or grumpy. But no matter!"

"I've got a conscience to think of, you know," he suggested.

Outside, they found that the fog had cleared away, leaving a wet, cold world behind it.

"We'll choose our horse now," he said.

"Oh, how lovely! Here comes a hansom! Poor thing, his knees are rather awful. There's a better one—that big bay, Ted!"

"Got a fare already."

"Oh, I didn't think of that."

"We'll walk along. You wouldn't sooner have a crock from the rank, would you?"

"Don't insult me, Ted! Look—that grey! Oh, he's a beauty!"

"Put on the pace," Ted said to the man, and presently Nell was sighing with joy.

"I'd love to spend a whole day in hansoms! Ted, the moral's all wrong! I'm enjoying myself much too much. And never so much as one 'I-told-you-so' glance from you! It's hopelessly wrong!"

As they turned into Henley Road, she held out her hand.

"Shake," she said, "and—I'm not going to thank you, but—oh, Teddie, you *are* a brick!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

Towards morning on March 17 Miss Kezia dreamed. She was not often troubled with dreams, but on this occasion her dream was long and peculiarly vivid. She dreamed that she was passing through a narrow roadway, on either side of which great rocks rose high and precipitous. On these rocks men were at work, cutting, chiselling, hammering, and every sound they made rolled and rumbled and echoed amongst the rocks, till, in her dream, Miss Kezia's ears sang and buzzed in agony. As they worked the men sang and talked, and the rocks took up their voices, and flung them from one to another, till the noise was deafening. On she hurried, striving to get through the roadway, but it had the interminableness of dream roads, and Miss Kezia struggled in vain.

At seven o'clock she woke, because seven o'clock was the hour at which she invariably rose. On the 17th of March she rose four minutes later than usual, taking that time to ponder her dream and feel her pulse. She looked anxiously at herself in the peculiarly unflattering mirror on the toilet-table, but it showed her the same long Scotch face as usual, and the green tinge imparted by the glass was no greener than it always was. Miss Kezia considered dreams a weakness due to illness or a diseased imagination, but halfway through her toilet a voice broke out:—

> "'Oh! Paddy dear, and did you hear the news that's going round?
> The shamrock is forbid by law to grow on Irish ground;
> Saint Patrick's day no more we'll keep, his colour can't be seen.
> For there's a cruel law agin' the wearin' of the green....'"

Miss Kezia stood, the cold water trickling down her face, and experienced a queer sort of sensation. Where had she heard that tune—sad even to her tough senses—quite lately? Why did her dream suddenly descend upon her, the sense of it gripping her most unaccountably?

A scream of woe in Molly's most material voice, "Oh, I've hammered my thumb into the middle of next month!" and the heavy fall of a hammer roused her suddenly, sharply, to full realisation and understanding of her dream. To the accompaniment of a steady hammering she finished her ablutions with a grim and wrathful haste. She faced the unflattering mirror with a gleam in her eye, and pulled and screwed her hair into its accustomed tight knot. She finished her toilet, and then she left her room.

Green met her eye; whichever way she turned she encountered green. The balusters were draped with green muslin. The austere photograph of a long-faced ancestor hanging, a perpetual prim disdainer of the follies of youth, on the wall opposite her door, looked out now disapprovingly from beneath a coquettish green satin bow hanging over his very brows.

Sheila Pat came marching down the stairs, holding aloft the Irish flag.

"Are you all mad?" Miss Kezia queried wrathfully.

The Atom turned an eye alight with a far-away scorn upon her.

"It's St. Patrick's Day!" she said curtly, and marched on down the stairs.

Miss Kezia put up with a good deal that day. She sat at the breakfast-table and faced, with strong but silent disapproval, a green-draped window. She said no word even when Sarah wriggled shyly in, her diminutive cap adorned with a great green bow. But her eye followed the hot and abashed little hand-maiden with dire meaning. When next Sarah appeared the bow had vanished.

She watched, from beneath raised brows, Kate Kearney tumbling over her own head in pursuit of the ribbon tied about her neck, but she did not say anything. After breakfast a box came by parcel's post addressed to Nell. It was a large box, and it was filled with shamrock. Miss Kezia studied it amiably.

"I suppose it is a pretty little weed," she said with affability.

She went farther. She asked Sheila Pat for information anent St. Patrick.

Unfortunately Sheila Pat started with the little item of his having swum across the Shannon with his head in his mouth. Miss Kezia remonstrated. She pointed out the impossibility of his performing such a feat.

Sheila Pat waxed indignant. She explained scornfully that anything was possible to St. Patrick, and that, moreover, his being in Ireland at the time had a great deal to do with his wonderful cleverness.

Miss Kezia argued that it would have been nothing more or less than a miracle.

Sheila Pat retorted, "And why not?" Miss Kezia was shocked. A long and hot discussion followed, of which the Atom had the last word. She said:—

"Why, you can't know *any*thing! You don't even know what Ireland's *like*! You're just a hignoramus!"

Miss Kezia was angry. She was also genuinely worried. It was not the first time that her young relatives by marriage had worried her active conscience from a religious point of view. Their stories of fairies and legends and miracles seemed, to her stern narrowness, profane. In the course of her argument with Sheila Pat, the Atom had observed that she thought it must be very nice for God to have St. Patrick for a companion. The remark had left Miss Kezia gasping.

Left alone with the rude epithet of hignoramus hovering scornfully in the air, Miss Kezia sought to arrange the chaos in her mind. She was still forming sound arguments to be used with effect on a future occasion, when she heard the O'Briens going out. She went to the window and received several further shocks. In the first place Denis was with the others, when he should have been at the bank. In the second, third, and fourth places, their costumes were most unseemly. To Miss Kezia they appeared to be composed chiefly of shamrock and green ribbon. In the fifth place Kate Kearney, all unchidden, was dividing her energies in a vain attempt to rid herself of her bow, between the mud heap at the side of the road and Miss Kezia's spotless door-steps.

Miss Kezia flung open the window, and called out:—

"Ridiculous! I won't have it! Denis, why aren't you at the bank? My steps!"

Denis waved an airy farewell with his shillelagh.

"Bank?" His voice was amazed. "It's a holiday, of course! Told them I shouldn't be there!"

"You are not to—"

Miss Kezia's voice died away. She recognised the uselessness of calling injunctions after fast-disappearing and obviously obstinate backs.

She returned to her dusting. Her amiability had been sorely tried; it was little more than a memory now. She approached the window to dust a chair, and became aware of the fact that her house was an object of interest and mirth to passers-by. She sighed angrily. She had a genuine

wish to make allowances. She understood dimly that the day meant a great deal to them. She could not discover from the windows the cause of the interest her house seemed to possess for the passers-by. She donned her bonnet and coat and went out. From the pavement she discovered only too quickly the cause of that interest and mirth. Her respectable house wore a festive, even a rakish, air. The dingy bricks seemed to shrink back apologetically beneath their gay adornments. Green—green—green—Miss Kezia took a violent dislike to the colour that day which never left her. The Irish flag held a prominent position; green bunting was festooned across from window to window; a basket of shamrock was slung by green ribbons from a water-pipe; there were garlands and harps. From one window there hung a long, limp object, professedly a dead serpent. Miss Kezia's eyesight was good; it was better than her imagination. She saw at once that a thing composed of some rolled-up strips of carpet that were her property hung from a window. But she did not see that the thing was a serpent. The realistic touches given by Nell's brush were, to her, merely so many insults added to the injury.

The O'Briens did not come home to lunch. Miss Kezia lunched alone. She also said to Sarah, "You are not to keep anything hot, Sarah!"

Sarah dragged the beef from the oven in such a temper that it fell into the fender.

Soon after lunch Miss Kezia went out. She glanced from the gate with approval at the decorous, unadorned bricks of her house. When she returned a few hours later, she glanced again at it approvingly. But as she put her key into the lock of the door, the more amiable expression of her countenance faded, and a look of disapproving horror took its place. She entered the hall and was greeted with several disconcerting things. Her ears were offended by the loud singing of many voices, accompanied by a concertina and combs. Her nose was offended with the unmistakable scent of tobacco. Her eyes—well, her eyes were offended with the smoke and with many signs of untidiness, of riot, and of fun.

Miss Kezia went upstairs. As she reached the door of the Stronghold the voices and music were in full swing:—

> "'You may take the Shamrock from your hat and cast it on the sod,
> But, never fear, 'twill take root there, tho' under foot 'tis trod.
> When laws can stop the blades of grass from growing as they grow,
> And when the leaves in summer time their verdure dare not show,
> Then I will change the colour I wear in my caubeen;
> But till that day, please God, I'll stick to wearin' of the green.'"

Miss Kezia stood, unseen, unheard, within the door of the Stronghold, and gazed.

Round the table sat several men, women, and children. On the table were the remains of a feast. Miss Kezia caught sight of a beef bone and gasped; she saw poultry bones, remains of pies, tarts, and cakes. The windows were flung wide, but the atmosphere of the room, thick with smoke, offended her nostrils.

A pair of bare little legs gave a sudden spasmodic leap to a sheltering lap, and a shrill little voice exclaimed:—

"Lady!"

There was a sudden lull. Denis turned to his aunt.

"Hulloa, Aunt Kezia! These are a few friends we came across to-day."

"In—deed!" said Miss Kezia.

An old woman was heard to exclaim with deep sentiment:

"Sure 'tis his honour's a rale gintleman entirely!"

Miss Kezia, looking back afterwards, on the minutes that followed, marvelled angrily at her strange and quite unsuitable behaviour. She concluded, and rightly, that she was dazed with bewilderment at the welcome she received. To her cold and austere nature it was inexplicable. She found herself surrounded, called by terms of endearment, her hands held and shaken, compliments paid to herself and her nation. One old woman, half weeping over the joy that had been hers that day, actually kissed her hand. She was not a particularly clean old woman, and Miss Kezia wished that she wouldn't do it. But she did not draw her hand roughly away. "Ten years," wailed the old woman, "have I stood the whole day through beside me barrow, and me not able to put me foot to the ground with the rheumatics!"

Miss Kezia felt a passing inclination to point out that the two facts were not compatible. Oh, these people were awful! And one had a monkey, a horrible little monkey, sitting on his shoulder!

And they were dirty!

"Sure 'tis herself's the kind lady, givin' the poor Irish immigrants the welcome!"

Welcome!

Miss Kezia began to beat an ignominious retreat. She had to confess herself unequal to the occasion. Her inclination set strongly toward turning these undesirable guests from her house. But their gratitude was so exuberant; they were so sure of her welcome, so childishly hilarious.

"'Tis herself's giving us the grand time entirely!"

"Won't ye be sittin' down wid us, me dear?" The old woman who had kissed her hand dragged a chair forward invitingly.

"'Tisn't much we've left ye," she pursued, "but ye'll be havin' a piece of cheese now?"

Miss Kezia heard, amazedly, her own voice making excuses, as she edged back into the doorway. A grimy little hand was thrust up in front of her; a beguiling little voice suggestively besought God to bless her.

Miss Kezia looked down into a smutty imp's face with eyes as blue and innocent as Heaven.

"God bless ye, lady! God bless ye, lady!"

Slowly Miss Kezia opened her purse, slowly she took from it a halfpenny, and dropped it into the little hand.

"God send ye a good husband, lady!" rang out jubilantly. "God guard every shtep of your way!"

Miss Kezia found herself surrounded suddenly by bare legs, blue eyes, outstretched hands, entreating voices.

"God bless ye, lady! God bless ye, lady!"

There were five halfpennies and two farthings in her purse. She dispensed them automatically.

"God send ye a good husband! God send ye a good husband!"

Even the smallest imp, a scrap of a thing, about a foot and a half high, shrilly called on Heaven to provide her with a suitable partner.

Miss Kezia looked uncomfortable. She shut her purse with a snap and retreated on to the landing. But they followed her, all talking at once. Her hands were taken again. Disconcerting questions as to her family, her parents, were asked. The old woman who had stood beside her barrow for ten years without once putting her foot to the ground broke out wailingly into an account of her trials, her sorrows, and pains. A black-bearded man gave her a picturesque presentment of his life as a father of eight children. His was the shoulder on which the objectionable monkey sat. He came close, emphasising, with dramatic gestures, his story. The monkey stretched out a thin little arm towards Miss Kezia's bonnet. Miss Kezia backed precipitately. Why did her bonnet possess a fascination for monkeys, she wondered shudderingly. She hated monkeys.

"Sure, thin, isn't he welcoming one of his own people?" the man with the black beard observed.

Miss Kezia thought the remark impertinent, and concluded that it was intended to be funny. It wasn't.

It gave her disapproval the necessary fillip, and she managed to beat a retreat. Once in her bedroom, she shut the door, and, with a hurried air not usual to her, turned the key in the lock.

Miss Kezia possessed an uncompromising conscience. She never allowed it to veil or excuse her motives. Yet, as she stood untying the strings of the bonnet that possessed such a weird attraction for the monkey tribe, she said to herself that she really must turn out and tidy a certain drawer at once. To an outsider the drawer would have seemed tidy enough, but Miss Kezia, sitting before it, the door still locked, methodically sorted out and refolded every article it contained. As she was refolding, for the third time, a certain scarf that was the last article to be tidied, the noise that had been surging, high and low, exuberant and sad, in her ears, as a never ceasing accompaniment to her tidying, suddenly swelled into sharper sounds, and she understood that the door of the Stronghold had been opened. She sat, rigid, a queer dread on her face. The dread gave place presently to absolute astonishment at the noise they managed to make. The rapid talk, the laughter, the jokes, bewildered her. The great affection that evidently existed between them and her young relatives surprised her.

"Old tenants," she surmised. "How very fond they are of their landlord's children!"

She experienced a distinct feeling of gratitude towards the Albert Hall, and the Irish concert that was to be held there that evening, and for which her relatives had taken tickets.

For a quarter of an hour by Miss Kezia's watch, the "tenants" bade their landlord's children

good-bye. Three times the door was shut, three times there came bangs and thumps on it, and it was re-opened. And each time all the noise and talk began again.

Later on Miss Kezia ventured forth. On meeting the O'Briens, she observed with forbearance that she trusted they would make things tidy now that their father's tenants had gone. She went on to remark that it was strange so many of them should be in London. They were a good deal amused. They pointed out airily that they were no tenants of their father's; that they had never seen them till that day; that they had just come across them. It was the last shock poor Miss Kezia received on that 17th of March. She was very angry, and very genuinely bewildered. She watched them go off to their concert with a sense of relief. She felt a newly developed fondness for the Albert Hall.

CHAPTER XXIX

The day after St. Patrick's day was a bad one for them. It was a beautiful day, bright and cold; but, in the reactionary mood that had gripped them all in a great gloom, the very brightness was a thing to rail at.

At the breakfast-table Miss Kezia gazed at them astonished. She was not a keen observer, but even she, with the memory of yesterday in her mind, marvelled at the sudden depression.

Denis, in the hall, observed gloomily:—

"Wish I'd get run over, or save a millionnaire's life. Either'd make a break."

"Millionnaires only get their lives saved in books," Nell rejoined bitterly.

He kicked the hat-stand angrily.

"Look here, Nell, I can't go to that beastly bank to-day. I'm sick of it! I'll be committing suicide, or murder, or something, if I do!"

A quick little sob caught suddenly at her throat.

"Oh, Denis!" she whispered. "Oh, Denis!"

He smoothed out a dent he had made in his hat. He looked up at her, a humorous smile twisting his mouth.

"Anyhow, I'll be a success as an author soon," he said. "Didn't I say all this beastly bank business was copy? Well, my books'll be pretty morbid and sordid, won't they?"

She felt blindly for his coat; it danced before her eyes in a mist. He began to laugh.

"I say, old fumble-fist, wouldn't old Pom-Pom be rich while I was murdering him? I can see him—'Excuse me, Mr. O'Brien, but you really are going to work in an unnecessarily rough manner.'" He dived an arm into the coat she held out for him. "Nell—think I shall ever want to bring in a realistic murder into a book? If so, now's the time to get it."

"You're late. Don't dawdle."

"Bet I'd get to the corner before you even if I gave you the steps in!"

"Not you!"

She flung open the door, jumped the long flight of steps, and vanished. She came back laughing, flushed, and vanquished, into the disapproving arms of Miss Kezia.

She listened to the lecture that followed in a passion of dreary revolt. When it was finished she observed tragically, "Next time I'll put on a *veil*!"

She went upstairs to Molly and French translation. She set Sheila Pat a sum to work out. Sheila Pat sat and gazed awhile at the figures, then she slid down from her chair.

"I won't do it, Nell!" she said.

She stood, a small figure at bay; a little quiver passed through her.

"Very well, asthore," Nell said gently.

The Atom went to the window and looked out. She came back to the table.

"Give me something to do, please, Nell."

Molly began, "Why, you just said—"

"I'm not sayin' it now, Molly O'Brien!"

"Duckie," Nell said, "will you write me a letter? I just feel I'd like a letter."

Sheila Pat got paper and ink and began:—

"My dear Nell—"

She wrote for a few minutes, then she said:—.

"May I say I've no time to write any more now, Nell? I don't want to write any more."

She went down into the garden and quarrelled violently with Stewart over the rival merits of

St. George and St. Patrick. In the very heart of the argument she slipped and grazed her nose on the wall. But she retrieved her position without loss of time or dignity, and went on with the argument.

Nell met her later wandering aimlessly up and down the stairs, in and out the rooms.

"Please don't touch me!" she said strenuously as Nell advanced, and she ran away down to the kitchen. At luncheon she hardly ate anything; she fidgeted, was rude to Miss Kezia.

Afterward she refused to go for a walk with the others. She said with forlorn dignity:—

"I am tired of walkin' between houses that squeeze you to death, thank you."

To omnibuses she made much the same objection. Nell, in pity, left her alone.

Later on Nell went out to buy a tube of rose-madder. She was painting desperately, in a sudden wild accession of determination to get back to Kilbrannan somehow. When she came back she found Molly deep in a book in the Stronghold.

"Where's the Atom?"

"Somewhere about."

Nell searched.

"She isn't."

"Oh, she's gone, then. I didn't know she'd gone yet. The maid came from next door to ask her to go to tea with Stewart."

"I'm glad."

A little before six Miss Kezia came into the Stronghold. Denis whisked Jim behind him, and faced her serenely.

"Molly, I wish to know if it is to you I am indebted for—these?"

She held out a pair of large, flat, square-toed shoes, and pointed majestically to two frivolous-looking little bows on their toes.

Molly grew scarlet.

"Y-yes, Aunt Kezia! I—I—"

"I thought so. I should like to know *why* my property is never to be safe from you?"

"I—I saw—I saw there *had* been bows—and I—I made fresh ones—"

"Yes. I picked the bows off myself. I object to them." She stared at Molly with a puzzled frown. "You are a very peculiar girl," she said, and left the room.

"I took *hours* sewing them on!" wailed the discomfited Molly to an unsympathetic and much-amused audience.

"I believe our dear aunt thinks you're a bit wanting," declared Denis, tapping his brow.

Miss Kezia put her head round the door again

"Where is Sheila?"

"She hasn't come back yet."

"Come back? From where?"

"Next door," said Nell.

"What has she gone there for? I object to her running in and out."

"She went to tea."

"No. I have come from there only half an hour ago."

"Are you *sure*?" Nell looked bewildered.

"Stewart had tea with us. She was not there."

Nell looked at Molly; her eyes had widened suddenly,

"Molly!"—her voice was quite sharp—"you said she had gone—"

"I thought she had. A maid came and asked her—"

Denis bounded down the stairs.

"Sarah!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Do you know anything about a maid coming from next door to ask Miss Sheila to go to tea?"

"Yes, sir, but she said, 'No, thank you, she didn't wish to go.'"

"Have you seen her go out, Sarah?"

"No, sir. She's never out, and it pouring and that bitter cold and windy!"

In another minute he had on his coat, and had gone off to the milkman's to see if she were there. The others waited. Molly tried guiltily to comfort Nell, and to excuse herself.

"Oh, do be quiet!" Nell interrupted her. "Can't you at least do that?"

Denis returned with no news of her.

"She may have gone to Mr. Yovil's or to Sarah's home—"

"Or Ted Lancaster's—Denis," Nell's voice was desperate, "she's been gone nearly three

hours! I can't stay here. I'll go to Sarah's, while you go—"

"You will not! You cannot go out alone! It is dark and raining," Miss Kezia interrupted.

Nell gave a queer little laugh.

"I'm going," she said.

"Nell," Denis interposed, "I'll get you a cab. You go to Mr. Yovil's—I'll go off to Lancaster's. Sarah will go home." His tone was quietly authoritative.

Miss Kezia found herself put aside and everyone obeying him implicitly. In reality she was very uneasy and anxious herself, but she hid it beneath a cold and disapproving manner.

Nell returned a few minutes after he did. She shook her head.

"He was out. She hasn't been there."

"There's Sarah yet. She isn't back."

"Must we wait, Denis?"

"No. I'm off to the police station. If she should bring her back, I can go and cancel orders."

His hand was on the door latch. "Here's Sarah!" he said.

Sarah hurried in, wet, breathless.

"No, missansir—oh, and them crool moters—and she such a baby for all her grown ways!"

The wind and the rain beat in angrily. Denis closed the door, and turned to speak to Nell. Something drove up and stopped outside. He flung open the door. In the light of the lamp they could discern a small figure standing by a horse's head. The horse was in a four-wheeled cab, the driver was getting down from his box. The next instant Sheila Pat was met at the gate and marshalled up the steps. Into the hall she came, a small, weary figure, drenched through, her face shining white in the lamplight.

They closed round her; Nell's arms squeezed her desperately; there was a babel of questions, reprimands, relief.

"What a rikkledous fuss!" were the first words the Atom spoke, and a strong odor of peppermint began to pervade the hall.

"Where have you been?" demanded Miss Kezia for the third time.

"Out," laconically.

Nell cried: "Oh, Sheila Pat, you're soaked through! Come and get dry things on!"

"Directly her clothes have been changed I wish to hear an account of what she has been doing," said Miss Kezia.

Denis picked her up into his arms and held her tight. "You're eating peppermint, you vulgar little ragamuffin!"

"He gave it me—he says it keeps out the cold wonderful. He used to take to drink to keep himself warm, but ever since his little baby was borned, a year ago, he sucks peppermint instead!" The excited little voice vanished up the stairs.

"With whom have you been consorting, Sheila?" Miss Kezia's dire tones followed her.

"I haven't been con—con—doin' that at all!" was the indignant response.

Denis translated into the wet ear nearest to him:—

"Who was 'he,' duckums?"

"Mr. Willie Riley," in a dignified voice. "And I shared his tea!" triumphantly.

"Hurry up, Denis!" Nell's face was worried, anxious. "I've her dry things all ready. But I think she ought to go to bed—"

"I won't! Sure, Nell O'Brien, I'm not a baby to go to bed at seven o'clock!"

Nell, rubbing her down, found she was shivering and trembling all through her slim little body. She huddled her into warm, dry clothes, rubbed her toes, hugged her.

"Asthore, asthore, you've given us all such a bad time!"

"But, Nell, I'm really not a baby! I don't see why you make such a fuss."

"You're absurd, Atom! We didn't know what might be happening to you. We don't know now what was happening. You *must* tell us—"

"I went out, and—and I got lost, Nell."

"But where did you go? And why?"

"Oh, we were all so frightened!" interposed Molly. "And I felt so awful, because I told Nell you were next door. I never dreamed you'd said you wouldn't go, and I heard the maid say it to Sarah, and oh, Sarah cried and said motor cars killed all the children, and I do think you're awfully naughty—" She stopped, out of breath.

"So do I." Nell's arms were round her again; she gave her a little shake. "I'm dreadfully angry with you, sweet, and you shall have some nice hot bread and milk presently."

"I don't want it, Nell! I shared Mr. Riley's tea."

"Tell me why you went out, Atom," she coaxed.

The little body stiffened.

"A person doesn't—always—want to—to tell things," she said, a note of desperation in her voice. "I'll tell you all about Mr. Riley," eagerly.

Denis came in. "I say, Aunt Kezia's waiting. Come and confess, Atom!"

"I won't."

"You've got to be a man. Come along."

He had touched the right note. Downstairs marched the Atom and into the dining room. Not pale was she now. Two vivid spots of colour glowed in her cheeks; her eyes shone. She sat her down on a chair and began:—

"I wished to go out all by my alone, so I put on my things and I creeped down the stairs and out of the door—"

"Most wrong! Most naughty!" interpolated Miss Kezia, but the Atom went on unheeding.

"Sure I'll not be tellin' you anythin' I don't wish to, so it's no use askin' undesirable questions about—" a halt, a momentary quaver, "about things. This London is just houses and houses and houses and streets like—" pause for an insulting metaphor, "like twin maggots! And I got lost." She stopped abruptly.

"It is very naughty and selfish to cause so much trouble to others while you enjoy yourself roaming the streets!" said Miss Kezia.

A curious expression came into the Atom's small face—a bitter little expression that made it look oddly old for a moment.

"Go on, asthore," Nell put in. "What did you do when you were lost?"

"I walked and walked. I wouldn't ask a policeman the way, because Sarah's young man says they're a bad lot and you can't trust them. And then," her face kindled, "I came upon a cab-stand, and there was one poor horse with his nose-bag slipped down,—the strap had come loose, and he couldn't get his poor nose in at all,—and I ran across and I kissed his nose—it had a white flame—he was a bay with a hog mane—and I tried to get his bag up, but, oh, 'tis heavy they are! I tried and tried, and I gave him a handful of oats to go on with, and then Willie Riley came along—" She broke off. "Oh, Nell," she said, in a breathless little aside, "all day long I'd been hearing all these hidjous London people's voices, all shoutin'—and Willie Riley came along, and oh, he called out, 'Sure and what's wrong at all?' Oh, but 'twas grand! All day I hadn't heard it. 'Sure and what's wrong at all?' just like that."

"The horse might have bitten you. It was a most foolish and foolhardy thing to do," reprimanded Miss Kezia.

Sheila Pat stared at her in a funny little considering way, then pursued:—

"He soon put it right, and then we had a talk. Nell, he comes from Cork! And he was tellin' me all about his home—"

"Get on with what *you* did!" put in Miss Kezia.

"I'm tellin' you," obstinately, "I talked with him. And then he drove me here." With a sudden abrupt movement she slipped from the chair. "I'll go to bed now."

There were great dark rings round her eyes; Nell saw her shiver.

"Come on, then, Atom," Denis picked her up again. "I'll carry you up."

The small arms went with sudden desperate clinging round his neck; Sheila Pat pressed her cheek hard into his.

"She must be punished," said Miss Kezia. "She has been wandering about alone for more than three hours."

"We'll see about that to-morrow," Denis said.

Nell went towards the kitchen.

"Where are you going, Eileen?"

"To make her some hot bread and milk."

"It is perfectly absurd the way you none seem to think she should be punished—"

"I shall make her promise never to go out alone again."

"She shared that cabman's tea," grimly; "that is sufficient. I will not have her coddled and fussed over as if she has done something clever."

"She must have the bread and milk. She is tired and shivering." Nell's eyes looked dark, her head was back. For a moment Miss Kezia hesitated whether she should enforce her words. She glanced keenly at Nell's face.

"If it is to stave off a cold, I will say no more," she said, and turned away.

When Nell took the bread and milk up, she found Sheila Pat on Denis's knee, flushed, heavy-

eyed, half asleep.

"I don't want it, Nell! Make her take it away, Denis!" Her tone was peevish.

"Not I. I want you to eat it. Come, try, old girl."

But the Atom turned her head away, and buried it deeper in his chest.

"I don't want it! I don't want it!"

"But you've got to try and eat it, Sheila Pat! Come, don't be a baby."

She sat up listlessly.

"I'll feed you. We'll pretend you are a baby, shall we?"

Halfway through it her heavy lids drooped, her weary little head fell back against his shoulder. Nell took the basin away.

"I'll get her to bed as quickly as I can," she whispered.

"Molly, run and fetch her nightie—to warm."

But the Atom clung wearily to Denis.

"I don't want to go to bed. Denis, need I go to bed?"

"Must, old lady."

"May I go in my clothes, then? I don't want to get undressed."

"You'll be so much more cosey, dear," coaxed Nell. "It won't take a minute."

Denis put her down. She stood gazing into the fire, her sleepy eyes closing now and then.

"Oh, Nell—why does a person have such a lot of clothes?" as her arms were dragged out of various garments.

"Oh—leave my chimmy on—"

"Need I have my stockin's off?"

In her blue flannel nightgown she knelt in front of a chair and said her prayers. She roused over them.

"I've got a new bit to-night," she said, and gave a curious little shudder. "I'm goin' to pray it to Jesus as well as God."

When she had finished Nell carried her into their bedroom, wrapped in a warmed blanket.

"Good night, Nell." Sheila Pat's arms clung tight.

Three times Nell peeped in that evening, and found her tossing restlessly, wide-eyed.

When she came to bed, Sheila Pat was still awake. She sat up.

"Nell, I've been very inceitful!"

"You're going to tell me why you went out?"

"Yes."

Nell sat down on the bed and took her, blankets and all, into her lap.

"Now, sweetheart."

But the Atom was silent. She wriggled restlessly.

"I feel—oh, someone's playin' tunes in my head, Nell! I—won't I ever be sleepy again? My legs hurt, Nell. Is it all those steps?"

"What steps, dear?"

"The monnyment. Are you *very* s'prised? I went up the monnyment—to—Nell, do you think I've got a cold comin'? My nose feels funny."

"I'm afraid you have. Go on, pet."

"The boy told me—I asked him—he had blue eyes and red cheeks and—and I thought he might be nice like an Irish boy, and—and—I—I felt," with sudden passion, "I would just *die* if I didn't see it—just one tiny bit! And he said I could—from the top of the monnyment—he said, 'Oh, yes, you can see Ireland right enough from there, you can see all the world,' but—I—couldn't—"

Nell's arms tightened about her.

"He was a wicked boy! He told a lie. I mustn't say 'lie,' but I will. I could only see—dirty—smoke—and houses—"

"How did you find your way there?"

"I don't know. It was very differcult, and I kept goin' wrong, but I asked people. And one woman gave me an apple off her barrow. It was very kind of her. But there was only smoke and houses—"

A sudden convulsive sob shook her from head to foot.

"I—I *ran* up a lot of the steps—" her fingers dug into Nell's arm—"and it was three pennies—and the man told me there are three hundred and forty-five steps—it was a long way—and," a little terrified shudder shook her, "there's a nasty cage—he said it's because people used to throw theirselves over to—because they wanted to kill theirselves, Nell! I—I didn't know people ever wanted to kill theirselves, did you?"

The shrinking terror in her eyes hurt Nell horribly.

"Don't, Atom—don't! Dear, it's only poor people who—who are mad—who don't know what they are doing. If they knew, they wouldn't do it."

The terror lightened a little. She lay quiet a little while in Nell's arms.

Nell hoped she was falling asleep, but presently the whole small form was shaken by another desperate sob.

"It was only smoke—-and houses—" came a desolate little murmur of utter weariness.

"Try to go to sleep, darling—do try."

"I'm not cryin', Nell! Only—I—you see shiverin' and a cold is rather like cryin', isn't it?"

"Very much, but you'll be better to-morrow. You must get better quickly, because suppose our first letters from Australia were to come with you sick! And they may come any day now, sweet. And there mustn't be anyone sick here! Because how can we celebrate the occasion properly then? If the letters say that mother is quite, *quite* strong again—and they will, darling, I know they will!—well, what shall we do then?"

She talked on softly, gently, and after a while the Atom slept. Nell sat for some time with her on her lap, frightened to move lest she wake her, but at last she laid her gently in her bed, and the Atom still slept on.

But the next morning Nell was wakened suddenly at six o'clock. She sat up. The Atom was striving to pour some water from the bottle to the glass, and it was the two clinking together that had waked Nell. The bottle shook in the Atom's hands; Nell saw that she was shaking all over.

She slipped to the floor.

"Go back to bed, asthore, I'll give you some water."

"I—I'm so th-thirsty, Nell, and I c-can't keep still—I'm r-rather like Mrs. J-Jelly!" with a shivery little smile.

"You're frozen. Now, drink it quickly, and let me tuck you in again."

"I'd sooner get up, Nell."

"Not yet, Sheila Pat."

"My bed's so c-cold, Nell. I don't like my bed."

"Come into mine, dear."

She snuggled into Nell, shivering and shaking.

"Will I make you very cold?"

"Oh, no, asthore. Now go to sleep."

After a while Nell dozed. She woke suddenly to find Sheila Pat lying beside her with all the bedclothes off.

"I'm so hot, Nell! I just burn—I b'lieve I'll scorch soon."

"You've caught a bad cold, Sheila Pat. You'll have to stay in bed."

"I won't! I want to go out and get cool. I'll go and have my cold bath now."

But very soon she was shivering again.

Miss Kezia sent for Dr. Everton. Sheila Pat was pronounced an invalid, the fire was lit, and the restless little Atom condemned to bed.

Dr. Everton looked grave; he murmured the dread words—rheumatic fever—but hoped it might be merely a heavy, influenza cold. He told them to be very careful.

It seemed a long, long day. Sheila Pat, realising she was to be an invalid, used all her sturdy powers to be a brave one. She was very hot and feverish; her poor little head ached, and she ached all over her body.

"Nell," she said once, "I can't be very little, after all, because there's such a heap of room for the aches! I feel most as big as the giant Mahon MacMahon. Nell, I wonder if he ever caught cold?"

But there was something that worried the Atom and tormented her far more than the worst of the aches did, and that was a bewildering, disconcerting longing to cry that had assailed her. Over and over again the tears got as far as her eyes, and had to be hidden away in the pillow. Once one ran down her cheek, and they caught her breath in her throat and made it ache with a worse ache than that in her legs. She lay tossing and turning, her brilliant eyes full of a desperation that hurt the others to see. Every other minute she was sitting up, her pig-tail sticking out, breathing hard.

"Mayn't I get up, just for a *minute*? May I just put my legs over the edge, then? Nell, I—I'm just tired of bein' in bed!" The poor little voice shook despairingly.

"Atom, *darling*!"

"I will be good, Nell." Down she lay again. "Am I a very tiresome invalid?"

"You're a jewel, sweetheart, only you must try to lie quiet."

"Yes, Nell."

Pause.

"When will Denis come, Nell?"

"Directly he gets home from the bank."

"Will it be *very* long now?"

"No, dear, not very."

"How long, Nell?"

"An hour and a half," unwillingly.

Sheila Pat hid weak tears in the pillow.

"Nell."

"Yes, asthore?"

"P'raps those people who throwed theirselves off the monnyment thought they could *fly*. Do you think they did, Nell?"

"Very likely. Try not to think about them, Atom."

"I—I can't help it, Nell. Do you think God would make the ground soft so's it wouldn't hurt *very* much?"

"Yes, dear."

"Up again?"

"I—I'm 'fraid I'll burn all up, Nell!"

She took the hot little hands into hers. Sheila Pat rested her head wearily against her arm.

"Is Denis comin' now, Nell?"

"In an hour, now, sweetheart."

"I'm so thirsty, Nell."

Nell fetched the toast water.

"I don't want that! I want real water. Mayn't I have just *one* drink?"

"Try this, dear. You mustn't have any more plain water."

She drank a little.

"Have you ever been up three hundred and forty-five steps, Nell? It does make your legs ache, but I wouldn't have minded that—if— There was only smoke and houses, Nell—"

She dropped back on to her pillow and buried her head in it.

"Some day you'll see it,"—Nell's voice shook a little—"see the greenness of it—the—"

"I shouldn't wonder if I'm dead before then," the Atom told her pillow with heartsick pessimism.

"Oh, Sheila Pat! That's not like you. You've had colds before, and been so brave!"

"They were different colds." The pillow was dented deep as she burrowed her head feverishly in her puzzlement. "I feel quite diffrent. I think I've got a cold *inside* as well as *outside* this time, Nell."

Nell looked at the dark little head in the pillow, and her eyes filled with tears.

Sheila Pat started kicking.

"My legs ache so, Nell! I can't keep them still."

"Let me rub them."

"Where's Molly?"

"I sent her away to keep you quiet. Do you want her?"

She shook her head.

"Isn't Denis comin' yet?"

"Very soon now, dear. Does rubbing make them a little better?"

"Yes, thank you, but I—I'm so hot, Nell! I feel as if it's never rained for years and years! Please may I have my Pearl?"

Nell fetched him. He squeaked angrily and protestingly.

"I don't want him, thank you. S'pose I gave him my cold? Will you put him back in his cage, please?"

Nell took him away, came back, and tucked her in afresh.

"Now try to sleep, sweetheart."

"I don't b'lieve I'll ever go to sleep again. I feel most as if they've burnt eye-holes all round my head."

She heard him coming. She knelt upon the bed quivering and shaking with sick eagerness.

"Well, poor little invalid!" His big arms went round her. "Wasn't it a little goose to go and catch cold? And the people worrying over you! Pennington sent his compliments, and Lancaster his love. Has she been a good Atom, Nell?"

"I—I'm very worryin'. I'm not very brave," she confided to his shoulder.

"Yes, she is, but she can't go to sleep."

"Denis, might I get up—just for one minute?"

"On to my knee. Come along. Plenty of blankets."

"I do b'lieve I'll scorch you." Eagerly she snuggled into his arms.

"When I smell burning, I'll put you back into your bed. Head ache, old girl?"

"Yes. I s'pose it couldn't grow any bigger in one could it? It *feels* so big and heavy."

"That's because it's full of all the sleep you ought to have had."

When he was going, she stopped him:—

"Denis, there aren't *many* people who—who have throwed theirselves off the monnyment, are there?"

"Bless you, no! Only one or two poor lunatics who didn't know what they were doing!"

"Perhaps it wouldn't hurt a lunytic quite so much?"

"Not it! You see, the poor things wouldn't be feeling the same as ordinary people—they'd all be dulled and heavy. Don't think of them, there's a good old Atom!"

"Denis, will you come back before you go to the bank again?"

"Why, yes, asthore! I won't be long over lunch."

The long, weary day dragged slowly on. Sheila Pat set all her hardy will to work, and succeeded in silencing her tongue. But Nell, looking at the restless little head tossing, turning, burrowing into the pillows; at the great heavy, weary eyes; wished her will were not so strong. She was sure it would be better for the Atom to give way and cry her cry out. The puzzled look that she met again and again in her eyes, the seeking, despairing expression, wrung her heart. She knew that the poor Atom could not understand; that she was at war with Providence in a vague, bewildered way, and that she was heartsick for her country.

Nell refused to leave her; but at last, in the afternoon, Miss Kezia, with strong common sense, put matters before her, and Nell went for a little walk with Molly. Miss Kezia betook herself and her knitting to the Atom's room. The Atom was lying with all the bedclothes off and trailing on the floor. Miss Kezia put them on again in silence. Sudden wicked feverish battle leapt to the Atom's eyes. Directly Miss Kezia had sat down she kicked them off again. Miss Kezia rose and rearranged them. When this had taken place four times, Sheila Pat lay exhausted and breathing hard, but in her eyes there still lurked battle.

"Please will you fetch my Pearl?" She watched triumphantly. "If you don't, I'll go and fetch him myself."

Miss Kezia hesitated.

"I will!" the Atom said firmly.

"I'll bring him up in his cage." Miss Kezia rose.

The triumph fell away from the flushed, restless face.

"I don't want him, thank you. I'm afraid of givin' him my cold."

"Very well," patiently.

Sheila Pat watched her a minute.

"May I have some toast water, please?"

Pause.

"I've dropped my handkerchief out of bed, Aunt Kezia."

Pause.

"Please will you readrange my pillow?"

Pause.

"May I have some more water, please, Aunt Kezia?"

Then Sheila Pat chuckled hysterically at the idea of her being able to make her aunt trot about just as she wished. But the amusement palled; listless curiosity made her ask, "Why don't you tell me to be quiet, Aunt Kezia?"

Miss Kezia looked at her over her knitting.

"You are feverish, and consequently restless. I conclude you would be as quiet as you could."

"No, I wasn't! I was doin' it to worry you."

Miss Kezia went on with her knitting.

"Are you cross, Aunt Kezia?"

"No, my dear, but I should be very glad if you could sleep a little."

"I'll try," said Sheila Pat, touched. She screwed her hot eyelids up with earnest purpose.

"Aunt Kezia, did *you* know some people want to kill theirselves?"

Miss Kezia looked across at the small face peering at her, excited, shrinking.

"Only a very few. It's not a nice subject for you to think about, Sheila."

"They threw theirselves down off the monnyment—right down—"

"Not now. There is a—"

"I know. It's only poor people who are mad, isn't it?"

Miss Kezia hesitated.

Sheila Pat was sitting up; her eyes were terrified, wretched.

"Yes, my dear; they don't know what they are doing," Miss Kezia said gently. "Lie down."

The room began to grow dim. Miss Kezia knitted on in the dusk, hoping the Atom would fall asleep. Suddenly her voice, shrill, impish, rang out:—

"'The ould dame sat in a stiff'-backed chair,
Click-clack, click-clack, click-clack, click!
Sure she knitted of stockin's sixteen pair
Click-clack, click!

Her face was long and her temper short
Piff-pouff, piff-pouff, piff-pouff, piff!
Sure she worked in bad words more than she ought
Piff-pouff, piff!'"

A chuckle.

"Are you cross, Aunt Kezia?"

"No."

"*Why* aren't you? Don't you think I asserve a cold?"

"You were naughty and foolish, and you are paying for it, but—" after a glance at the figure sitting up in the dusk, "I am sorry for you."

"I don't *want* you to be sorry for me!"

Sheila Pat flung herself back.

"'Her mouth was wide and her tongue was sharp'—

Oh, go away! Go away! *Quick*—"

Miss Kezia, to her own amazement, found herself obeying the strenuous voice, the note of real agony. As she hesitated outside the door she heard a sudden storm of sobs—a breathless, wild weeping, a smothered wail of woe. And she walked softly away, her face flushed, as if she had been guilty of some meanness. She stood inside her room awhile, then went back. She paused outside the door; all was silent. She turned the handle clumsily and went in. Sheila Pat lay in her bed, quiet and still; but Miss Kezia knew she was not asleep.

"I've fetched my red wool for the border," she said, and she told the falsehood—a thing abhorred of her rigid conscientiousness—with a ringing cheerfulness.

Nell came in presently with a bowl of bread and milk. The Atom sat up listlessly.

"Aunt Kezia has been very patient," she said gravely. "Nell, *please* need I have any?" She leant her head against Nell's arm, and her fingers squeezed it lovingly.

"Just a little, sweet. Has she slept at all, Aunt Kezia?

"No. Perhaps she will after her bread and milk."

But she didn't. And as the evening wore on her temperature rose; her little burning face grew more desperate. She began to talk, feverishly, excitedly. Dr. Everton called again. He gave a few directions, and urged them to keep her mind as quiet as possible.

"Her temperature is very high. She hardly knows what she is saying. I believe she has something on her mind. I will call early to-morrow morning. No talk, please; she *must* be kept quiet."

"Nell, people never want to kill theirselves in Ireland, do they? There's not a bad old monnyment

there. It had three hundred million steps. The man said so. It was *very* high, you see, and I was glad, because I thought I'd be able to see over all the roofs, and I thought I'd see the sea and a blue mist and Ireland shinin' out—all green—oh, I want to go home, Nell! I want to go home!" She broke out into pitiful crying, too bad now to fight any longer.

"You shall soon—you shall soon—" Nell's arms were round her; her voice choked.

"I want to go now! S'pose I'm dead before mother and dad come back?—All green—and cool—I'm all scorchin', but I wouldn't be there—Oh, I want to go home! I want just to *look* at it!—I'll come back quite quick—I b'lieve I'll *die* if I don't go!—Molly O'Rourke died, because she went to America. I'll die, too—I'm all *sick* inside—" She shook all over with sobs; her voice rose to a wail of utter woe. "I *must* see it—all green—and the colt—oh, he can go—he'll be a fine horse, miss, entirely—look at the legs of him already!—Where's the sugar, then, you bad boy? *He* knows!—All dirt and smoke and houses—and houses—and a great big monnyment where people kill theirselves. Nell, where are you? *Nell*—I b'lieve you're throwin' yourself off the monnyment—"

She quieted down a little; her body shook with deep, silent sobs. She began whispering to herself.

"If I could just see you—just for one minute—just walk 'long on the grass—by the stream—and up the Kilsparran hill—and go and see Biddy—with the turf smokin' in my eyes—and smell it—" Then she broke out crying again.

"I want to go home! I want to go home!"

Nell tried to soothe her. She was trembling herself; but the Atom's little body was torn and shaken with her awful weeping. She clung to Nell, crying out pitifully that she must go home—she must go home.

"I can't bear it any longer—I'm stiflin'—*please*—just to let me *feel* it—I'll come back—so good—oh, *please*—I must go home! Oh, I want to go home! Where's Denis? I want Denis—"

"I'll go and fetch him, dear. Will you wait?"

She went out on to the landing. He was walking up and down: he turned quickly.

She shut the door quietly, and went to meet him. Her face was quite white; when she spoke, her voice shook.

"She wants you. She—she's crying for home—" Her lips quivered so that she could not go on. "I can't quiet her. She's—oh, I can't stand it, Denis!" She broke into sudden passionate tears.

"Don't cry, old girl. I'll see if I can quiet her."

He went into the room. Sheila Pat was crouched up on her bed, moaning: "I want to go home! I want to go home!"

She lifted her head, and her heavy eyes leapt to his with a wild gleam of hope. She stretched out her arms; she was shaking all over.

"Denis—oh, Denis—I want to go home!"

He put his arms round her.

"Try to be good, Atom—try to be quiet, and go to sleep." His face worked; he bit his lip. "You'll go—some day," he said huskily.

"Let me go now—-I'll be so good—I won't stay a minute—if I can see it—just *feel* it—and smell it—oh, Denis—Denis—I want to go home!"

"You shall go, Atom."

There was a sudden breathless lull. She gave a little shiver.

"I—I didn't quite hear—" she whispered hoarsely.

He glanced, his blue eyes desperate, across at Nell, then down at the wild, incredulous little face upturned to his. His eyes cleared, grew deeply tender.

"I said that you shall go." His voice was clear, firm. "Directly your cold has gone I will take you across for a few days if you still want to go."

She dropped suddenly forward against his chest.

"Please hold me." Her faint little whisper told of sudden ineffable peace.

They wrapped her in blankets, and he took her into his arms and walked up and down the room with her. She pulled her arm out of the coverings and stroked his cheek with a gesture almost of adoration.

"I don't think," a sudden passionate whisper came from her, "God *can* be quite so nice as you!"

Up and down he went.

"Try to go to sleep, Atom."

"Yes, Denis."

Presently she started trembling.

"Denis?"

"Yes, acushla."

"Have—have I been asleep?"

"No."

"—I didn't *dream* that you—you said—"

"I said that when your cold is better, I will take you home for a few days."

She gave a little wriggle and a snuggle of utter joy.

"I was 'fraid I'd dreamt it."

"Denis, *would* you mind keep sayin' it every now and then?"

Nell sat by the fire and watched him tramp the room. Once Molly peeped round the door, but was frowned away. Once he tried to lay her down, but she objected with drowsy terror.

"*Hold*, me, Denis! Say it again!"

Presently.

"Denis, if we took all the poor mad people to Ireland, wouldn't they get better, and not want to kill theirselves any more?—Please just say it again."

"Where's Nell? I want to say good night to her."

Nell came and kissed her softly.

"Poor Nell—may she come, too, Denis?—All green—and cool—I—I can most smell it already—I like lying my cheek on the grass—like—this—it's so—cool—it smells—all—wet—Please—say it—again."

Up and down the room he went, while she slept in his arms. Nell signed to him to put her down, but he glanced down at the small white face in the blankets, and shook his head.

But at last he put her into her bed, and covered her up. For a minute they stood waiting, but Sheila Pat lay still, her breathing soft and regular.

Denis turned to Nell; he put his hand on her shoulder, marched her out of the room, and into the Stronghold.

Molly was there, frightened and sleepy.

"She's all right now. Fast asleep. Go to bed, old girl."

"It's been such a horrid day—is she really better?"

"Yes. I hope she'll be all right to-morrow. Scoot."

Molly went yawning out of the room.

They stood a minute, looking into the fire. Then Nell said:—

"Denis, don't you think—it will make it worse—for her—after?"

He answered without any hesitation:—

"There wasn't any worse then."

She dropped tiredly into a chair.

"No," she said.

He seized the poker, and began hammering at a lump of coal.

"I suppose the money—" she worried.

"Can't be helped! Nell, I *couldn't* do anything else! I—I couldn't stand it!"

They were silent a little while. Presently he said:—

"I don't believe she'll go. If I know the Atom when she's calm and all right, she'll stick to her guns. If she doesn't—if she still wants to go—I take her. The coming back—having it all over again—will be awful for her, but there was nothing else to do."

"No," she agreed.

CHAPTER XXX

"Good morning, Atom."

Nell bent caressingly over the bed, and laid her hand lightly on a cool little brow.

"Good mornin', Nell."

"You're better, asthore, you're better." There was a gay lilt to her voice that told her relief, her joy, more plainly than her words.

"Yes," the Atom said. "Will I get up now, Nell?"

"Oh, no, dear, you must wait till Dr. Everton has been. Do you ache anywhere now?"

"Only a little."

Nell looked down into the sombre eyes, then turned away.

Sheila Pat lay stiff and still, her small face frowning a little, solemn, mournful.

When Denis came cheerily in, she looked at him quickly, nervously, and her face flushed a little.

"Well, invalidish Atom, you'll soon be up and worrying me again, won't you?"

"Good mornin', Denis."

"Pardon. Good morning. Aren't you going to give me a kiss?"

She turned her face to his languidly. He looked at Nell and raised his eyebrows. Then he sat down on the bed and talked.

Sheila Pat lay very quiet and answered monosyllabically.

"You're very unkind to me, Atom, you know."

She gave him another odd little glance, and her face grew scarlet.

"I—I'm thinkin'," she stammered. "—I'm not unkind—"

"Of course you're not! I was joking. I must be off now. Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

When he had gone, she lifted her head.

"Nell, when is Dr. Everton comin'?"

"Any moment."

"Nell—"

"Yes, dear?"

"I—I wish to speak to him—alone, please."

For a moment Nell looked startled.

"There isn't anything—you don't mean there's some pain you haven't told us of?"

"No. I'm quite well now."

"Very well. You shall, dear."

"Thank you."

Molly tiptoed into the room, knocked a photograph off the mantle shelf, bade the Atom a loudly whispered good morning, stood on one leg, then on the other, and tiptoed out again.

"Nell, isn't Dr. Everton here yet?"

"He will be presently, Atom."

"Will he come straight up to me?"

"Oh, yes."

"Are you *sure*? Perhaps he's talkin' to Aunt Kezia now?"

"I'll go and see," soothingly.

In a few minutes he came. Miss Kezia came upstairs with him, but at Nell's request she followed her presently from the room, and left the doctor and the Atom alone.

"Dr. Everton!"

"Yes, my dear?"

Pause.

He looked down at her surprised. Sheila Pat was breathing hard; her eyes were wildly eager.

"Something is troubling you," he said gently. "Tell me what it is!"

But she shrank back nervously into the bed.

"You see—I—"

"Well?" He felt the fluttering pulse again. "Tell me, little one."

"Was I—" Pause; then, with a burst, "Was I 'lirious last night?"

"Now, now, you mustn't get nervous—"

Her face stopped him. He rubbed his chin and studied her perplexedly. He was trying to discover what it was that she wanted.

"Was I?" She sat up, clung to the bed knob with one hand. "I—I *thought* I was!"

The expressive voice held a note of despairing doubt in the last words that helped him.

"Well, you were very feverish and," he was feeling his way, "you certainly didn't quite know what you were saying—um! Yes, you *were* delirious!" he finished with sudden heartiness. There was no doubting now what it was she wanted. At his words she sank down on to the pillow with a sort of little croon of relief.

"When a person's 'lirious she might say—say *very* foolish things—she might—*ask* for things—she'd be 'shamed to if she *knew*—"

He was sure of his way now. He pulled his chair closer, and his clever face softened.

"I should think so, indeed. Why, now, there was a young lady I was attending,—she was quite grown-up, too,—and when she is well she's a very sensible sort of girl, but she was delirious, and what do you think she kept crying out for? Why, an elephant—a real, live elephant!"

Sheila Pat laughed.

He took her hand into his.

"Oh, yes, people say and do very queer things when they are delirious. I had a big boy once who wanted a doll, and another who wanted to start for Australia." He paused as he felt the hand in his give a little jerk.

"Do persons—often want to—to go somewhere when they're 'lirious?"

"Very often. It's one of the commonest wants, little one."

Sheila Pat was smiling; she lay looking up at him, her face pale, tired, but very peaceful.

"You're going to be a good little girl, and keep very quiet, and take all your medicine—"

"I—I'm just goin' to be as good as—as snow-drops."

"Why snowdrops?"

She drew her brows together in thought. "I don't know: snowdrops are just good through and through."

He smiled.

"I do think you're such a nice doctor," Sheila Pat said earnestly.

When Nell crept in a few minutes later, she was fast asleep. When she woke, she took her medicine without a murmur.

"Is Denis home, Nell?"

"I think he's just come in. Yes, here he is."

He entered with a beautiful bunch of parma violets.

"With Lancaster's compliments. Aren't you proud, Atom?"

"They are very beautiful," but her eye was absent.

Nell took them and buried her nose in them.

"Denis, Dr. Everton says I was 'lirious last night."

"Poor old Atom."

"And—and he says when a person's 'lirious, they want elephants and Australia and—and to go to places—"

There was a pause.

The Atom turned her face a little away on the pillow.

"I remember—some—I—I didn't know what I was sayin', Denis—I—I wouldn't—have—said—it if—"

"Of course you wouldn't. We know that. But what I said holds good, Atom. If you want me to take you home for a few days, I will!"

There was silence in the room. Sheila Pat had turned her face to the pillow and buried it deep. Nell stood, the violets pressed against her cheek, waiting.

"No—thank you." It came with a little catch between the two first words, but firm, decided.

Denis bent his head suddenly, and whispered in her ear. She turned, stretched up her arms, and held him tight. Tears were running quietly down her face and dropping on to her nightgown, but Nell caught an ecstatically proud note in the whispered query, "Do you—really-*truly*—think I'm all that?"

When he had gone, she turned to Nell.

"Am I very heavy, Nell?"

Nell felt suddenly what a bit of a baby Sheila Pat was: she stroked her cheek gently.

"You weigh about as much as a good-sized robin. Why?"

"I do feel," wistfully, "I'd like to sit on your lap a little while!"

"Oh, petsums, come along."

She fell asleep almost directly.

That evening, wrapped in blankets, sitting in a large arm-chair, the Atom received three visitors.

Stewart came first. He was very subdued, shy of this white-faced Atom in the blankets.

He sat down and stared at her.

"You're to intertain me," she told him peremptorily.

Stewart, just about to speak, at this awful mandate flushed and collapsed.

Sheila Pat watched him relentlessly.

"Sure you English *are* queer! Mum! Mum! Mum!"

"Do you feel better?" he burst out.

"You know I do, else I wouldn't be receivin' visitors."

Silence.

"You're not intertainin' me," warned the Atom.

"I don't know how! I've never done it!"

"I think you're a very silly little boy, and you're not intertainin' me at all! You'd better go, I think."

He got as far as the door.

"Tommy, come back!"

He stood and faced her, his thin little body stretched to its utmost limit.

"I'm not a *little* boy!"

"Tommy, how's Peter?"

He came back eagerly.

"I say, what d'you think he swallowed yesterday?"

Ted Lancaster came next.

"Mayn't I pull your pig-tail?" he asked gently.

"'Tisn't any manners you English have got at all!" Sheila Pat retorted.

"Ah, that's all right. 'Pon my word, when I came in you looked so good, I was afraid I'd never be allowed to be rude to you again. May I hide that medicine bottle? I do hate medicine bottles. They carry me back to a sick room of my own."

She asked interestedly, "Were you 'lirious?"

"Rather!"

She sat forward, her face alight with eagerness

"Did you want a elephant and to go to Australia?"

"I don't know about the elephant. But I know I wanted to go to Australia, or anywhere else, so long as medicine bottles and beef-tea and thermometers didn't grow there."

She hesitated, her eyes never leaving his face.

"But—but did you—did you say things—"

He smiled.

"Yes, I said things, Sheila Pat!"

"Awful things? Things you'd never, *never* say when you were well?"

"I hope I shouldn't!"

A tired little frown creased her forehead.

"Did you—did you *ask* for things?"

"Oh, yes, heaps of 'em! I nearly wept because they wouldn't give me my organ into bed with me. And foot-balls—I was always begging for foot-balls. And one night I insisted on its being imperative that I should start off for Paris—"

Eagerly she interrupted, "Did you worry and *worry*?"

"They had to hold me down."

She lay back in the pillows; she gave a little excited laugh.

"Aren't persons *queer* when they're 'lirious?"

"Sheila Pat, catch hold!"

He tilted a brown-paper parcel into her lap.

"It's a book about horses, and there're plenty of photographs in it, so will you forgive its not being Irish? And remember that I hate being thanked, Sheila Pat. If you thank me for it, I'll kiss you. So now you know."

She was turning the pages with trembling fingers. He watched the expressive face as she bent over the beautiful photographs.

"Nell," Denis poked his head round the door, "may that conceited Atom receive another visitor? Mr. Yovil wants to see her."

"Yes, with great pleasure!" shrilled out Sheila Pat, excitedly.

She turned to Ted; she lifted up her face.

"I love it! I *love* it!"

"You're thanking me!"

He bent and kissed her.

"I'm jealous," Mark Yovil said sadly, as he entered the room. "He isn't half so nice as I am, Sheila Pat! You ask my mother. She's down in Devonshire, but we could send her a wire. And you've never been his Social Prompter, have you? Please send him away, Sheila Pat!"

"I will, anyway," Nell laughed.

Mark Yovil only stayed a few minutes. He looked at the Atom's excited face, her bright eyes,

and talked quietly to Nell. Then he went.

For a quarter of an hour Sheila Pat studied her precious book.

Then Sarah appeared with a petition from Herr Schmidt for just a "beep at the little Miss Sheila."

He came in, laboriously tiptoeing, beaming.

"Ze poor little invalid! You are better, hein?"

Sheila Pat was very tired.

"I'm quite well, thank you," she responded, her manner exceedingly grown-up.

"There's only one thing about her that troubles us, Herr Schmidt," laughed Nell. "She's so good! She takes her medicine without a grimace! She's so meek and good I'm quite uneasy."

Sheila Pat fidgeted restlessly. She explained earnestly. "I'm not *really* good! I'm doin' it for—for a reason of my own."

Herr Schmidt seemed to think that exquisitely funny. He chuckled like a great fat baby.

"Ze funny little child!" he chuckled, "ze very funny little child."

He took off his spectacles, rubbed them with a gigantic handkerchief, and said, "Ach, I forget!" He fumbled in his coat-tail pocket; he dragged forth a limp and very much sat upon brown-paper parcel. He eyed it proudly.

"Ach, zat is why I zink her so nice for a bed! See, I sit on her, but it does not matter!"

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Denis in Nell's ear.

Herr Schmidt handed the parcel to Sheila Pat. He stood watching, beaming at her over his spectacles. Sheila Pat pulled off the paper; she gave a little gasp. There was a tense silence.

The present was a baby doll—a rag baby doll.

Nell quavered desperately, "What a fine colour it has!" And she averted her eyes hastily from the horrible, crimson-dabbed cheeks.

"You like her, little one?" Herr Schmidt's tone was anxious.

"Thank you," said Sheila Pat, in a subdued little voice. She stared fixedly into the fire, her head averted from the Thing in her lap.

"Ach, I zink berhaps she does not like it?" Herr Schmidt whispered loudly to Nell. "And I zink it so sweet!"

"She is tired. She has had too many visitors. It was so awfully kind of you to bring it for her, Herr Schmidt. I want her to go to sleep now."

Sweetly Nell sped his departure. When he had gone, Sheila Pat, still with averted head, dropped her knee till the doll slid to the floor. She looked up at Nell, outraged dignity in every feature.

"Please take the—carrion thing—away!"

And to Kate Kearney she presently whispered:—

"Oh, K.K., he's never forgotten! He thinks I'm a baby! And it's all that petticoat! I knew it!"

CHAPTER XXXI

These came a morning when Miss Kezia breakfasted in angry state, alone. At eight o'clock she sat down, as usual, to the table. With down-drawn lip she filled the five cups with coffee, then started on her porridge. Every now and then her eye glanced at the four bowls of porridge with their rapidly lessening issue of steam. From overhead there came, at intervals, the banging of a door, the rush of footsteps from one room to another, a burst of laughter now and then. Miss Kezia went on with her breakfast. Once Sarah knocked timidly, and, with a scared face, dared the whispered suggestion that she should take the porridge "to keep it hot." Her courage failed before ever Miss Kezia's grim lips had begun to frame an answer, and she fled back to the refuge of the kitchen.

From above came Denis's voice, jubilant, a musical shout of joy.

> "'Miss Judy O'Connor, she lived forninst me
> And tinder words to her I wrote—'

"I say, Nell, did I leave my towels in your room?"

Down came Miss Kezia's upper lip.

From above:—

"A stud is an animate article, possessing the human attributes of legs and devilment—got him, by Jove! Now thin ye young devil, is it hidin' from me, indeed! I'll be teachin' ye a lesson—"

"Denis, *have* you seen my hair-ribbon?"

"Oh," this was Nell's voice, "I wish I had a tail like a kitten, to run round and round after!"

Miss Kezia's expression grew painfully long-suffering.

"If you were havin' a tail in this London, there wouldn't be room to run round after it!" Scorn vibrated in this voice.

A pause.

Thud—thud—patter— Then, with a startling suddenness, a wild Irish whoop.

Miss Kezia jumped badly, and the angry, shamed colour flooded her cheeks. She rose—a quick succession of whoops sounded nearer and nearer—she went out into the hall. Denis was coming downstairs, two at a time, and performing an Irish jig at the same moment. The others were behind him.

"May I request that you cease making those horrible noises? I do not want the police here, thinking murder is being committed."

Unfortunately this struck their perverse minds as being intensely funny.

Miss Kezia went back to the dining room, and they followed her to cold coffee and congealed porridge. But coffee as cold as the ice round the North pole, and porridge as congealed as lead, were powerless, as Miss Kezia's disapproval was powerless, to quench the hilarity in the atmosphere that morning.

"May I inquire why you have chosen to be three-quarters of an hour late this morning?"

Heads were lifted from bowls of congealed porridge; laughter rippled round the table.

"'Twasn't we chose—it was the letters," Nell said, and her voice was almost a song, so gay was the lilt of it.

Denis said blandly, "Put the blame on the postman, and the cap will fit him like a glove."

Nell volunteered sweetly:—

"They're letters from Melbourne, Aunt Kezia! Mother is quite well and strong—quite brown and well and strong!"

"I am glad to hear it, but surely you could have read them after breakfast."

The gaiety was quenched momentarily by the sheer force of the surprise that invaded them. Silence reigned, while their thoughts worked rapidly over the waiting of the last months—the impatient suspense of the last days, as the time drew near the date on which they had calculated they could get their first Australian mail. Nell eyed Miss Kezia with a hint of soberness in her face.

Tucking Denis into his coat a little later, she said, "I pity her."

"Who? Our austere relative?"

She nodded; then tapped her brow and her left side suggestively.

"There must be something wanting somewhere."

"A good deal," laughed he, amused.

On the door-step he paused, turned, and made a comical grimace.

"Figures on a day like this! Don't start pitying me, too, or I'll never go!"

He was out of the gate.

At lunch time he observed to Nell:—

"Suppose I get the sack?"

"I could almost wish it, twin."

He laughed.

"Never did man be burdened with such a degenerate twin! Well, old Tellbridge wants to speak to me this afternoon! In the manager's room, Nell!"

"A rise!" she ejaculated.

"Or a fall! I was showing the chaps how to play handball. We'd cleared the room a bit. Tellbridge came in. Lord, he did swell! I thought it was a good thing we'd cleared the room. He asked a few questions—with bland edges to them—and he wants to see me at half-past two in his room."

"Oh, Denis, suppose—"

"A wrinkled brow to-day, Nell!" he laughed. "I refuse to suppose," he observed gaily. "Even in my very innermost recesses, I don't suppose. I'm horribly hungry. Let's see, there's no mutton from yesterday to be eaten up, is there?"

She flung her arms wide.

"My innermost recesses are not supposing now!"

When he came back that afternoon he brought Ted Lancaster, and both were laden with parcels.

"Celebration parcels, Nell!"

Ted said, "I say," and wrung her hand hard.

"Denis! Well?"

"What? Oh, my interview with old Pom-Pom. My dear, I made a plain statement of the facts of the case, and he actually smiled! Here endeth the—er—*third* interview!"

Molly came in and poked about amongst the parcels.

"I do wish Aunt Kezia were going out to-night."

Denis pretended to feel faint.

"*You*, Molly? You, the patent softener of a relative's hard heart?"

Molly blushed and glanced abashed at Ted's amused face.

"Well, for her own sake, anyway," she protested, and dropped her eyes with a giggle over her hypocrisy.

"Ted," Nell said, "here's a penny."

"Thanks awfully."

He took it and dropped it into his pocket.

"It may come in useful some day. One never knows."

"Well?" she said.

"Well what?"

"You don't think I'd give you a penny for nothing! It's for your thoughts."

He gave her a quick little glance.

"Oh, my thoughts! And I hoped it was pure disinterested benevolence!"

"Tell me your thoughts! I'm sure you were thinking of something nice for us—"

He interrupted flurriedly.

"Something nice? I—I— What made you think that? I wasn't! I really—"

"You looked sort of kind," she said, laughing.

"Well, I wasn't!"

"Give me back my penny!" He handed it back with an absent-minded air.

Protests were sent and brought up to the Stronghold that evening. An abashed and blushing Sarah brought them, and an austere and angry Miss Kezia sent them.

Sheila Pat marched downstairs, and knocked at Herr Schmidt's door.

"Kom in!"

Sheila Pat went in. Her eyes were very bright, her pig-tail was very crooked.

"Herr Schmidt," she said, "please will you walk out with Aunt Kezia?"

Herr Schmidt's big face grew redder than its usual red wont. It chanced that he understood the meaning of "walking out."

"Ach!" he ejaculated.

Sheila Pat eyed him severely.

"Sarah says if you're walking out with a young man you must always go when he asks you to," she explained. Her voice rose, "Oh, Herr Schmidt, you could *always* ask Aunt Kezia when we want to get rid of her, and," impishly she glowed, "she could never say no!"

"I'm sorry—" he began.

She urged strenuously. "She's very worthy! She gives all her old clothes to charity. And Sarah says she's very just, and she'd make your wages go a very long way. Sarah says that's a great thing."

He began to chuckle, but checked it in his distress at having to disappoint her. She came down at last to a humble, "Well, will you please just take her for a walk *now*?"

She returned, chastened and severe, to the Stronghold. A visit a few minutes later, from Miss Kezia herself, lent an added intensity to the small figure that flung itself desperately at Mr. Mark Yovil, who called to leave some book for Denis.

"Take her away! Walk out with her! She's a wet counterpane on us!"

Mark Yovil, known for his obstinacy, his firm will, was weak where this Atom was concerned.

"I'm going to a lecture," he declared hesitatingly.

"Take her!"

"But, my dear, it's nothing that would interest her. She would not come—"

"Oh, *please*! 'Magine us—up there—all quiet and still like dead mice! And our letter-day! It—it's really very sad!"

He looked down into her upturned face, into the wild entreaty of her great eyes.

Miss Kezia came into the hall and greeted him, surprised.

He turned to her, and asked her if she would be so very kind—his sister had lost her cook quite suddenly—not very experienced—advice—

Miss Kezia presently had gone upstairs to don her bonnet, her one weakness, love of giving advice, enveloping her in a cloud of complacency.

"Now, small Sheila Pat, am I not a true friend? But, mark this, I have told no falsehoods." He took her on his knee. "My sister has lost her cook. She is inexperienced. She does want advice," he twinkled there; "I don't know that it's the advice of your estimable aunt that she particularly requires, but we'll hope so. Your aunt once whacked my sister's baby on the back when it had swallowed a spoon or fork or knife or something of the kind. Perhaps it was the soup-tureen. Well, now, I shall have to leave your aunt in one room while I explain to my sister. You'll have to love me for ever for this, Sheila Pat."

A little later, and noise echoed with joyful abandon through the house.

When Ted bade them good night, he said hesitatingly:—

"I say, Nell—er—"

"Say on!" she encouraged him.

"You don't think—I mean—well, you won't get thinking—er—will you?"

"Oh, Ted, why? Have you noticed any grey hairs yet?" She put up her hands to her hair.

He smiled.

"I mean—you know—"

"By Jove, if she does know, they didn't divide the supply of brains between us equally," Denis observed.

"I only mean that I don't want you to—to get thinking that—you know you said before that I looked as if I were thinking of something nice for you—well, you won't think I was, will you?"

"Oh, indeed, I will now! Denis, can't you see there's a secret somewhere? Oh, how lovely! Ted, I do love secrets. Is it something *very* nice?"

He looked into her teasing face with an expression of almost ludicrous dismay.

"I—wish you wouldn't!" he muttered so gravely that she stopped laughing.

"Well, I won't!" she said. "I'm quite sure there's nothing nice going to happen anywhere or any time, and it'll be all the more a surprise, won't it? Oh, Ted, I didn't mean it," she added remorsefully. "It was all fun, all smoke—"

"'There's no smoke without a fire,'" Denis told the ceiling.

"Mine was pipe smoke," she rejoined.

Ted still looked worried. His good nights were absent. When he had gone, Nell observed thoughtfully:—

"I wonder what it is! Oh, I hope we won't have to wait long!"

CHAPTER XXXII

Down the stairs flew Nell, out into the street, up to a banana barrow, a boy, and a puppy.

"Could you lend him to me for a while?"

The boy eyed her suspiciously. There was not much ground for suspicion, since it was hardly likely she could be contemplating theft; the puppy, though fascinating, was obviously incapable of proclaiming what breed he was intended by nature to represent. Moreover Nell, in a long pinafore and hatless, could scarcely run away with him. It was merely from force of habit that the boy eyed her suspiciously. The puppy was more discerning. He welcomed her as a long and ardently looked for friend; he turned ecstatic somersaults over her feet; then stood up, and tore at her pinafore with wild, soft little paws. She picked him up.

"May I have him? I want to paint him."

The owner of the bananas, for whom the boy and the puppy were waiting, reappeared. He was quite a gallant gentleman, and assured Nell he would be pleased to let her have the puppy for "a *h*our, miss," he said with a good deal of effect. "And in a *h*our I shall be back this way, and will fetch 'im if convenient."

Nell smuggled the puppy into the house and up to the Stronghold beneath her pinafore.

He started the *h*our by persisting in looking upon Kate Kearney as a butt, provided by Providence, for his especial benefit. He thought her a tremendously funny joke and the more K.K. aired her dignity, the funnier he thought her. He rolled over in uncontrollable mirth, kicking up

impertinent little legs right beneath her nose; he turned somersaults over her staid body; he frisked up to her in ridiculous boxing attitudes; he slapped her face, and he jeeringly incited her over and over again to "come on."

But K.K. refused to "come on." She was furiously jealous of the unaristocratic little mongrel who had suddenly invaded her precincts. She took refuge in a hurt dignity; she turned her head away at his approach with an unmistakable suggestion. The puppy was not hurt; he had, together with his dirt and his plebeian origin, a useful thick-skinned philosophy.

K.K. retired to a corner, back to audience, and Nell tried to sketch the puppy. When held by Molly, he howled so pathetically that he procured his release, which was exactly what he meant to do. Thereupon he licked all available hands and waddled back to Kate Kearney. As interludes to his worrying of her, he tugged a great hole into the table-cloth and upset Nell's paint-water; he managed to get a pencil stuck into his mouth, and screamed with terror; he, perhaps, after all, and in spite of his plebeian philosophy, somewhat affected by K.K.'s suggestively averted nose, essayed a bath in her drinking-pan. He upset the pan, and his own feelings; dripping and whimpering at the shock of the water, he ran round the room, and chose a wet oil-painting of Nell's against which to dry himself. The result was bad for the painting, and for the puppy, too. Adorned with patches of green and blue, he waxed pathetic, sat down with a disconcerting suddenness, and put his head on one side.

Nell exclaimed, "I can't give him back like that!" and had resort to turpentine.

All the puppy's instincts arose and defied her. He wriggled and kicked and howled, and in the midst of it Sheila Pat appeared with Jim on her arm, and the information that Aunt Kezia had returned home. The puppy was released. The Atom put Jim down, and ran to him delightedly. But a change had come o'er the puppy. On the floor Jim O'Driscoll sat, lazily picking the shell from a nut. He took no notice of the puppy; his air of complete indifference was positively insulting. The puppy stood for a minute, petrified, then he pranced a little closer, and waited. Jim scratched his left ear and ruminated. The puppy barked. Jim scratched his right ear and ruminated further. The puppy made a nervous dash at him, and fled with his tail between his legs. Jim drew in the foot that the puppy had touched and went on shelling his nut. There was a pause, then the puppy approached within a yard of the blasé little figure on the floor and barked. They tried to stop him, but that puppy refused to be stopped; he had a good deal to say, and he meant to say it. That the object of the rude things he was saying gave not the slightest heed to him merely aggravated his eloquence to a louder pitch.

Molly thrust her head round the door. "Aunt Kezia is coming!"

Nell seized the puppy and poked him into the bottom shelf of the cupboard. Sheila Pat dropped Jim's cage behind the sofa, picked Jim up, poked him into it, tried to fasten the door, and Miss Kezia entered the room. There was a dead silence while she gazed about and took in every detail of disorder down to a dropped match.

"Ow—yow—yow—*yo—o—ow*!"

A long and distressful wail arose from the cupboard.

Now it happened that Kate Kearney had so far foregone her dignity as to approach the cupboard to dab at it with a triumphant and insulting paw.

"There it is again!" Miss Kezia was wrathful, but there was also an anxious glint in her eye. "What is the matter with the dog? Is it ill?"

Nell, fascinatedly watching the putting forth of a stealthy brown arm from beneath the sofa, in the direction of Sheila Pat's shoe buttons, responded with an irrepressible little laugh.

"I don't see anything to laugh at, Eileen! I am afraid you are very foolish and frivolous for your age."

"Ow—yow—yow—yo—o—o—oo—*ow*!"

The final "ow" was a veritable triumph of hideous nerve shattering. Miss Kezia's voice rose angrily: "I believe it is going mad! Or has distemper! I was foolish ever to allow it in my house! I hate dogs! It will have to be sent away if it's ill!"

The brown paw had reached and seized a shoe button. Sheila Pat was kicking frantically. The paw darted back.

"Oh, no—he—she isn't ill, Aunt Kezia—she's quite well—she's been mad—I mean, had distemper, already—oh, I—I think I'm rather m-muddley this morning—"

"I hope you're not hysterical, Eileen! You are really astonishingly foolish! As for the dog—"

K.K. had turned; her head was now facing Miss Kezia. Nell recognised the fact that the next howl could not, even by Miss Kezia, be put down to her. For a moment she thought of hustling her aunt from the room; but the detection of the puppy merely meant anger, punishment, a letter

to Australia. They could face that, and Jim's arm had disappeared. They could not put up with his banishment.

There was a sudden and portentous silence in the cupboard.

Miss Kezia had a few more remarks to make. She made them. Once she deviated from the main theme of noise and general untidiness, lured by a rustle in the cupboard, on to mice. She declared that the kitchen was overrun by mice, and all because they had wantonly bought and let loose three in her house. She was going to buy new traps, as something had evidently gone wrong with the springs of hers. Twice she had found the cheese gone and the mouse, too!

Sheila Pat sat and gazed down thoughtfully at the forefinger of her right hand; a small smile flickered at the corners of her lips. The finger was rough and red. She wondered would it be possible to grease the lock of the kitchen door. It was not the pain she minded so much as the risk attached to the noise the slow turning of a stiff key makes at four or five o'clock in the morning. At the moment of her musing a determined little hand seized again on her shoe; fingers picked at a button. Sheila Pat kicked. Now, as a rule, Jim O'Driscoll was easily cowed—easily induced to retire. A frowning shake of the head had hitherto been sufficient to keep him still, in an attitude of petrified thought, for several minutes at a time. Apparently a backward kick, gentle because Sheila Pat could not, even for his own welfare bring herself to make it otherwise, had lost its power of petrification; anyhow Jim refused to abandon his tenacious hold upon her shoe button. Sheila Pat wriggled her foot out of the shoe; it disappeared immediately. Meanwhile Miss Kezia talked. She had never considered herself, or been considered by others, a talkative woman. When she left the Stronghold, there were worried lines about her face; she moved her lips in an irritated manner. It was irksome to her to be obliged to talk so much; it outraged Nature, and added to the irritation consequent on the O'Briens' misdemeanours. But she considered it her duty to talk, so she did it. And no one was grateful.

Sheila Pat rescued her button from Jim's cheek, and Nell opened the cupboard. The puppy certainly looked very charming. He lay in a nest of oats, biscuits, ink, and torn paper; a long paint-brush stuck rakishly out of the corner of his mouth. It was perhaps his expression that was so particularly charming. He had feasted on biscuits; he had tasted the flavours of oats, ink, and paper. He had had a meal to his taste, and now he was sleepy. He looked up at Nell a little mischievously and palpably with a supreme content with life. He was sleepy, and willing to be petted. That he was adorned still with patches of paint to which he had added smears of ink in no way detracted from his adorableness.

Nell said, "Oh, you bad puppy!"

She picked him up and hugged him.

CHAPTER XXXIII

Nell, carrying Jim O'Driscoll upstairs beneath her pinafore, nearly fell down at the sudden loud rat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat that echoed through the house.

Sarah came running to open the door. They peeped over the balusters; Ted dashed in, up the stairs, and into them.

"You seem to be in a hurry," Denis suggested.

"Er—no—"

He stood silent.

"Police after you, old man? We'll hide you. Get into Jim's cage, and they won't know the difference!"

Nell was looking at Ted.

She said quietly, "What is it, Ted?"

"Oh—coming out? Nice day—"

A snort came from the direction of the Atom's bedroom:

"Only fog so thick that a person can't see an inch in front of her! And whichever way you look, you see nothing but mud and mud! But sure 'tis a nice day for London!"

Nell's eyes had met Ted's; she understood.

"Molly, go and put on your things. I'll get ready in a minute."

She led the way into the Stronghold. She turned and faced him.

"What is it?"

But he had grown suddenly uncomfortable.

"I hope you won't think—er—that I've been meddling," he said, with the slight drawl Nell understood so well now.

"Never!" she said. "Go on."

"Well, you might. O.B. told me about those Rêve d'or shares—" He paused.

Denis nodded.

Nell put her hand out suddenly, and rested it heavily on the table.

"What about them?" she said.

Ted spoke quickly, giving the heart of what he had to say.

"The governor says—'Hold on—don't sell.'"

There was a little pause. Nell's face had gone quite white.

"He—means?" she said.

Ted glanced at her, and away again.

"It may mean nothing—of course, you can't always tell—"

"No, no! We know that," Denis broke in impatiently. "What made your father say it?"

"He's out there, you know—South Africa. He's got no end of a head. And he's a shareholder. I asked him about them in a letter some time ago. He wrote last week saying he believed they weren't as bad as he'd thought, but he couldn't be sure yet—"

"That was the night our Australian letters had come," Nell said.

He nodded.

"Just now I got a cablegram—saying, 'Hold on, don't sell.'"

He paused.

"He may be making a mistake," he said slowly. "The shares may not go up—don't reckon on it—" He stopped.

"We—we can't help it, Ted," Nell said shakily.

"No."

He walked over to the window and looked out. There was a little silence. Then suddenly she laughed out, an excited, wild little laugh.

"Oh, I *know* it's true! I *know* it is! We shall go home—Denis, don't you *feel* it? Ted, it's all you—all you, Teddie! You'll come with us. You'll climb the hills with us—you'll love our home—" Her voice broke.

Ted grew very red; he turned his back on her, and spoke, in a tone of elaborate unconcern, to Denis.

"Thought you might come round to Bumpus's, old man, with me, about that book—"

"Oh, hang Bumpus! Hang the book!" Denis interpolated.

Nell's charming face, laughing, was poked suddenly close to Ted's.

"I'm not going to cry, Teddie! D'you think I'd repay you like that? And I won't even try to thank you—"

"Nothing to thank me for," he interposed.

"Oh, no, it's nothing to hear that we're going back to Kilbrannan soon," observed Denis.

"Don't be such a fool, O.B.!" Ted turned on him angrily. "You're not a baby! I tell you, those shares may never pay another dividend!"

"Oh, Teddie!"

The woeful change in her face made him add weakly:—

"But I've never known the Pater to make a mistake over that sort of thing—"

"Oh, *Teddie*!"

She was radiant again. She started talking; her voice was breathless, almost a song of joy.

Ted said heavily, "It's an awful responsibility."

She stopped in the middle of a laugh.

"Anyway—in any case—" she said, "you—oh, how good you are, Ted!"

"Good Heavens!" he ejaculated. "Why don't you put me up on a pedestal and worship me?"

He spoke with strong irritation.

"Oh, how rude you are! You English are queer! Denis can do with any amount of gratitude."

"Well, I'm not Denis," he grumped. "Your father's not likely to sell out, is he?"

"No, no one'd buy the shares, you know," Denis replied confidently.

But Ted had inherited somewhat of his father's business faculty.

"Don't be an ass, O.B.!" he ejaculated. "Some chap might scent that they're likely to go up, and offer to buy them of your governor."

"Oh, Denis, and dad would sell them for *nothing*!" Nell cried. "Oh, what shall we do? He'd never suspect—he thinks they're worth nothing. Ted, tell us what to do!"

"We must cable to him," Denis put in. "Where's my hat? I'm off!"

"Oh, do wait for me. Do let me come, too!"

She fled into her bedroom. She dragged out a coat. Sheila Pat was folding up her nightgown.

"Are you goin' out?" she demanded.

"Yes. Find me a hat, there's a sweet."

Sheila Pat crawled under the bed, and dived into a hatbox.

"Where are you goin'? I'll come, too."

Nell dissembled badly.

"Oh, we—we're only going just out—for a little while. Give me a hat, Atom."

Sheila Pat handed it to her in silence; she studied Nell's superlatively guilty face with calm disapproval.

"Why don't you own up that you're doin' somethin' secret?" she queried disdainfully.

"Oh, don't be silly, Atom! Oh, why *won't* my hat go on?"

"I'm comin' too," Sheila Pat said, and she smiled a little triumphant smile.

"Oh!" said Nell.

Sheila Pat went to the wardrobe, and lifted down her coat. Nell kicked one of her boots beneath the chest of drawers.

"I can see what you're doin'," said Sheila Pat, calmly.

Nell began to laugh.

"You can come if you're ready to start when we are, but we won't wait," she said, and ran out of the room.

A cold little voice pursued her.

"I was only pertendin'; I never intrude where I'm not wanted."

Nell hardened her heart. She burst into the Stronghold.

"Do come! Oh, every moment's precious!"

As they went downstairs Denis said, "Lancaster's been pointing out that of course we may be advising the Pater quite wrong—"

"How, Denis? Oh, *how*?" She wrinkled her brows anxiously.

"The shares mayn't go up, you see."

"Oh, that!" she cried relieved. "Yes, I know."

"But, by telling him to hold on, we should stop his selling if he got a chance and if they don't go up—oh, you see, don't you?"

She nodded.

They let themselves out into the street in silence.

"I wanted you to understand," Denis said.

"Yes."

She looked down abstractedly at her thin house-slippers, which she had forgotten to change.

"I want to send the cablegram," she said. "I want to take the risk."

"That's all right. So do I."

"It's four and tenpence a word to Melbourne," observed Ted, prosaically. "What shall you say?"

"'Hold on to Rêve d'or shares,' I think," Denis said.

"'Don't sell' would be a word less," Nell suggested. "'Do not,'" Ted amended. "You mustn't put 'don't' in a telegram."

'"Hold on to' is more emphatic," Denis opined.

On the way back Nell said hesitatingly:—

"Denis, do you think it'll frighten them dreadfully to get a cablegram from us?"

"Only for a second, and it can't be helped, worse luck!"

"We won't tell Molly or the Atom, will we?"

"No. We'll wait. It would drive the Atom mad to wait."

"Yes." She looked as if she thought it might drive her mad, too.

When she and Denis were alone in the Stronghold that night, she observed elatedly, and with considerable confidence, "And we'll be able to manage so beautifully, because we've had such practice in economising lately."

He nodded.

"We'll live on potatoes, old girl! I must say I prefer to economise on praties rather than on porridge."

"I've been thinking it all out. We'll have to be very careful, of course, but what does it matter —what does it matter? I'll sweep and clean and groom the horses! I'll have one dress a year—oh,

Denis! Denis! I'm all in a wuzzle. I'm so happy that—"

"Let's go out! Come along. I shall burst if I don't."

"We'll find a quiet square and *run*!" she cried.

It was ten o'clock. At eleven o'clock they remembered that they would be locked out. They returned and threw small stones at Herr Schmidt's window. He let them in.

"Ach," he exclaimed, looking at Nell, "you make my dry heart glad!"

CHAPTER XXXIV

Miss Kezia entered the dining room.

Molly, hastily and with a very red face, slipped the sheet of paper on which she had been writing beneath the blotting paper. She looked up, and the giggle that had started to her lips died away.

"Oh! Oh, can I do anything for you, Aunt Kezia?" She jumped up and kicked over her chair.

Miss Kezia replied stiffly that she required nothing from her. She looked at her thoughtfully.

"I suppose it was you who put my everyday bonnet into the wrong box?" she queried.

"I—oh, was it the wrong box? I—I'm very sorry—"

"And it was you who sewed a black button on my glove, while the others are white, I suppose?"

"I didn't think it would matter—"

"And may I ask where you have hidden my keys?"

"I—I haven't touched them!" Eagerly she seized on the small bit of relief. "I haven't seen them."

"You surprise me!" Miss Kezia said, with a strong inflexion of sarcasm in her tone. "Hadn't you better pick up that chair?"

Molly stooped and set it erect; she blinked back tears.

Miss Kezia said: "You are a very peculiar girl, Molly. I should be obliged if you would leave my things alone. You puzzle me, but I understand that you mean well."

Molly's downcast face lightened. Impulsively she burst out, "Oh, thank you, aunt—*auntie*!"

"I," said Miss Kezia, "object to pet names!"

She walked from the room, leaving a scarlet and abashed niece behind her.

She went into Herr Schmidt's room to see that Sarah had dusted it thoroughly. She found Sheila Pat sitting at the table, with paper, pens, and ink of Herr Schmidt's before her.

"What are you doing in here, Sheila?"

"Writin' a private letter," said Sheila Pat.

"Take it up into your room! You have no business in here at all."

"Has," said Sheila Pat, in very judicial tones, "has Herr Schmidt ever told you that you're like a little sunbeam in his room, and just as welcome?"

Miss Kezia seemed a little disconcerted.

"N-no," she said.

"Then you'd better go," the Atom observed. "He's said that to me."

She bent over her writing.

Miss Kezia came closer.

"Please," said Sheila Pat, "don't read what I'm writin'. It's very private."

"May I ask," said Miss Kezia, "if Herr Schmidt has also given you permission to use his writing materials and paper?"

"He hasn't given me *permission*," said Sheila Pat; "he asked me to do him the *honour* of placin' them at my disposal."

It sounded very grand. Miss Kezia left the room.

She went upstairs to the Stronghold to speak to Nell. Nell was seated at the table, writing. She started up guiltily as Miss Kezia entered the room.

"You all appear to be very busy writing this morning," Miss Kezia said crossly.

For some reason or other this seemed to amuse Nell considerably. She began to laugh.

"Oh, are they writing, too? I wonder—" She broke off, and went on laughing.

"Eileen, I am constantly obliged to chide you for your frivolity. You laugh at nothing; or, at least, I can see no cause for laughter?"

There was a pronounced query at the end of her sentence. Nell strove to answer it.

"Well, you see—you see—we're writing—private letters—at least, I am, and now you say—so I suppose they are, too—you see—oh, I c-c-can't help it, it's s-so f-f-funny!"

Miss Kezia gave the message she had come to deliver; she gave it in an austere voice, and with a face of disgust. The she went.

"Oh, I'm a w-worm!" Nell chuckled, crawling beneath the sofa to speak to James. "But, oh, Jimmy, I feel all mad these days! If—if it comes to nothing—but it won't! it won't! Oh, Jimmy!"

The next morning was bright and sunny, with a gladness in the air, a song of spring. It was the first of April, and even in London it was a glorious day.

"I won't even *think* the thought, 'What it would be like at Kilbrannan,'" Nell declared to Denis, when she met him on her way down to breakfast, "because—shan't we soon be there?" She broke out singing:—

"'There blooms a bonny flower,
Up the heather glen;
Tho' bright in sun, in shower
'Tis just as bright again.
I never can pass by it,
I never dar' go nigh it,
My heart it won't be quiet,
Up the heather glen.
Sing O, the blooming heather!
O, the heather glen!
Where fairest fairies gather
To lure in mortal men—'"

She broke off; she turned to him on the last stair, hung on to his arm.

"Denis, if only, *only* we might tell them! My hair fairly rises with the weight of the secret! I know Sheila Pat is wondering what has come to us!"

"Eileen, come in to breakfast!"

They went in. On the table there lay a great pile of letters. Molly and the Atom came hurrying in; Denis tossed letters to them all, and kept a few himself.

"I cannot understand why there are so many letters this morning," Miss Kezia observed. She looked round the table, surprised.

"Why do you not open them?" she asked.

"Anticipation is the soul of wit!" observed Denis, absurdly.

They fingered their letters, laughing, glancing at each other.

"Have you all gone mad?" Miss Kezia demanded.

"That's a good suggestion," Denis opined thoughtfully. "They do look somewhat abbreviated in the top story. As for me, I will open my letters at one minute past twelve, noon."

He airily tucked them away in an inner pocket.

"I request an explanation of these horribly addressed letters!" Miss Kezia cried.

The laughter broke out hilariously. Denis stretched out, picked up one of Sheila Pat's letters, and eyed it with pride.

"I thought that rather good," he observed. "Look at the curly little heads, and those tricky Greek *e*'s!"

"Molly!" Miss Kezia turned to her with an air of finality, "Molly, will *you* vouchsafe me an explanation?"

Molly, at once proud and horrified, plunged forthwith:—

"Oh, yes, Aunt Kezia, you see, it's April the first, and you're a fool if you don't know it—"

She made an unfortunate pause, flustered by a burst of laughter.

Miss Kezia's cheek reddened a little.

"Molly, your language—"

"Oh, no! Oh, I didn't mean that! I mean that if you don't know it, you get caught, and if you do, you don't, and—and—you see—we wrote letters to each other—we didn't know the others were remembering the date, too, and of course if it had been our own handwriting we'd have known, you see. So we disguised them, and we can't open them before twelve or we'll be fools." She stopped, out of breath.

Miss Kezia said slowly:—

"Do you mean that you have wasted all those stamps, that paper, those envelopes, on a ridiculous childish game? That you have thrown away honest pennies on such tom-foolery?"

She proceeded to deliver a lecture on thrift which lasted throughout breakfast. Just before Denis started for the bank, a telegram came for Nell. Sarah brought it up to the Stronghold. She looked at Nell with scared pity in her face.

"It's for you, miss!"

Nell seized it, tore it open, burst out laughing.

"I'm caught! It's from Moira McCarthy! Oh, I *wish* I could catch her!"

She crumpled it up and threw it at Denis.

Sheila Pat picked it up and studied it.

"April 1," she read thoughtfully. She smoothed the paper out with a tender little hand, then folded it carefully, carried it to her room, and locked it in the box where she kept such treasures as she had brought to London with her. They were in the hall a little later, Denis had just gone, when there was another loud double knock at the door. Sarah came running, but Nell was before her. She opened the door; a telegraph boy stood on the step. She took the telegram from him. "For you this time, Sheila Pat!"

Sheila Pat took it. She looked at it.

"And 'er so little!" Sarah murmured from the background.

"Molly," said the Atom, "wouldn't you like to open it?"

"No, thank you!"

"I know it's from that Ted!" opined Nell. "Open it, Atom. The boy's waiting to know if there's an answer!"

From the dining room issued Miss Kezia.

"A telegram? And for you, Sheila? Why do you not open it?"

Sheila Pat hesitated. Longing to see if it were by any chance another telegram from Ireland, and determination not to let Ted Lancaster catch her, fought within her small bosom.

"Are you afraid?" Miss Kezia said, coming forward. "I will open it for you."

Now at the opening words of her sentence Sheila Pat's head had been uplifted with a disgusted jerk, but as Miss Kezia finished speaking, a sudden impish glow shone in her face, and gravely she held out the orange envelope. Miss Kezia took it. They watched breathlessly. She tore open the envelope, she read what was written on the form inside. A great and triumphant satisfaction illumined the Atom's small features as she watched the expression that overspread her aunt's countenance.

"It is, I suppose, intended to be witty," Miss Kezia observed at last. "I consider it a vulgar and sinfully wasteful joke. Sheila, did you know what the telegram contained?"

"I thought it was somethin' like that," the Atom said. "Please give it to me." She turned to Nell. "There can't be two April Fools over *one* thing, can there?"

The telegram was long; it was addressed in full to Miss Sheila Patricia Kathleen O'Brien, and it said: "Shure and isn't it afther being the 1st of April then, och begorra, and isn't it meself will be having the laugh of ye entoirely at all at all, for when ye rade this, won't ye be afther being taken in ochone acushla!"

"That telegram," said Miss Kezia, in awful tones, "cost four shillings and eightpence to send."

Nell eyed her admiringly.

"How quickly you can add up!" she said.

A little later Molly stole guiltily away up to her room. She locked the door, and sitting down on her bed began to tear open envelopes. Presently to her through the keyhole came a whisper:—

"Molly O'Brien, I hear the rending of note-paper!"

Molly jumped; her face grew scarlet.

"Oh, Nell! I!—I—"

Through the keyhole there was a ripple of triumphant laughter. Molly stood, red, and stammering futile excuses, and heard the laughter die away down the passage.

CHAPTER XXXV

"Denis," said Nell, "let's!"

She turned to him; her cheeks were flushed pink, her breath came in quick little pants between her lips.

"Right you are!"

She ran towards the door, but Ted barred her way.

"I'm a mere cautious Englishman," he said, with an uncomfortable little laugh. "I want to remind you—"

She danced before him, her hands over her ears.

"I know it all by heart, Teddie. 'Tis mere waste of breath to tell it me all over again. And if you died for want of breath through telling me, I shouldn't understand any more than I do now, not if you went on and on for ever! 'The shares,'" her laughing voice sobered, echoed his ponderously, "'have only gone up a little. It is true that they continue to go up, but they may never pay a high enough dividend to enable you to return to Kilbrannan.' There, don't I know it all?"

Suddenly she dropped her hands, her lips quivered.

"I must tell them, oh, I must! Even if—if—it comes to nothing,—oh, we must risk it, mustn't we, Denis? Sheila Pat—"

She turned and went over to the window.

Ted looked as if all the cares of the state sat upon his shoulders.

Denis said:—

"We've kept it from them till it's pretty well certain—"

"You can't tell," put in Ted, moodily.

"Well, they'll face it somehow, whatever happens. And meanwhile—why, man, think what it'll mean to them! Come along, Nell!"

Molly and Sheila Pat were downstairs trying to play a duet on the piano.

When Nell and Denis went in, Sheila Pat glanced round; her eyes widened suddenly, her hand fell with a little crash of notes on the keyboard. She sat staring at Nell; a little quiver went through her.

"Yes—yes—oh, Atom!" Nell cried out.

She left Molly to Denis. She went closer to Sheila Pat, and told her—told her breathlessly, almost incoherently, her words hurrying one over the other.

Sheila Pat sat awhile, rigid on the stool, then suddenly she slipped to the floor, she ran at Nell, her arms held out: "Nell—oh, Nell!"

Nell held her close, whispering to her, and Sheila Pat cried, with never a thought of the hurt to her dignity.

That night when ready for bed she turned to Nell.

"Nell," she said in very dignified tones, "please don't wait."

She stood, a small figure in her white nightgown, her face very tired, her eyes very bright. Nell, looking at her, thought suddenly of the time she had been so ill. A little shiver went through her.

"Why not, sweet?" she said.

"I shall be a long while over my prayers, you see. It worries me to have you waitin'; I've got a good deal to say to God to-night."

As Nell left the room, the Atom's voice pursued her:—

"Nell, I do want to be very perlite to-night. Don't you think I'd better call him *Mister* God?"

CHAPTER XXXVI

It was on the 9th of May that the letters came. They came in the middle of the morning, when Nell and Molly and Sheila Pat were wrestling with their studies. It was a real wrestle to fix their minds on their work, for they knew it was mail day, and they knew that they might get an answer to their cablegram that week. The Rêve d'or shares had gone up and up. That alone was sufficient to make any study a weariness of the flesh. The wild hilarity in the atmosphere lately had been borne with a considerable amount of fortitude by Miss Kezia. There had been storms; there had been lectures; but Miss Kezia found herself making excuses for her Irish relatives. She was not given to making excuses for people, any more than she would have made them for herself; but she certainly took to reminding herself during these hilarious days of such facts connected with the O'Briens, as their youth, the peculiar circumstances attending the Rêve d'or shares, and largest excuse of all, their nationality. Had she possessed nerves, they would have suffered acutely. She wished sincerely that her relatives would not make such undesirable acquaintances. She came upon Nell in the hall one day holding a diminutive baby. It was enveloped entirely in an

old shawl, and Nell told her it was Irish! Miss Kezia had no fondness for babies, but being in an amiable mood, she came forward to examine this one. But Nell drew back with all the appearance of anxious alarm.

"Do you think you'd better come near, Aunt Kezia? He's fretful—perhaps he has the measles or scarlet fever."

Miss Kezia had been very angry, and considerably alarmed. She had ordered his instant return to his parents.

"Who is he? Where does he come from? Where are his people?"

Nell had told her that the baby's name was James O'Driscoll, that she did not know where his people were, but would take him to some friends of his.

Miss Kezia had been a good deal worried. For several days she scrutinised her relatives' countenances, dreading to find them flushed or spotted. But the weeks slipped by and not a spot appeared; not one face was unduly flushed. Then the 9th of May dawned. It was a beautiful 9th of May; the hilarity of these spring days was mixed with a great restlessness; no one could settle down to anything. The letters—there were four of them—came in the middle of the morning.

The first Miss Kezia knew of their arrival, was when she was swept aside in the hall by an advancing trio, making for the door. She asked questions. She received answers, breathless, wild, glad answers that left her with a dazed understanding that something very wonderful had happened, that they had received letters of marvellous import. Then they swept out of the door. They left Miss Kezia calling out that Molly's gloves were odd; that Sheila Pat's hat was on back to front; that Nell had left her painting pinafore on, and it showed beneath her coat. They laughed and waved back to her airily; they started, to her consternation, running. She would have been more concerned had she known where they were going. They made straight for the bank where Denis worked. They ran all the way; they pushed open the swing doors, they hurried in waving their letters above their heads.

Mr. Tellbridge was there, giving instructions to a clerk. Both he and the clerk looked startled. Mr. Tellbridge also looked disapproving.

"Good morning!" Nell cried out breathlessly. "Oh, where is Denis? Where is he, Mr. Tellbridge?"

"Here I am! What's up?"

From round the partition he came.

"Letters, Denis! They're coming home! In about two weeks! They got the cablegram! He was just going to sell out! P.&O. boat! In a fortnight they'll be here!"

Mr. Tellbridge pushed his spectacles up on his brow, and eyed them with a mild surprise. He seemed to find the study of them and their joy bewildering. In the babel his somewhat pompous, but not unkindly, "Dear me, I cannot allow this!" passed unheard.

At last Nell turned to him:—

"Denis may come with us now, mayn't he, Mr. Tellbridge? You see, he couldn't do any work now, possibly."

"Pennington will do my share, when he comes in," observed Denis, easily.

Nell looked at the bank manager, gave a little laugh.

"We're being awfully rude," she said. "I will try to explain."

She did try. She tried to speak soberly, plainly, but her words sang, jostled each other, grew picturesquely extravagant.

Mr. Tellbridge's mild disapproval was not proof against her eloquence. He professed himself delighted at the good news. He gave Denis a half-holiday, his benignity tempered by a drily expressed suggestion that the work would not suffer much from his absence.

They went straight to Gowan Square, found Ted in, and dragged him off to lunch.

At No. 35 Henley Road, boiled mutton and a bread-and-butter pudding awaited them in vain. At the Express Dairy in Oxford Street four perfectly happy people lunched that day. Ted was quieter. He seemed to derive a certain amount of satisfaction from watching and teasing Sheila Pat. Sheila Pat was very Irish, her sharp little tongue very quick, and very broadly accented. She was never at a loss for a repartee. Her great eyes fairly glittered with excitement; a faint pink flush glowed on either cheek; her pig-tail, owing to constant rude tweaks, stuck out at an aggressive angle. Halfway through lunch, Ted said:—

"And now, suppose some one explains what it's all about."

"Explain!"

"One at a time, please. Oh, not just yet, perhaps. I thought I'd given you time for the effervescence to have subsided a little—"

"Time? An hour or so?" laughed Nell. "Why, we shall go on effervescing like ginger beer for the whole of the next fortnight!"

He sighed.

"I wonder if Miss Kezia's effervescing, too! Why do you laugh? I'm thinking of applying to her for an explanation of your state."

Nell bent toward him.

"Ask," she said softly; "after all, it's you—you—you—who did it all! Oh, Ted, dad says he had had an offer for the shares, and had just decided to sell out when he received the cablegram!"

"How'll they be home in a fortnight?" he put in quickly, warding off her gratitude. "Question No. 1."

"Why, mother's quite strong and well now, so she doesn't need the long sea voyage, by sailing vessel now, you see!"

"But I thought the passage was booked—"

"Dad managed to exchange on to a P.&O. boat."

"Ah, now I begin to understand."

"Time you did," Denis remarked. "Your skull must be a foot thick."

It was later, up in the Stronghold, that Nell drew near to Ted.

"Mother and dad are so surprised and inquisitive," she began. "They can't think *how* we knew about those shares, you see." She paused. "If it hadn't been for you, dad would have sold out—I don't understand a bit—but he says it would have been for quite a little, we—we couldn't have gone back to Kilbrannan."

There was a little pause.

Denis strolled up to them.

"Ted," Nell said, "you will spend all your vacations with us, won't you? Except just a week here and there for other people—won't you?"

He laughed uncomfortably.

"I know I've been pretty good at poking myself in here—" he began.

"*Teddie*!" Nell ejaculated.

"Don't be such a fool!" Denis exclaimed angrily.

"Well, anyhow, your people—"

"Will be delighted if you'll make Kilbrannan another home," finished Denis, proudly.

Nell held her letter out to him.

"It's true, Teddie. Read what mother says about you. She knows all about you. There—at the top of the page."

He took the letter and read:—

"I know you would not have cabled to us as you did unless you had very strong reasons for your opinion that the shares were going up; that, and the fact that your father had an offer for them—oh, Nell, he is telling Denis about that! He very nearly accepted it!—well, this makes me hope that we shall be able to return to our home. Won't we all be willing to economise? Bread and potatoes and Kilbrannan are not to be despised, are they, asthore? You and Denis must make your friend, Ted Lancaster, promise that, if we only can go back, he will look upon it as a second home. Tell him we shall want as much of his time as he can spare to be spent at Kilbrannan, and we'll manage to add a trout or two, perhaps even a salmon, to the bread and potatoes when he is with us. With these extras, and the hearty welcome he will receive from us all, I hope he'll find Kilbrannan so bearable that all his vacations will be given to us!"

Ted grew very red as he perused the letter. He handed it back in silence.

"Well?" Nell laughed.

"I say—er—why, it's no end kind—"

"That'll do. You needn't say anything, except—you will, Teddie, won't you?"

"By Jove, yes!" he said.

He stood looking out of the window. He felt then the first liking for Mrs. O'Brien that afterwards developed into such devotion that she always declared she had two sons.

Once he approached Nell.

"I say," he said, "you know—I—I mean a lot!"

She gave a little laugh.

"So do I," she said. "Oh, Ted—"

"But you say it!" he remonstrated, and strode across to Sheila Pat, whose pig-tail he proceeded to pull. But Sheila Pat was very dignified.

"Please don't intrude. I'm thinkin'."

Presently she came to Nell.

"Nell," she whispered, "Kilbrannan's very healthy, isn't it?"

"Why, yes, sweet!"

"I'm thinkin' maybe it'll make Tommy's left leg grow as long as the other one!"

"I'm afraid it won't do that, asthore."

Her face fell.

"I'm glad I didn't mention it to him," she said earnestly. "I didn't on purpose, because I wasn't wantin' to give false hopes to him, you see."

Nell bent and kissed her.

"It will make him strong and well, anyway."

Sheila Pat nodded. She went across to James O'Driscoll.

"In a fortnight and two days we'll introduce you to your cousin!" she said.

That evening Nell went into her bedroom. She came upon an absorbed Atom, kneeling before her treasure box.

"What are you doing, Sheila Pat?"

Sheila Pat lifted her head; her small face was full of a restless joy. She said staidly:—

"Sure, Nell O'Brien, and what would I be doin' then? *I'm packin'*!"

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE YOUNG O'BRIENS: BEING AN ACCOUNT OF THEIR SOJOURN IN LONDON ***

than the United States.

1.E. Unless you have removed all references to Project Gutenberg:

1.E.1. The following sentence, with active links to, or other immediate access to, the full Project Gutenberg™ License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg™ work (any work on which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” appears, or with which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

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

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is derived from texts not protected by U.S. copyright law (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase “Project Gutenberg” associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg™ trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg™ License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg™ License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg™.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg™ License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg™ work in a format other than “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg™ website (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg™ License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg™ works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works provided that:

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg™ works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, “Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation.”

- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg™ License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg™ works.

- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you

within 90 days of receipt of the work.

• You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg™ works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the manager of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread works not protected by U.S. copyright law in creating the Project Gutenberg™ collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain “Defects,” such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the “Right of Replacement or Refund” described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you ‘AS-IS’, WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg™ work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg™ work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg™

Project Gutenberg™ is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg™’s goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg™ collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent

future for Project Gutenberg™ and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation information page at www.gutenberg.org.

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non-profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's website and official page at www.gutenberg.org/contact

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg™ depends upon and cannot survive without widespread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine-readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations ($1 to $5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit www.gutenberg.org/donate.

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: www.gutenberg.org/donate

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg™ concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg™ eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg™ eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as not protected by copyright in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our website which has the main PG search facility: www.gutenberg.org.

This website includes information about Project Gutenberg™, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.