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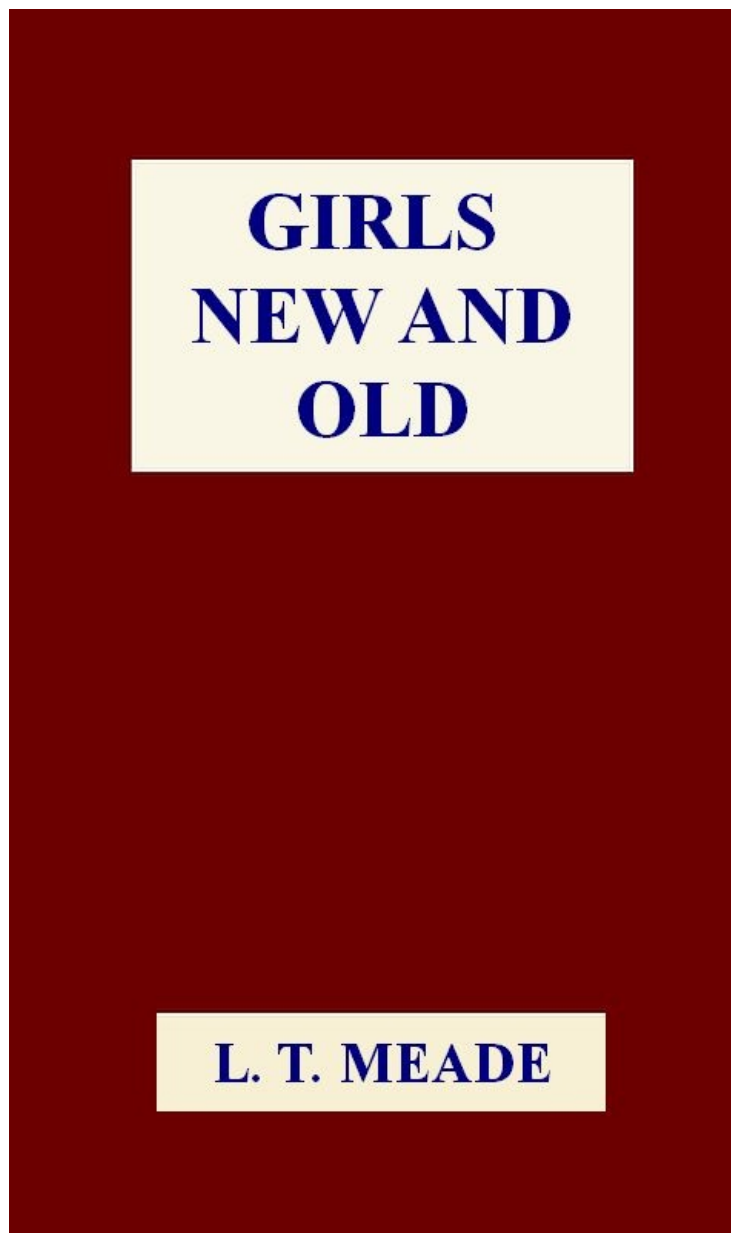
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THEY ALL BROUGHT KATE O'CONNOR BACK IN TRIUMPH.

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## GIRLS NEW AND OLD

BY  
L. T. MEADE

AUTHOR OF "BETTY, A SCHOOL GIRL," "A SWEET GIRL GRADUATE,"  
"WILTON CHASE," "FOUR ON AN ISLAND," "BASHFUL FIFTEEN,"  
"RED ROSE AND TIGER LILY," "PALACE BEAUTIFUL," "RING OF  
RUBIES," "POLLY, A NEW-FASHIONED GIRL," "A WORLD  
OF GIRLS," "OUT OF THE FASHION," "GOOD LUCK,"  
"A GIRL IN TEN THOUSAND," ETC., ETC.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY  
J. WILLIAMSON

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## GIRLS NEW AND OLD.

[1]

### CHAPTER I. A FIRST NIGHT.



T was an autumn evening when Molly Lavender first arrived at Redgarth. This large school for girls was situated in a certain well-known district in the north of England. It adjoined a cathedral town of great beauty, and was in the neighborhood of those wide downs and far-reaching moors for which this part of the country is justly famed. The school itself was inclosed in spacious gardens, occupying several acres of land. The houses of residence surrounded the great hall and lecture rooms, where the work of education was carried on. There were eight houses of residence, and from forty to fifty girls lived in each.

It had been the dream of Molly Lavender's life to go to Redgarth. Her education hitherto had been conducted partly at home, and partly in a small school; she longed to enter a wider world, and looked forward with much enthusiasm to the comradeship and *esprit de corps* which would form part of the education of her new life. A vacancy had been offered her at St. Dorothy's, one of the most popular of the houses, and when her cab drew up there on this lovely evening, a very eager and excited young face peeped out.

[2]

Molly was fifteen, just the age when girls can be shy. She had lived in a whirl of excited feeling during all her long journey from London; but now that she had really arrived at Redgarth, a sense of unexpected timidity assailed her, and although she was not such a coward as to wish to run away, she heartily desired the first evening to be well over.

When she appeared, a group of girls were standing idly chatting in the beautiful entrance-hall. No one spoke for a moment; but before there was time for real embarrassment, the principal of the house, a tall, good-looking, dignified woman of about thirty, came out of a room at one side of the hall. She gave Molly a cordial welcome, introduced her to one or two of her companions, and then took her upstairs, to show her her own little room.

"I hope you will be thoroughly happy at Redgarth, my dear," said Miss Leicester, in her brisk, energetic voice. "You are very fortunate in finding a vacancy in this house. We are all very happy here, and I think I can promise that you will have a good time. Our motto is, Plenty of work, and plenty of play; the life is as healthy and full of pleasure as life can be. For my part, I envy girls who, like yourself, come to a great school like this with all their future fresh before them. By the way, what is your Christian name? It is the custom at St. Dorothy's to call the girls who are in residence by their Christian names."

[3]

"My name is Molly," replied Molly Lavender, looking, with her clear brown eyes full at Miss Leicester.

Miss Leicester could not help smiling at the sweet, frank face. "Molly is a very good name," she said; "there is something lovable about it. I hope you will have a happy time here, Molly. And now tell me how you like your room."

"Am I to have this room all to myself?" asked Molly.

"Certainly; how do you like it?"

"I think it lovely—only—is it my sitting room?"

"Sitting room and bedroom in one. Oh, you don't see your bed! Let me show it to you."

Miss Leicester walked across the little room, to where a luxurious-looking sofa stood: she pulled aside a pretty covering, and showed underneath a properly made-up bed, small, certainly,

but looking most inviting, with its snowy sheets and white frilled pillows.

"There, Molly," she said, "I hope you will sleep soundly in that little bed. Your washing apparatus is cleverly hidden away behind this screen. This pretty bureau contains a bookcase on the top, a writing table and desk at one side, a set of drawers for your linen at the other. Behind this curtain you will hang up your dresses. Now, my dear, I must leave you; but we shall meet, I hope, at supper time."

[4]

Miss Leicester nodded brightly, and the next moment the tired girl was alone.

"If only Cecil were here!" thought Molly to herself. "I wonder if there is any chance of Cecil coming. Oh, yes, this is a sweet little room, but I feel shy just now. I feel quite stupidly shy, and like a fish out of water. Still, I'm determined not to remain in that uncomfortable position an hour longer than I can help. Grannie has sent me here, she sent me rather against her own inclination, and I'm determined to prove to her that she has done the right and only thing to satisfy me. I could not live if I didn't make something of my life. Grannie objects to Girton and Newnham, but she has consented to my finishing my education at Redgarth. Now, then, for a good tussle with the fates; I shall win, I feel convinced. If only Cecil were here, I should feel certain on the subject."

Molly took off her hat, brushed the dust carefully from her dress, rearranged her smooth brown hair, and washed her face and hands. Then she went over to the window, threw it open, and looked out. Redgarth is one of the most beautiful towns in northern England. It boasts of a lovely cathedral, and from where Molly stood she could see its four slender spires, and its gray turrets, hoary with age. The next moment the hour struck, and a chime of bells rang beautifully out on the evening air.

"It is lovely," thought the girl, clasping her hands. "I know I shall adore that old cathedral. How joyous those chimes sound! how beautiful the evening sky looks at the back of the spires! Yes, this lovely sunset on my first arrival is a good omen. I hope, with all my heart, that I shall do well here."

[5]

There came a knock at the door. Molly said "Come in," and a girl with dark eyes and hair entered the room.

"My name is Hester Temple," she said. "As you are quite new, I thought perhaps you would like to come down to supper with me."

"You are very kind," said Molly, with some timidity in her voice.

"I hope you like your room," said Hester.

"Yes; I think it charming."

Miss Temple went and stood by the bureau; she tapped her fingers on its polished surface somewhat impatiently.

"They all make that sort of remark at first," she said; "they all call their rooms charming until they find out their defects."

"Whom do you mean by they?" asked Molly.

"The girls at St. Dorothy's. You belong to 'they.'"

"Do I?" said Molly. The color flooded her cheeks.

Miss Temple regarded her with a fixed and critical stare.

"I wish you would come here, just for a moment," she said. "Please stand so, facing the light."

[6]

"Why?" asked Molly.

"Won't you oblige me?"

"Yes, certainly; here I am. Now, what do you want?"

"To take a good look at you, of course; do you know you are quite good-looking?"

Molly laughed.

"I wish you would not flatter me, Miss Temple," she said.

"It is not flattery—I abhor flattery—I never flatter anyone; I am remarked all over the school for my brusqueness. I simply state a fact—a very patent fact; others will tell it to you in more glowing language. You are good-looking; you have a clear complexion; not much color, but that doesn't really matter; your hair is thick and abundant, awfully prim and old-fashioned in the way it is arranged, but that can be altered. I can quite imagine that, if anything excites you, your face will wake up into real beauty. Now pray don't begin the usual thing; don't say, 'Oh, Miss Temple!' or anything commonplace of that sort. In the first place, I am not Miss Temple to you—I am Hester. We're all Hester, and Jane, and Anne, and Mary, or whatever our Christian names happen to be, to each other. What is your name? Desdemona, I should think; or perhaps Ophelia—you've got something of the martyr droop."

"Oh, what a horrid thing to say!" replied Molly, brisking up and laughing. "I am not so

[7]

fortunate as to be distinguished by the name of either Desdemona or Ophelia: I am simply Molly."

Hester Temple dropped a mock courtesy.

"Simply Molly," she repeated; "what a dear little rustic English sound! Well, Molly, I can read your character already. I see you intend to go in for the whole thing. You will take up the life with zest. You will enthuse—yes, I know you will. Now, I never do; I don't think it good form."

"Well, I think it is," said Molly stoutly.

"Didn't I say as much. I knew you had lots of spirit. How your eyes flash! Oh, you will find no inconveniences in your room. Everything will be *couleur de rose* with you. You are just the sort of girl whom Miss Forester will adore."

"I am longing to see Miss Forester," said Molly. "She must be a splendid woman."

Hester shrugged her shoulders.

"*Chacun à son goût*. Well, if you are ready, we had better go downstairs."

"I am quite ready," replied Molly.

The girls left the pretty little room together. They went down the broad, polished stairs, and stood for a moment or two in the hall. Molly, who was not accustomed to the beautiful parquetry which covered the floor, found herself slipping about as if on ice. Hester looked at her and laughed.

"Your first lesson at St. Dorothy's," she said, "is to get your footing; it is like being on board ship—you must get, not your sea legs, but your parquetry legs. Now, don't be afraid; don't attempt to walk on your toes—tread firmly, and the deed will be accomplished. I see some of my friends; I will introduce you. This is Annie Sinclair, and here, here is the romp of the house, Kate O'Connor. Come here, Kate, and let me present you to Molly Lavender; Molly is the new girl we have been expecting, you know; yes, I quite see that you two will be chums.

[8]

"Kate, Kate O'Connor,  
Oh, how I love her!"

Hester sang the couplet in a gay, clear voice. Kate's splendid black eyes danced with mirth.

"I wish you wouldn't be such a ridiculous creature, Hester," she said, "you would prejudice anyone against me. Is your name Molly?" she continued, looking full at the newcomer. "What a pretty name! I heartily hope you will have a good time here."

"It is so like you, Kate, to say the word 'heartily,'" exclaimed Hester. "That's because she is Irish, you know, Molly. Irish girls always exaggerate. I should consider it quite sufficient to say, 'I hope you will have a good time,' but the Irish girl has to put in the word 'heartily.'"

"I heartily hope you will have a good time, Molly Lavender," repeated Kate, in a stout voice.

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"It will be her own fault if she hasn't," said Hester. "What do you say, Annie? What opinion would you form of a girl who found St. Dorothy's dull?"

"That she was unworthy of our privileges," replied Annie.

"I am most anxious to like everything," said Molly.

She laughed slightly as she spoke.

The fact is, she was feeling more nervous than she dared to own. The girls rattled off their conversation in brisk, brusque voices; all the faces were new, all the voices strange; there was a great deal of badinage and repartee—a sort of ceaseless chaff was going on. Molly felt bewildered.

A great gong sounded at this moment through the house.

"Come and sit near me at supper," said Kate, noticing the faint alarm which lurked in Molly's brown eyes. "I will promise to steer you through the shoals this first evening. You will get on your own feet in no time."

"No, she won't; she's slipping now," said Hester, with a laugh.

"Take my arm," said Kate. "This horrible parquetry! I nearly brained myself during the first fortnight. Now, here we are; this table to the left is mine. You must sit here at my right. I can't talk to you for the first few minutes, for I have to carve. Oh, I forgot—I had better introduce you before I begin. Girls, this is the new girl—Molly Lavender. I'll introduce you all in correct style presently."

[10]

There were five or six tables in the large dining-hall. All the tables were surrounded by eager girlish figures. Most of the girls wore demi-evening dress. Pretty blouses of different colors were the rage. The principal, Miss Leicester, looked very handsome in black velvet, slightly open at the neck. The meal which was set before the hungry girls was plain but abundant. Molly, who had not eaten anything for hours, was glad to turn her attention to the well-filled plate which Kate placed before her.

"You were lucky not to sit at this table when Kate O'Connor first took the head of it," said a laughing girl of the name of Amy Frost.

"Amy, you're surely not going to tell tales?" cried Kate.

"Yes, I am! yes, I am!"

"Tell, Amy! do tell!" exclaimed several voices. "Kate deserves to be shown up in her true colors."

Molly watched the girls as they spoke. Several pairs of eyes were turned on Kate's laughing, beaming face. Notwithstanding the badinage in their tones, the glances which Kate received were full of affection.

"Oh, she's the wildest, naughtiest, most daring, most forgetful, wild Irish girl in existence," said Amy. "Being Irish, she is full of presumption; she has the utmost confidence in herself, and she dearly loves to take the lead. She never rested until she had persuaded Miss Leicester to make her head of a table. You perceive, Molly, that being head means responsibility. The head has to feed all the hungry members. Well, when Kate O'Connor first took this honorable position, she used to indulge in a little peculiarity of her own. This can only be spoken of as retiring into her castle in Spain. Kate lives in her own special castle in Spain most of her time. Oh, how happy she was in her castle, and how we suffered! It is not considered correct at St. Dorothy's to ask the head to feed the members. The head must think of that for itself. Well, this head being high up in its castle, forgot all about us and our hunger, and oh, didn't we starve, and didn't we growl! It is all over now: we took her out of her castle in private; we won't tell you how we did that. Kate, my dear, you needn't blush; we have forgiven you."

[11]

"Beware, Amy; don't add another word," interrupted Kate. "Think of the water-jug and the wet sponge. Remember that you are sleeping in the dormitory at present, and that my cubicle is only two doors away from yours. Oh, I say nothing, but I mean a good deal."

The rest of the meal passed with much mirth and hilarity. Kate's table was certainly the merriest in the room. Hester Temple did not belong to it. Molly did not know if she were glad or sorry. Hester puzzled her—she was not quite certain whether she liked her or not, but her whole heart had gone out to Kate O'Connor on the spot.

[12]

When supper came to an end—and the meal did not last very long—the girls all trooped into the great drawing room. Here a beautiful square of Indian carpet was hastily rolled up and an impromptu dance began. Kate opened a piano and began to play waltzes. The girls quickly found partners, and were soon revolving round and round. The barn-dance followed, and others. Molly could dance beautifully, and Amy Frost begged to be her partner.

When the dance came to an end a few girls still lingered in the room, but most went away to their private studies. Miss Leicester returned to the drawing room about ten o'clock. She then led the way into the dining hall, where all the members of the house, including servants, stood in rows. The principal read a psalm, which was followed by a collect; she then bade her assembled pupils a hearty "good-night."

"Come along, Molly. I was your first friend, so I will take you back to your room," said Hester Temple. "By the way, you are lucky to have a room to yourself. I also have a room, but it is a very small one. Kate O'Connor, Amy Frost, Annie Sinclair, and several others sleep in the big dormitory at the top of the house. I see you have taken to Kate. Let me give you a hint as to the way in which you can oblige her."



"AND HERE IS THE ROMP OF THE HOUSE, KATE O'CONNOR."

"I should love to oblige her."

[13]

Hester laughed.

"Didn't I say you would enthuse?" she answered. "You might be Irish yourself, by the way you go on, and by the emphasis you put upon certain words. You'd love to oblige a girl you never saw before in the whole course of your life! Well, poor Kate is ambitious and clever—indeed, I may add that in some respects she is brilliant. She takes up life here from a serious point of view. There are scholarships given at Redgarth, and she is studying very hard to obtain one. The Ford Scholarship is to be competed for before Christmas. She finds it hard to prepare for such a serious examination in the room with a lot of other girls. You might ask her to be your chum, and to share this dear little study every evening with you. She'd love you forever if you did. Kate would rather die than ask you, but if you will, I'll run up at once and tell her."

"Oh, I would with pleasure," said Molly, "only—only for Cecil."

"Who, in the name of fortune, is Cecil?"

"My greatest, best friend. She is coming here, I trust and hope, in a week or two."

"Your greatest, best friend!" repeated Hester. "I give you up, Molly Lavender; your enthusiasm quite crushes me."

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## CHAPTER II. THE PRINCIPAL.

[14]

**I**T seemed to Molly that she had only just dropped off to sleep when she was awakened by a booming, crashing sound, which seemed to get upon her head and half crush her. She rubbed her sleepy eyes, wondered whether a thunder-storm or earthquake were taking place, and then suddenly awoke to the fact that she was a member of Redgarth School, that she had just spent her first night at St. Dorothy's, and that this unearthly, inhuman sound must be the noise made by the gong, which was telling the girls to arise. She jumped out of bed, and looked around her with a momentary sense of dismay. The arrangements of her complex bedroom puzzled her not a little. She was just preparing to attack her washing apparatus, when a low knock came at her door, and Kate's roguish, laughing face peeped in.

"Are you up? That's right," she said; "you are sure to long for a nice hot bath after your journey. Hurry as fast as ever you can to the bathroom; there is no one in it now. Lock the door, and have a good splash. Never mind if the girls come in dozens to turn the handle: first come, first served, is the motto here. I got up at six, and had a glorious cold dip. Now it is your turn."

[15]

"Thank you very much," said Molly, with a beaming face.

"When you are dressed," continued Kate, "I'll come and take you down to breakfast. You don't

know any of our daily routine yet, of course; you shall be under my wing to-day."

Molly gave Kate a beaming look of gratitude. She then hurried off to the bathroom, had a good wash, and afterward dressed herself quickly. As she did so, she could not help rejoicing that Kate had taken her up.

"I begin to fall in love with her," thought Molly; "it must be that Irish way of hers. She is so frank, and her eyes have such a delicious sparkle in them; then her voice—it has so many notes in it. It can be daring, and mischievous, and mirthful, and tender, and solemn almost in the same sentence. Yes, I am quite certain that I shall love Kate very dearly. If Cecil should not come—if anything prevents my father doing what I have begged of him to do, then, perhaps Kate will be my friend; but oh, of course, I can never put anyone before Cecil."

Molly was dressed and had put her little room in order before the second gong, which was to summon the inmates of St. Dorothy's to breakfast, sounded through the house. Before the last boom had quite died away, Kate appeared.

"Let us come down at once," she said. "Miss Leicester has very short prayers in the hall, then breakfast immediately follows. After breakfast, those of us who are preparing for lectures are generally glad to get away by ourselves until it is time to go to school." [16]

"Please remember that I don't know anything about anything," answered Molly.

"Well, you will after to-day. Now, here we are in the dining hall. Good-morning, Miss Leicester!"

"Good-morning, my dear Kate!" replied Miss Leicester. "Molly Lavender, dear, I hope you slept well?"

"Yes, Miss Leicester, I slept beautifully," answered Molly.

"Take your stand near Kate. Now, I am going to begin."

The hall was filled with from forty to fifty girls of ages varying from seventeen to fourteen. Miss Leicester stood at the head of the hall. A troop of servants appeared. The principal read a psalm; the collect for the day followed; then the hungry girls marched straight into the breakfast room.

Molly found herself once again at Kate's table.

"If you like, you can sit here always," said Kate to her.

"I should like it very much," answered Molly.

"All right; I will speak to Miss Leicester. Miss Leicester, Molly Lavender would like to have a seat at my table." [17]

"Is there a vacant place?" asked Miss Leicester.

"Yes, here to my right."

"Very well, Molly can sit there for the present."

At this moment Molly met the quizzical eyes of Hester Temple. Hester's eyes seemed to say, as plainly as if she spoke the words, "How disgraceful it is of you to enthuse in that open manner! I knew you would do it—I read your character from the first."

Molly found herself blushing; then a slight sense of irritation took possession of her heart.

Breakfast was a meal quickly got over. The girls were all more or less preoccupied with the thoughts of the lectures which they were to attend that morning. Amy Frost, who sat next to Molly, was quite disconsolate.

"I don't know half my French," she said, appealing to Kate. "Mlle. Lebrun is so frightfully strict, and she does gabble so when she gets excited, that I can't take in half she says. She was awfully dissatisfied with my last *résumé* of her lecture—she held me up to ridicule before the other girls. I blush to think of it even yet."

"Well, Amy, know your French, and you won't be ridiculed," replied Kate, in a somewhat tart voice.

She was busy pouring out coffee, attending to the wants of everyone, and giving herself no thought at all. [18]

"You haven't touched anything," said Molly at last.

Kate gave her one of her quick, brilliant smiles.

"It is all right," she answered; her smile was followed by a sigh. "I am only at the other end of the pivot," she continued. "I thought of no one but myself a fortnight ago, and now I think of everybody except myself. It is just the reaction, nothing more whatever. You will soon deplore my selfishness."

"That I'm sure I never shall," answered Molly, but she felt worried.



"I do wish the girls here would sometimes talk downright sensible English," she said to herself. "I suppose the sort of sharp repartee which goes on all over the place is very clever, but it certainly puzzles a newcomer like myself. I wonder how Cecil will like it when she comes. The girls are not a bit in her style, but they can't help loving her for all that. She will be a sort of revelation to them. She is so quaint—so unlike anybody else. I wonder when I shall hear from father. Surely father must say yes. I think the Indian mails came to London yesterday; if so, they will be delivered at Redgarth to-day. Oh, I certainly ought to hear from father to-day. I wonder what he will have to tell me."

"A penny for your thoughts, Molly Lavender," said Amy, giving Molly's wrist a pinch. [19]

Molly started and blushed.

"I was thinking," she began.

"Anyone could see that. About what?" Amy asked.

"About my dearest friend."

"For goodness' sake don't answer her when she says 'a penny for your thoughts,'" interrupted Kate. "It is shabby of you, Amy, to try to probe a newcomer. I am head of this table, and I insist on being obeyed. Girls, will you stand up, please? I see Miss Leicester is just about to say grace."

A moment later Molly found herself alone in the hall. The girls had all rushed off to their work in different parts of the house. Miss Leicester, who was passing through the hall in a hurry, saw Molly standing near the fire. She paused to speak to her.

"My dear," she said, "prayers are at the school at a quarter to nine. Don't forget to ask Kate to introduce you, immediately after prayers, to Miss Forester."

Molly promised to obey, and then went up to her room. She found it in the hands of one of the housemaids. She put on her hat and jacket, and ran downstairs again. It was a crisp and beautiful autumn day. Not a leaf stirred on the trees; the sky was of a clear, pale blue; there was just a faint touch of frost in the air.

"Everything is lovely," she said, under her breath. "I mean to have a splendid time here. I mean to show grannie and father of what stuff I am made." [20]

Her meditations were cut short by a troop of girls who were seen passing St. Dorothy's.

They stopped abruptly when they saw Molly. One of them—a girl with a plain, freckled face—came close up to the paling which divided St. Dorothy's from the rest of the school.

"Say—are you a newcomer?" she called to her.

"I don't understand you," answered Molly, with a little haughtiness.

"But do say—are you a new-comer?"

When the girl spoke a second time, two or three of her companions giggled. Molly's face grew crimson.

"I have just come to St. Dorothy's," she replied, in a low voice.

"Oh, dear!" The girl with the freckled face dropped a mock courtesy. "Oh, dear, what a privilege for St. Dorothy's! I say, girls, isn't it a prim little darling? Good-by, dearie! we'll meet very soon in the presence of the great Miss Forester. *Au revoir*, love, *au revoir*."

The girl, with the rest of her companions, hurried across the grounds, and Molly returned to her station in the hall. The rest of the St. Dorothy girls now appeared, dressed in hats and jackets.

"Come," said Katie, "we are late; we must make a rush for it. I promise to steer you through the shoals. Why, what's the matter? You look worried." [21]

"I ought not to be," answered Molly, "but I'm afraid I am. A girl who was passing the house called out to me in a very disagreeable voice. Oh, of course I ought not to mind. Is she a Redgarth girl?"

"Has she sandy hair and a freckled face?" inquired Kate.

"Yes; she is a plain girl."

"I know her—her name is Matilda Matthews. If I were you, Molly, I wouldn't take the least notice of her. She doesn't belong to our house, and is never likely to. You'll have little or nothing to do with her, unless by chance you happen to attend the same lectures; she can make herself very disagreeable—none more so. I don't believe she is a high-principled girl, and I should recommend no friend of mine to have anything to do with her. Of course, you won't, and she isn't worth a thought. Now, come on; we must run, or we'll be late."

A moment later, and the girls entered the wide quadrangle of the school. They entered the enormous hall, where four hundred girls were assembled for prayers. Molly, to her joy, found her place by Kate's side, and after a moment of dazed wonder, had courage to raise her brown eyes to look around her. Hundreds of other eyes seemed to meet hers. In multitudes, however, is

safety. Molly could not be afraid of all the eyes. Soon a voice at the other end of the hall arrested her attention. She saw a solitary figure standing on a platform. The figure was that of a tall and noble-looking woman in the prime of life. There was a look about the whole face which immediately arrested the attention of those who gazed at it. The eyes had a kindling light in them, the mouth was shrewd as well as kindly, the brow was very full, broad, and of noble proportion; but it was the voice which awoke that quick enthusiasm with which Molly herself was full.

[22]

"That is Miss Forester, the principal of the school," whispered Kate to her companion.

Molly nodded; she could scarcely take her eyes from Miss Forester's face.

The principal gave out the first line of a hymn. A few bars were played on an organ, and then the whole of the great hall became full of the sweetest and most trained melody. The girls sang in parts: the music was simple, but beautifully rendered.

"At thy feet, O Lord, we lay,  
Thine own gift of this new day,"

sang the four hundred girls.

Molly found herself entering into the spirit of the well-known words. Toward the end of the hymn tears very nearly choked her voice. She was just the sort of girl to be easily influenced by her present surroundings. The hymn was followed by a psalm, which Miss Forester read aloud in her deep and beautiful tones. A second hymn followed; then there came a short prayer, followed by the benediction.

[23]

Immediately afterward all was bustle and movement. Miss Forester held up her hand. The girls and teachers stood still, as if by magic.

"I will take the class for Scripture in the north room in five minutes," said the principal. "Now, file out in order, please; every girl to her class."

The girls and teachers began to move up the hall.

"Stay behind one moment, Molly," said Kate; "I will take you to Miss Forester."

As she spoke Kate led Molly to the upper end of the hall. Miss Forester stood erect and dignified on the platform. It was very evident that her dark eyes took in each particular of the whole scene. Mistresses and pupils alike were all under her domination. Suddenly her eyes fell upon Kate.

With an imperious wave of her hand she beckoned the young girl to her side.

"Tell me why you are not going to your class, Kate O'Connor?" was her query.

"If you please, Miss Forester, I have brought Molly Lavender here."

"And who is Molly Lavender?"

"She is the new girl at St. Dorothy's."

"Yes, of course, I remember. Tell her to come here."

Kate beckoned to Molly, who came up at once.

[24]

"How do you do?" said Miss Forester, looking at the young girl as if she would read her through.

Molly raised her eyes to the principal's face. Something in their earnest gaze kindled an answering light in Miss Forester's eyes.

"I hope, Molly Lavender," she said, "you have come to this school imbued with an earnest spirit, and a desire to avail yourself of the great advantages which will be offered you?"

"I trust I have, madam," replied Molly, lowering her eyes.

There was something in the expression of the sweet face which touched the principal. She laid her firm hand for a brief instant on Molly's shoulder.

"If that is the case, my child, you will do well," she replied, in a gentle but thrilling voice. "Thank you, Kate, you can now attend to your own work. Molly, you have found no niche as yet. You can come with me to the north room; afterward I will take you to see the different professors, in order to ascertain what classes you are best fitted to join."

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### CHAPTER III. PROFESSORS AND PUPILS.

[25]

MOLLY was destined all her life long to remember the lecture which the principal of Redgarth delivered to her class that morning. The simplicity of the words, the noble thought which



pervaded each utterance, penetrated straight to her sensitive nature. Molly was in just the mood to be uplifted. She was the sort of girl to take things seriously. She regarded her arrival at Redgarth as a great step in her career. When Miss Forester spoke to her as she did, she struck the right chord, and whatever the future might bring forth, Molly became strongly attached to the principal from the first.

Miss Forester, who was quick at reading character, could not but be interested in those speaking and pathetic brown eyes. Now and then she gave her new pupil a full and direct glance. Molly bore this without shrinking; she was no longer shy; she was so completely interested that she forgot herself.

The lecture was on "The Value of Personal Influence." Miss Forester spoke much about the direct influence which each girl, however young, or slight, or commonplace, exercised over her companions; she touched on the all-important subject of environment, and said that those girls who had the privilege of being educated at a school like Redgarth would have much to answer for in the future. Molly made many brave resolves as she listened to the spirited words. [26]

When the class was over Miss Forester took her new pupil through the school, introduced her to many of the professors, and showed, by her manner, that she already took a marked and special interest in her.

"I will enter your name for my Scripture class at once," she said. "I saw you were interested in what I said this morning."

"Yes, madam," answered Molly.

"I have not time to talk to you much now; you must come to my study some evening for a long chat; but just tell me what special branch of study you wish to take up. Is it your intention to go from here to Girton or Newnham?"

"I should like to, but I shall not be able," answered Molly.

"Why not?"

"My father does not wish it; he wants me to join him in India when I am eighteen."

"I see—I see! Then we must make you a specially useful and practical girl. Is your mother living?"

"No." Molly lowered her eyes, a faint pink color stole into her cheeks.

"Then you are a motherless girl," said Miss Forester kindly. "I always have a special leaning toward such. I was motherless myself when very young. If your mother was a good woman, as I am sure she was, you must try to live up to what she would expect from you, could she speak to you from the home where she now is. There is a great deal to be done in life: I must not enter on this subject now. May I ask you a question? Is your father well off?" [27]

"Yes," answered Molly; "he is an Indian judge. He tells me that when I go to him I shall have to look after a very large establishment."

"Precisely; then you must learn how to rule. You must also know how to use your hands in the most efficient and thorough way possible. I approve of a course of training in cookery, and also in all branches of housework. Know something of the work that you try to correct in your household staff. You must also learn to rule your spirit. All this knowledge is a great and wonderful possession. Now I must talk no more. I am going to ask Miss Shaw to take you in hand for English. Here she is—let me introduce you to her."

Miss Shaw, a tall, somewhat gaunt woman, with an enormous brow, and clear but light blue eyes, came up to Miss Forester at this moment.

"Let me introduce Molly Lavender," said Miss Forester. "She has only just arrived at Redgarth, and is one of the new residents at St. Dorothy's. Will you kindly examine her in her English studies some time this afternoon? I know nothing with regard to her attainments, but at least she can think. I wish Molly to have every possible advantage, Miss Shaw; and if you think she is capable of understanding your lectures, will you take her as one of your pupils?" [28]

"With pleasure," replied Miss Shaw. "Come with me now, Molly; I am giving a course of lectures at this hour on 'Moral Science.' Here is a notebook for you; you can make any notes you like. If the subject is new to you, you will find it a little difficult at first, but just note down anything you understand. Immediately afterward I shall lecture on Charles I., which will probably be a more interesting subject. Will you return this afternoon at two o'clock? We can then have a quarter of an hour together, and I will find out what you really know, and what you don't know. Now, this is your seat, my dear."

Molly seated herself in front of a small desk: the desk contained ink, pen, and blotting-pad. Her new, clean, little notebook lay before her. The professor immediately resumed her place on a small platform, and continued her lecture. The subject was decidedly over Molly's head, but she made valiant efforts to attend and understand. She was getting some faint ideas with regard to one of the primary rules of the subject of the lecture, when a sudden and severe dig in her elbow caused her to turn her head abruptly. The sandy-haired girl was seated next to her. She gave Molly a particularly intelligent glance, accompanied by a knowing wink. Molly turned away; her [29]

irritation and dislike were quite apparent.

The lecture lasted for half an hour. Immediately afterward those girls who were attending the English History class followed Miss Shaw into another room.

"Molly Lavender, will you come with the rest?" said Miss Shaw, giving her new pupil a kind smile.

"Say, is Molly Lavender the little name?" whispered the sandy-haired girl. "Ha, ha! Miss Prim, didn't I tell you we'd soon meet again? Your little secret is divulged. Molly *Lavender*, forsooth! Dear me, I wonder if it smells sweetly." She caught one of Molly's hands as she spoke, and raised it to her nostrils.

Remembering Kate O'Connor's advice, Molly resolved to take no notice. There were certain forms of ridicule, however, which affected her painfully, and she had some difficulty in keeping back a strong sense of anger. Without making any reply, she hurried after the rest of her companions to the English History classroom. To her great relief, she found that Matilda Matthews was not one of the number. With Charles I. and his pathetic story Molly found herself quite at home. Miss Shaw was a splendid lecturer, and she threw many fresh lights on that time of struggle and adversity. Molly listened so hard that she scarcely put down any notes. The girl who was seated next to her spoke to her on the subject. [30]

"You will forgive me, won't you?" she said. "You are a stranger here, are you not?"

"Yes; this is my first day at school. Why did you ask?"

"In the first place, your face is new, and in the next, you hardly took any notes. You ought to take plenty of notes. You will be expected to show a perfect *résumé* of this lecture to-morrow morning to Miss Shaw."

"I can easily do that," answered Molly. "I remember almost every word."

"You think so," said the girl, "but you will find, when you begin to write, that that is not the case. Please take my advice, and make plenty of notes in future. You will find that the most salient facts have slipped your memory. Miss Shaw wants accuracy beyond everything. Your writing, your spelling, your grammar, must all be perfect. Miss Shaw will be down on you like a sledge-hammer if you make a mistake. Then Miss Forester reads almost all the *résumés* of the lectures in the course of the week. I never knew anyone so strict as Miss Forester. She aims at perfection herself, and woe betide any of us, if we try to fall short of her ideal! Now this morning's work is over, and we are all going to your different houses for dinner. Where do you live?"

"At St. Dorothy's."

"Lucky you! there isn't a house in the place like St. Dorothy's. I'm at Orchard House. Oh, yes, it's very nice, and we have a splendid garden, but St. Dorothy's is *the* place of residence. Have you a room to yourself?" [31]

"Yes; a tiny one."

"Lucky you again! I have the fourth of a room; the room is divided by curtains; all the furniture is the same color,—Miss Marsden is the name of our principal—that is her special fad. I am in the golden room. It is so pretty: wall-paper, chintzes, bed hangings, curtains, all of a pale shade of gold. The blue room is next to that; then we have the green room; then the red room; then the violet room. I must say they are all sweet, but a room to one's self is something to be coveted. What is your name?"

"Molly Lavender."

"How pretty! I once had a sister called Molly; she died; you've a certain look that reminds me of her. My name is Constance Moore; I'm studying awfully hard; I've got to live by it some day. I'm so glad we are going to sit next to each other at history. Now, be sure to take notes this afternoon. Good-by, Molly! Ah, there is Kate O'Connor; she is calling you to walk home with her."

In the afternoon Molly had an interview with Miss Shaw, and one or two other professors, who wished to ascertain what her abilities and acquirements were. Molly's intellectual powers belonged essentially to the average order. Her force of character, however, and intensely warm heart, gave her a marked individuality wherever she went. She spent an afternoon of hard work, and returned to tea at St. Dorothy's, feeling tired and overexcited. Kate O'Connor, who was standing in the entrance hall, slipped her hand through Molly's arm, and they walked together to the tea-room. [32]

"Well," she said, in a sympathetic tone, "how did you get on? You had an ordeal to go through, had you not?"

"I got on pretty well," answered Molly; "I am not a bit clever, you know."

Kate glanced at her with a smile.

"Perhaps not," she replied. "What does that matter? You are going to be a very sweet woman by and by; you are going to be womanly in the best sense of the word. Miss Forester has taken quite a fancy to you—that in itself is something to be proud of; she scarcely ever shows

preference. When she does, that person is in rare luck, as we say in old Ireland. But what have you done? Whose lectures are you to attend?"

"Miss Shaw is going to take me for English, Mlle. Lebrun for French, then I am to join Professor Franklin's class for drawing, and Fräulein Goldschmidt will undertake my music."

"I think you have done very well," replied Kate; "but don't you want to take up something special? Are you only going in for an all-round education?"

"Miss Forester spoke to me about that," answered Molly, blushing slightly. "She says my attainments are quite average; I am neither beyond nor behind the ordinary girl of my age. She recommends me strongly to give a year to general education. At the end of that time she will counsel me with regard to any of the special subjects which I am likely to wish to take up. My father is devoted to music, but I don't think I have it in me to make a first-rate musician, although my late mistress said that my voice was true." [33]

"If it is, you had better take singing lessons, Molly. A sweet, true voice can give a great deal of pleasure."

"Yes, I know it makes other people happy, which is a great deal to be said in its favor," replied Molly; "but, really, I can do very little in that way."

"You shall sing to me; Hester Temple has a piano in her room. You shall sing to me there."

"I could not sing before her."

"Forgive me, that is silly of you. Hester is a most excellent creature, although I grant she is a trifle quizzical. Rest assured, however, that she has plenty of heart beneath it all. I hope, Molly, you are not going to be too modest; that is a great mistake. Now, I am not going to lecture you any more. By the way, there is a letter for you. It came by the midday post. It was lying on this slab, where all the letters are put, and I said to myself, 'Molly Lavender shall not be quizzed.' You know some of the girls quiz a newcomer shamefully. I put the letter in your room; you will be able to read it in peace now." [34]

"Thank you a thousand times," replied Molly, the color spreading all over her delicate face. "Did you, Kate, happen to notice if the letter had a foreign stamp upon it?"

"I'm afraid I didn't. Now we must really go into the tea-room. Miss Leicester likes us to be punctual."

After tea, the girls strolled about the grounds in pairs, chatting, and eagerly recounting the different events of the day. The girls of Redgarth formed a little world of their own, and Molly began already to see that, notwithstanding the really splendid life of the place, their views were somewhat narrow, and seldom extended beyond the surroundings of the school. On this occasion, she had little leisure to give to them; her one desire was to get away to her room, in order to be able to read her earnestly expected letter.

Kate helped her in this.

"You can't have half unpacked," she said. "You will have nice time to put all your things in order between now and supper; run off and do it, and pray remember this is your last evening of leisure. You will have to write *résumés* of all your lectures to-morrow night, and won't, for the next week or fortnight, have time or thoughts to give to anything but your studies."

"And will it be better after the first week or fortnight?" asked Molly. [35]

Kate laughed.

"It may take longer than that," she replied; "the whole thing depends upon yourself. If you are quick and adaptable, you will soon get into the ways of the place. You will begin to understand the professors, and to know that mademoiselle wishes to have one thing remembered, fräulein another, Miss Shaw another. You will begin, in short, to classify, and to make the sort of notes which will be useful to you; but for the first fortnight or three weeks, I may as well tell you at once that you will be in hopeless hot water over your notes."

"Oh, Kate, you quite frighten me!" exclaimed Molly.

"I am sorry, but I must tell you the truth. Isn't it so, Hester?" she called out.

Hester, who was passing through the hall, came up to Kate's side.

"Is what true?" she said, with a laugh.

"Isn't it true that poor Molly will be in hot water over her notes?"

"Hotter than hot—scalding, I should say," replied Hester.

"Now I am sure you are not in earnest," answered Molly.

"Oh, am I not? I never more fully and absolutely spoke the words of sober wisdom. May I ask if you attended a lecture to-day?"

"I listened to two of Miss Shaw's lectures—one on 'Moral Science,' which I did not understand." [36]

"I should rather think not, poor chicken! What has a baby like you to do with moral science?"

"I didn't understand it a bit," answered Molly; "but afterward Miss Shaw lectured on Charles I., and what she said was quite splendidly interesting."

"So interesting that you enthused—*n'est ce pas?*"

"Please don't quiz me, Hester; I was deeply interested in that lecture."

"You took notes, of course?"

"I didn't—at least very few."

"And you are to write a *résumé* of the lecture to-night?"

"I am; but it really won't be difficult."

"All right. Now, Kate, do let me speak! Molly, my dear, there is no teacher like experience. Write your notes by all means, then tell me to-morrow evening what Miss Shaw thought of the *résumé*. Now, I see you are dying to put your things in order. Be off with you!"

Molly ran upstairs; she was excited, her new life was full of the deepest pleasure, but there were a few qualms lying near her heart. Suppose, after all, she failed to grasp the full meaning of this beautiful home of learning. Suppose she didn't avail herself of the advantages held out to her. She had struggled so hard to come to Redgarth: suppose it was a mistake, after all. She knew well that she was not specially clever or brilliant in any way.

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"I don't want to fail," thought Molly. "Oh, how I wish Cecil were here! she would help me so much. Yes, here is father's letter at last. Now, I wonder what he has said. Am I to be made happy? Is Cecil's life to be a grand success, or the reverse? Oh, dear! I quite tremble at the thought of what the next few minutes may bring forth."

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## CHAPTER IV.

[38]

### DWELLERS IN CUBICLES.

**M**Y dear Molly," wrote her father, "when this reaches you, you will have begun your new life as a student at Redgarth. From what your grandmother tells me, I am sure the place will suit you, and I trust you will derive all possible benefit from the sound education which you are receiving. I may as well, however, say frankly that, for my own part, I don't especially care for learned women. I like a girl to be thoroughly well domesticated, and to think no household work beneath her knowledge. When you come to me, you will have a great deal to do in the way of superintending—you will be the mistress of a large staff of servants; you will have to contend against the prejudices of race, and the ignorance of the Hindu. I differ from most of my countrymen in disliking the style of cooking which goes on here. I have no passion for curries, and curry seems to be the sole thing which the Indian cook considers necessary to digestion. I hope, Molly, you have a taste for cooking. Does Miss Forester happen to have a class for the training of young girls in this important department? If so, I beseech you, my child, join it. I quite long for a few dishes in the old-fashioned English style."

[39]

"Oh, when will he come to the point?" thought poor Molly, as her eyes rushed over the page.

His honor, Judge Lavender, however, had by no means exhausted himself on the all-important subject of dinner.

"You know, of old, my love, that I am easily pleased," he continued. "A little clear soup nicely flavored, a cutlet done to a turn, with the correct sauce,—understand, Molly, that everything depends on the sauce,—a savory omelette, a *meringue* or a jelly, make up the simple dinner which more than satisfies your affectionate father. You will think of this trifling matter, my darling, when you are perusing your Latin and Greek, and those other abstruse subjects which are now considered essential to the feminine mind."

"What would father think if he saw me puzzling my brains over 'Moral Science'?" thought Molly, knitting her dark brows. "Oh, dear, dear! I'm afraid he's got this cooking craze so strong on him at the present moment that he will forget all about my darling Cecil."

She bent her head and continued to read her letter.

"Yes, I am enjoying excellent health; all the delicacy from which I suffered some years ago has passed away. I am a hale and strong man, and do not feel any inconvenience from this climate. I shall be able to place you in a very nice position when you take the head of my house, my dear little girl. Prepare for this time now by all the means in your power; work hard, eat plenty, take abundance of exercise, and come out to me in two years' time a fresh and beautiful specimen of young English girlhood. I shall look forward to your first impressions of Redgarth with much interest. From what your grandmother tells me, Miss Forester must be a remarkable woman. I only trust she is not too mannish. Whatever you do, Molly, strive to retain all the gentle privileges of your sex. Endeavor to polish yourself in every way, my love, and to acquire those nice accomplishments which are essential to the comfort of man. I want you to be particular about

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your dress. Your dear mother was. I would not have married her if this had not been the case."

"Oh, I wish he wouldn't drag darling mother's name in," thought Molly, her lips quivering. "Why do his letters, although I long so for them, always set my teeth on edge?"

"I want you to learn grace and deportment, my darling," continued Judge Lavender; "in particular, how to enter and leave a room nicely. A little light repartee, not *too* clever, in conversation, gives sparkle, and is by no means amiss. For Heaven's sake, don't ever consider that it is your duty to argue with men: just let them see that you understand them; they like to be appreciated. Above all, learn the art of making tea gracefully, and without any *contretemps*. Deportment is fearfully overlooked, in these later days of our century. Struggle for a dignified deportment, Molly, as you love me. Now I must stop, my dear, or I shall miss the post.

[41]

"Your affectionate father,  
"CHARLES LAVENDER."

"Oh, good gracious! not a single word about Cecil," thought poor Molly. "Yes, yes, here's a postscript; her name does come in—now, what does he say?"

"As to your erratic and eccentric young friend, Cecil Ross, I own that I feel a certain difficulty with regard to the request which you have made. I am quite rich enough to oblige you in the matter as far as mere money is concerned; my difficulty is on quite another head. The fact is, I dread the influence this exceedingly brusque young person may bring to bear on your own character, and hesitate, therefore, at the thought of placing her at the same school."

"Oh, father! how can you!" thought Molly, quick tears filling her eyes. "Oh, my darling, noble, brave Cecil! How little you know her!"

"I don't absolutely refuse your request, my dear," continued the judge, "but before granting it, I have written to your grandmother to consult her on the subject. She will give me an unprejudiced report with regard to Cecil Ross. When I hear from her I will reply to you. Now, once again, adieu. Your affectionate father."

After finishing her letter, Molly became oppressed by a strange sense of limpness. The strength and go which her vigorous day had imparted seemed suddenly to forsake her. She clasped her hands on her lap and gazed straight before her. She had been indulging in a daydream, and the letter which she had just received from the one whom she loved best in the world, gave her a sense of chill which almost amounted to shock. Tears rose slowly to her eyes; she slipped the letter into her pocket, and going over to her little writing-table, took a sheet out of her portfolio, and wrote a few hasty lines to her grandmother.

[42]

"I have scarcely time for more than a word," wrote Molly. "I have just heard from father, who wants to consult you about Cecil. Please, darling grannie, tell him what you really think of Cecil. Oh, I know she will be quite safe in your hands. Please do not lose a mail in writing to father, for the whole thing is so important.

"Your loving and anxious  
"MOLLY."

Having finished the letter, Molly addressed it; she then ran quickly downstairs, to discover by what means she could get it into the post. Miss Leicester met, her in the hall.

"Well, Molly," she said, in a cheerful tone, "I hope you have by this time got all your things nicely unpacked and in perfect order, so as to be able to get into a good routine of work to-morrow."

"I am ever so sorry," answered Molly, "but the fact is——"

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"What, my dear; why do you hesitate?"

"My things are not unpacked, Miss Leicester. I had a long letter from father by this afternoon's post; I have been reading it; there was a good deal in the letter to make me think; then it was absolutely necessary for me to write this. Please tell me where I am to put this letter in order that it may be posted."

"In the box just above your head which is marked 'Letters.' I am sorry to say you are late for this evening's departure."

"Am I really? Oh, what a pity! When will the letter go?"

"This box will be cleared the last thing to-night, and the letter will reach London, if London is its destination, some time to-morrow afternoon. I am sorry your things are not unpacked; all your time after supper ought to be taken up preparing for to-morrow's work. Miss Shaw tells me that you are to write notes on two lectures which she delivered this morning. Let me tell you, Molly, that Miss Shaw is extremely particular. Well, I suppose I must excuse you this time, but now run off, my love; don't waste a moment."

Molly ran upstairs; the cloud which her father's letter brought over her spirit seemed to grow a little thicker.

"No one quite understands me except Cecil," she muttered. "How I wish Cecil were here!"

She stooped over her trunks and began unpacking them. The occupation did her good, and brought back some of her cheerfulness. She had nearly come to the end of her task when the great gong for supper sounded through the house. She found that she had no time to change her dress; Miss Leicester always insisted upon punctuality at meals, and Molly would be forced to appear in her thick morning dress. She hastily smoothed her hair, and went downstairs feeling hot and uncomfortable. Every other girl at Kate O'Connor's table looked cool and fresh.

[44]

"Come and sit near me, Molly," said Kate, in her kind voice. "After supper," she whispered, as Molly sank down into the vacant chair, "I have a little plan to talk over with you and Amy Frost. You must both come and see me in my dormitory."

"Yes," replied Molly.

"I am not fortunate like you," answered Kate; "I can only receive you in my share of the dormitory. Oh, I don't complain of my little cubicle, but a cubicle is very different from a room."

"Yes," answered Molly, in a reflective tone. She thought that Kate's eyes were fixed upon her with an expectant and wistful glance.

She longed to ask her to chum with her in her own pretty room, but the thought of Cecil restrained her.

"Do you find the room very hot?" asked Amy Frost's voice at her elbow.

Molly, who was flushed already, grew redder than ever.

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"I suppose I look very hot," she replied; "I forgot all about changing my dress, I was so busy unpacking."

"Unpacking from tea to supper time!" responded Amy. "What a lot of dresses you must have brought!"

"Don't be impertinent, Amy," said Kate.

"My dear Kitty, that is the last thing I wish to be, but patent facts must draw forth certain conclusions. If Molly has not come here with a supply of luggage resembling a trousseau, why should she take from half-past four to seven o'clock to get her things in order?"

"I didn't," said Molly; "I was reading a letter and writing one."

She spoke defiantly. Her manner irritated Amy, who had not the best temper in the world. She didn't speak at all for a moment; then, bending forward, she said, in a semi-whisper:

"I hope you will forgive the remark I am going to make. I do it as a matter of duty. It is the duty of old girls to give newcomers all possible hints with regard to deportment, the rules of the place, etc. Now, Miss Leicester is an angel, but she is an angel who likes us all to observe the unspoken rules of the house. One of these is that we should look nice and fresh at supper time. Those who do not carry out her wishes are likely to get into her black books. Now, there is a difference, a subtle difference, between the white and black books even of an angel. Take the hint, Miss Lavender. I have spoken."

[46]

"I don't think you have spoken at all nicely, Amy," said Kate. "Why do you persecute poor Molly? Of course she'll come downstairs properly dressed to-morrow night."

"Have I made you angry?" asked Amy, looking hard at her.

"No, no!" replied Molly. She felt tears near her eyes, but made an effort to recover herself. "The fact is," she said, making an effort to speak pleasantly, "I knew perfectly well that I ought to dress for supper. Hester was kind enough to tell me all about it last night, but I had a long letter from father. This letter interested me very much. I was obliged, in consequence of it, to write a hasty line to my grandmother in London. The rest of my time was spent unpacking my things, and I found, when the supper gong sounded, that I was still in my morning dress. That is the whole story. If, on account of this omission, I am likely to displease Miss Leicester, I had better go and apologize after supper."

"Oh, for goodness' sake, don't do anything of the kind!" said Amy. "Twenty to one Miss Leicester has never noticed you. Molly, your generous explanation forces me to confess my fault. I am the soul of mischief—in short, I am the Puck of St. Dorothy's. Your hot face, and a certain little air of discomfort which it expressed, tempted me to quiz you. Now, do forgive me, and think no more of the matter."

[47]

"I am glad you have said that, Amy," exclaimed Kate, in a pleased tone. "Don't forget that you are to come up to the dormitory with Molly after supper."

The meal had come to an end, and as no one seemed inclined to dance that night, Molly soon found herself an inmate of Kate's pretty cubicle. The dormitory consisted of a long, lofty room, with cubicles at each side and a passage down the middle. The cubicles were divided by wooden partitions, and were railed off in front by pretty curtains. The whole arrangement was pleasant, bright, and convenient; the drawback being that sounds could be distinctly heard from one cubicle to another. With this one disadvantage, the cubicles possessed all the comforts of small private rooms. In her own cubicle, each girl could indulge her individual taste, and thus give a certain indication of her character. Kate O'Connor's was decidedly of the chaotic order. As she



entered it now, followed by her two companions, she made a dash at her hat, scarf, and gloves, which lay sprawling across her bed.

"Oh, dear!" she exclaimed, "how my Irish nature does burst forth! Do stay near the door for a moment, girls, or rather, I should say, near the curtains. I'll set this room right in a jiffy. Now, then, here goes!"

She pulled open a drawer, thrust her hat and scarf out of sight, kicked a box under the bed, pulled open the lid of her desk, swept a quantity of papers into it, then faced her two companions with her hands to her sides. [48]

"*Voilà!*" she exclaimed; "now tell me, you two, is there a more perfect room in the world? The fact is this, I like a certain degree of order on the surface and disorder beneath. I couldn't live with tidy drawers; they'd drive me mad in a week. I like a hay-stack in my drawers; there's something exciting about never knowing where to find your things. You pitchfork your hay-stack up and down, and there's no knowing what may unexpectedly turn up. There are advantages in not being too well acquainted with one's property. The other night, for instance, I was in despair how to make myself look smart to meet our beloved Leicester's angelic eye. I suddenly came across two yards of pale green ribbon buried under a lot of *débris* in the hay-stack. I twisted half in my hair, and made a knot of the remaining half for the neck of my blouse. Leicester, the darling, looked at me with much approval. Have I shocked you, girls?"

"Not me," said Amy. "I know you far too well."

"You have astonished me," said Molly. "I certainly never thought you were untidy. You don't look it a bit in your dress or hair. I rather think I like you for it. I'm glad, at least, that you are not perfect."

"You dear little quaint piece of goods!" said Kate. "How ridiculous it does sound to hear you speak of me as perfect! Did you really think so, even for a minute?" [49]

"I did. Oh, now we can meet on common ground. Kate, what are you laughing at?"

"I must have my laugh out," replied Kate. "Amy, did you hear—did you hear what she said? She thought me perfect! I, the dreamy, the untidy, the reckless, the incorrigible! Bless you, Molly! I have not laughed so heartily for many a day."

"But you don't want to be the incorrigible?" said Molly anxiously.

"Child, you'll kill me, if you look so solemn. Can't you take a joke? Oh, what a trial it is for an Irish girl to live in England! you English are so painfully prosaic. Do believe one thing about Kate O'Connor, my dear little Molly: it is her fashion to talk at random. She would not be Irish if she were not always propounding the most impossible theories, and saying the most impossible things. But when she does the queer things and says the queer words, just make up your mind that she is in fun, and doesn't mean them to be taken seriously. Of course, when she says sensible things she means them, and that reminds me that we are here on a very sensible matter. Now to business."

As Kate spoke, she leaped lightly into the center of her bed, and sat there, tailor fashion, with her legs tucked under her. She immediately invited Molly and Amy to follow her example.

"I don't think there is anyone in the next cubicle," she said, "but I must find out. Hi, Julia, are you there?" [50]

As no answer came from Julia, Kate nodded her head brightly.

"Empty on that side—so far, so good; now, then, for the other. Mary Jane, love, are you at home?"

Mary Jane being also silent, Kate clapped her hands, and looked demurely at her companions.

"Now, then," she said, "this delicious little plan wants explaining. Are you all attention, girls?"

"I am," said Amy. "The fact is, I'm more than attention—I'm devoured by curiosity."

Molly nodded, but did not speak.

"Well," said Kate, "my plan is this—I want to form a society to eject selfishness from St. Dorothy's."

Amy sighed deeply.

"Oh, Kate!" she cried; "I did think you had got something sensible in your head at last. What is the use of taking up wild, abstruse ideas of that sort?"

"My idea is neither abstruse nor wild," replied Kate. "Do listen, Amy; you can speak and argue as much as you like when you know what I mean. You and I, my dear, belong to the afflicted tribe—we live in cubicles. We are the Dwellers in Cubicles—that is our name. There are times, Amy, when Mary Jane and Julia make my cubicle anything but an abode of peace. I've not the least doubt that Harriet and Pussy give you headache also at odd intervals. It is not easy to write good epitomes of our lectures when we are sitting between two fires of idle badinage, chaff, silly stories, and sometimes even—I'll just whisper the word—quarrelings. [51]

"Now, in this house there are a certain number of rooms which fortunate students hold undisputed sway over. Some of these students are obliging, and during the hours of study, share their rooms with their less fortunate friends; but others are selfish, perhaps from thoughtlessness, and keep their rooms to themselves. I have been racking my brains over a careful calculation, and I find that, supposing St. Dorothy's to be quite full, every student in the place could be accommodated with a quiet corner for study, if each girl who has a room to herself would share it with one chum between supper and prayer time. Of course, such a state of things can't be enforced by any rules or any order, but it is my belief that moral suasion can do a good deal. I want to bring morality to bear in the matter. I want to form a club, and I want to force the girls to become members of it; those who refuse can be sent to a sort of moral Coventry. The object of the club will be to wage war against selfishness, and particularly against that awful form of selfishness which sports its oak, to borrow an Oxford phrase, against the suffering Dwellers in Cubicles. What do you say, Amy, to my darling scheme?"

"Oh, my dear, I should love it, of course," replied Amy; "but unfortunately I belong to the Dwellers in Cubicles. Molly's opinion is worth having, for she belongs to the opposite side." [52]

"I brought Molly here on purpose," said Kate. "Molly is just in the position to give a perfectly candid and unbiased opinion. She is a privileged member of the Single-room Fraternity. She has made no special friends as yet. Now, Molly, you can tell me frankly what you think of the scheme. How, for instance, would you like to share your room with an outsider?"

Molly thought for a moment.

"You speak frankly to me," she said, "and I must reply in the same spirit. I have a great friend. I am hoping against hope that she may come to St. Dorothy's. My friend is poor, and I know that she will be obliged to come here in the least expensive way. She will not have a room to herself, and I look forward with great pleasure to giving her any little privilege I can. I hope that she and I may study together in my room."

"Well, Molly, then you are in favor of the plan?" said Kate, looking at her a little anxiously.

"Yes; but then I am not unselfish, for it would be delightful for me to have Cecil in my room."

Kate gave a faint sigh.

"No one knows the difficulties under which the Dwellers in Cubicles labor," she exclaimed. "I, for instance, have a passion for certain kinds of work, but I'm afraid, although I manage to please my lecturers, that I am something of the scatter-brain order of human beings. When I hear Julia and Mary Jane chatting and quarreling, and calling across to each other over my head, and sometimes rushing to meet each other just outside my curtain, to exchange either blows or kisses, I must own that my poetic ideas or my thoughtful phrases are apt to melt into a sort of Irish frenzy. The fact is, under the existing condition of things, I indulge in Irish frenzy every night of my life, and it is bad for me in every way; it is simply ruining my character. I get into a furious passion, then I repent, and I get into bed really quite weak, it is so fearfully exhausting." [53]

"Oh, Kate, I can't help it!" exclaimed Molly. "You must be my chum until Cecil comes. Perhaps Cecil won't come at all. Oh, I fear as much as I hope about that. If you will be satisfied to be my chum, *only* until Cecil comes, you are heartily welcome, Kate."

"You are a duck, and I accept heartily," said Kate, in her frank way; "but because I have reached an ark of shelter, that is no reason why I should not extend a vigorous hand to a drowning sister."

"Mary Jane, for instance," exclaimed Amy. "Who is the unfortunate victim who is to admit that Dweller in Cubicles into her inner sanctuary?"

"Twenty to one Mary Jane won't wish to go," replied Kate. "Anyhow, the nice, honest, hard-working, white sheep can't be crushed on account of the black. I am going to draw up rules for the new club to-morrow. I shall quote Molly Lavender as a noble example of unselfishness. I shall have an interview with Miss Leicester, and get her to give her sanction to my scheme. Oh, I'm certain she will, when she recognizes the terrible position of the studiously minded Dwellers in Cubicles." [54]

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## CHAPTER V. CECIL AND THE BOYS.

 [55]

**F**OUR boys were seated round the break fast table. They ranged in age from fourteen to ten. One glance at their faces was sufficient to show that they belonged to the average healthy-minded, hearty, English schoolboy. A girl was pouring out coffee for the quartet. She was standing to her work. Her age might have been sixteen: in some respects she looked older, in some respects younger. She was a tall, slim girl, with a somewhat long face of a pale but clear olive. Her eyes were dark, large, and well cut; her brow was particularly noble. She had quantities of straight, thick, black hair, which was swept off her forehead and fastened in a thick knot at the nape of her neck. The girl's name was Cecil Ross. She was Molly Lavender's

dearest friend, the one around whom Molly's warmest thoughts, hopes, and affections were centered. The boys were eating their breakfast with the voracious appetite of the British schoolboy. The eldest had a look of his sister.

"I say, Ceci," he exclaimed, "how white you are! You've been fagging last night; I know you have, and I call it a beastly shame." [56]

"Oh, never mind me, Maurice," said Cecil; "I have to study, you know, and really you four do want such a lot of mending and making and seeing to generally, that if I don't sit up a little bit at night, I simply get no study at all. Jimmy, darling, is it necessary to put six lumps of sugar into that cup of coffee?"

"There's no sweetening in this sugar," said Jimmy, aged eleven; "I can't make it out. What ails it? I put ten lumps in last night, Ceci, when you were out, and the coffee only tasted like mud."

"Like treacle, you mean," said Maurice. "Don't you think it's a shame to waste good food? You're a greedy youngster, and I'll punch your head if you don't look out."

Jimmy bobbed his curly fair head, for Maurice had extended one strong young hand as he uttered his threat.

"It's time for us all to be off now," he said, rising from the table and shaking the crumbs from his Norfolk suit.

"Like dear boys, do go out quietly," said Cecil; "Mrs. Rogers has spent a very suffering night, and I don't want to wake her."

"Oh, bother!" exclaimed Jimmy; "what with no sugar, and having to keep as still as mice, how is a fellow to have a chance? I say, Maurice— Oh, I say, I didn't mean it; no, I didn't, Ceci, not really."

The boys clattered off; Cecil heard them tumbling and scrambling downstairs; she uttered a faint sigh for Mrs. Rogers' chance of sleep, and then walked to the window to watch them as they ran down the street. They attended the Grammar School—the far-famed Grammar School of the little town of Hazlewick; the school was at the corner of the street. [57]

"How Maurice grows!" thought Cecil, as she watched them. "Of course, I know this sort of thing can't go on. There's not money enough; it can't be done, and how are they to be educated? I wouldn't tell dear old Maurice what brought the black lines under my eyes last night. No, it wasn't study,—not study in the ordinary sense,—it was that other awful thing which takes more out of one than the hardest of hard work. It was worry. Try as I would, I could not stretch my cloth to cover the space allotted to it. In short, at the end of the year, if something is not done, I, Cecil Ross, will be in debt. Now, I'm not going into debt for anyone. I promised mother six months ago, when she died, that somehow or other I'd keep out of debt, and I'll do it. Oh, dear, dear! what is to be done? I suppose I must give up that delightful scheme of Molly's, that I should go to Redgarth for two or three years, and perfect myself in all sorts of learning, and then take a good post as head-mistress of some high school. I don't see how it's to be done—no, I really don't. What would the boys do without me?"

At this point in Cecil's meditations, there came a knock, very firm and decided, at the sitting-room door. [58]

"Come in," she said, and Miss Marshall, her landlady, entered the room.

"Now, Miss Ross," she said, "I've come to say some plain words. You know I'm a very frank body, and I'm afraid I can't keep you and those boys any longer in the house. There's poor Mrs. Rogers woke up out of the first sleep she's had the entire night. Oh, I don't blame 'em,—the young rascals,—but they simply can't keep quiet. What are they but four schoolboys? and all the world knows what it means when there are four schoolboys in a house."

"I promise that they shall behave better in future," said Cecil; "they must take off their outdoor shoes in the hall and—"

Miss Marshall raised her hand; she was a large-limbed, bony woman of fifty. She had a thin red face, small but kindly eyes, and a firm mouth. She would not be cruel to anybody; neither would she be inordinately kind. She was shrewd and matter-of-fact. She had to earn her living, and she considered it her duty to put this fact before all other considerations. Cecil's white young face touched her, but she was not going on that account to give way.

"It isn't that I don't love the lads," she said, "and you too, Miss Ross, but the thing can't be done. I make my living out of this house, and Mrs. Rogers has sent for me to say she'll leave at the end of the week if I don't find another place for you and your brothers, my dear. Mrs. Rogers is the drawing-room lodger, and, what with her being ill, and one thing and another, I make a lot of extrys out of her. Now, I don't mind letting you know, Miss Ross, that it's from extrys we poor lodging-house keepers make our profit. There's never an extry to put into your account, my dear, and, besides, I *could* get ten shillings a week more for these rooms, only I promised your poor, dear ma that I wouldn't raise the rent on you. The fact is, Miss Ross, Mr. Chandler would gladly take the parlor and the upstairs rooms for himself and his lady for the whole winter, and I think I ought to put it to you, my dear young lady." [59]

"Of course," said Cecil.

She stood upright like a young reed. Her brows were slightly knit; she did not glance at Miss Marshall. She was looking straight before her.

"I understand," she said, turning her gaze full upon her landlady's red face, "that you wish us to go?"

"Oh, my dear, it's sorry I am to have to say it, but that's the plain fact."

"How long can you give us?"

"Do sit down, Miss Cecil; I declare you're whiter than a sheet; you'll fade off like your dear ma if you're not careful. There, my dear, there, you shan't be hurried; you take your time—you take your time."

"It's a dreadful position," said Cecil; "it is fearfully inconvenient; there's not another house where we can be so comfortable; there's no one else will bear with us as you have borne with us." [60]

"Oh, for mercy's sake, my dear, don't you begin that, or I'll yield—I declare I will! and how am I to live if I don't raise my rent, and seek lodgers that go in for extrys. Look here, Miss Cecil, why do you burden yourself with those young gentlemen; why don't you put them to school?"

"What do you mean?" said Cecil; "they are at school."

"Why don't you put 'em to boarding school; it would be a sight better, and cost less—and there, I forgot to tell you, Miss Pinchin's English teacher left her only yesterday; there is a vacancy in that first class school for a good English teacher; why shouldn't you try for it, Miss Ross?"

"I don't know—I'm greatly obliged," said Cecil. "I'll see what I can do, Miss Marshall, and let you know to-night; perhaps you can give us at least a week."

"That I can, and a fortnight too," said Miss Marshall. "Dear, dear, it's a hateful job altogether, and me that loved your ma so much. I wouldn't do it, not for any Chandlers, but when Mrs. Rogers, whose extras mount up wonderful, threatens to leave, there seems no help for it. Duty is duty, aint it, Miss Ross? and the best thing for a poor woman like me to see to, is that she keeps her head well above water, and lays by for her old age." [61]

"Of course," said Cecil abstractedly. She was scarcely listening to Miss Marshall. She was thinking of the vacancy at Miss Pinchin's school.

The landlady reached the door and half opened it, then came back a step or two into the room.

"You might as well order dinner now, my dear, while I'm here. What'll you have?"

"The cold mutton and potatoes," said Cecil.

"Bless you, child! there's only the bone downstairs. Master Jimmy was mad with hunger last night, and he stole down to the kitchen about nine o'clock. That boy has the impudence—— 'Fork out that cold mutton,' says he, 'I can't sleep with a hollow inside of me. You bring the cold mutton in here, and let me have a slice or two.' I brought the joint and some bread, and left him standing in the kitchen. When I came back, why, 'twas nothing but the bone. That child grows wonderful fast; you can't blame him, poor lad."

"I do blame him for not speaking to me," said Cecil; "but that is not your fault, Miss Marshall."

"Well, my dear, what'll you have for dinner?"

"Please put the bone down, and make a little soup."

"That soup won't be ready for early dinner, Miss Ross."

"The soup will do for to-morrow's dinner. I am going out in a few moments, and I'll bring something fresh in from the butcher's. And please make a very large rice pudding, Miss Marshall, and let's have cabbage and plenty of potatoes. I'll bring the cabbage in when I come. I suppose there are plenty of potatoes left?" [62]

"Never a one at all, my dear; you finished the last supply yesterday."

Cecil sighed.

"Well, I'll bring potatoes too," she said.

The landlady closed the door at last, and Cecil gave a sigh of relief.

"She's gone, and I can think," she said to herself. "I'm glad she mentioned about the vacancy at Miss Pinchin's school. Dear, dear! I'd better put down what I'm to get when I go out. I do wish Jimmy wasn't such a greedy boy. Think of Maurice polishing off all the cold mutton! Maurice is my blessing, the joy of my life. Poor dear Jimmy is my perplexity—no, I won't call him my cross. Charlie follows in Maurice's footsteps; Teddy is inclined to think Jimmy a hero. Oh, well, they are all four dear boys, and I don't suppose I'd have them different. Jimmy has no thought, and Maurice has too much. Oh, my boy, how I love you! what would I not do for you? You are so clever, so manly, you could do anything if only you had a fair chance. You shall have your heart's desire; I'll manage it somehow. I'm four years older than you; by the time you're fit to go to Oxford or Cambridge, I'll have enough money to send you there. Yes, yes, it shall be done." [63]

Cecil's fine eyes began to shine, her beautiful lips took a firm curve, the color crept slowly into her pale cheeks. She sat down by her little writing-table, pushed a Greek lexicon and other books out of sight, and entered in a tiny notebook the marketing which was necessary to be done that day. "Beefsteak, potatoes, cabbage, rice, sugar," she wrote, in her neat, small, upright hand. She slipped the book into her pocket, and then went out.

As she was leaving the house, the postman came up the steps and gave her a letter. She glanced at the writing, and the color rushed into her cheeks.

"It's from Molly," she said to herself. "Oh, what nonsense all this Redgarth scheme is! How can I possibly leave those four boys, to go to Redgarth? Of course I'd love it beyond words, but it isn't to be done. Here, let me see what Molly says."

Molly Lavender's letter was very short:

DARLING CECIL:

I have only just time to write a line. I have heard from father on the subject of your joining me, but he shifts the whole question on to dear grannie's shoulders. The fact is, Cecil, father is old-fashioned, and just because you are the bravest girl in the world, he fancies that you must be mannish. You mannish, you dear old feminine thing! I comfort myself with the thought that he has never seen you, Cecil. Oh, yes, it will be all right in the end. Grannie knows you, and if she gives you a good character,—which of course she will, quite the best in the world,—you are to come. I write now, however, to say that, with all these delays, I don't see how you can come to St. Dorothy's before the half term. Make up your mind to be with us then. Oh, how I look forward to your arrival! I think you will like the place,—you will be in your native atmosphere,—the very air seems solemn with the weight of learning; the college is splendid; as to the great hall, where we have prayers, it almost takes your breath away the first time you see it. Miss Forester is about the grandest woman I ever came across. Oh, Cecil, how you will worship her! St. Dorothy's is perfectly charming, only you've to get your parquetry legs, or you'll have many a great fall. The girls are full of character. I like one of them immensely; her name is Kate O'Connor—she's Irish, and such fun! She is chumming with me in my room until you come. You will want to know what that means. It means that she and I share my room, for purposes of study, from after supper until prayers. Oh, Cecil, what good the life will do you! you will expand in it like a beautiful flower. You shan't have a care or sorrow when you come here. How are the boys? Give my love to Maurice.

[64]

Your affectionate friend,  
MOLLY LAVENDER.

Cecil crushed the letter into her pocket, and walked down the little High Street of the small town.

"I don't see how I am to go to Redgarth," she said to herself. "I don't suppose Judge Lavender will lend the money, and even if he should think of such a thing, how can I possibly go and leave the four boys? Dear Molly was full of it when we were together in the summer, and it did seem so tempting, and I had a kind of hope that perhaps Miss Marshall would look after the boys, and Maurice would be a sort of father to them. But I see now it can't be done. Jimmy is too much for Maurice, and why should my boy, while he is so young, have this burden thrust upon him? Oh, if I only could get that post as English teacher at Miss Pinchin's school, why, we'd be quite well off! I'd be able to save a little, perhaps, and instead of going into lodgings, I might take a tiny house, and have one servant. I wonder which would be really cheapest? It's impossible to keep four boys as mum as mutes. Oh, of course, I'm sorry for Mrs. Rogers, but boys will be boys. Now, everything depends on what Miss Pinchin says. Miss Pinchin used to be very kind to me when mother was alive, and I don't see why she shouldn't give me the first chance. Oh, I do sincerely hope I get the post! I know Miss Edgar had eighty pounds a year. Add eighty to one hundred and fifty, and it makes two hundred and thirty. How rich we should be with that! I certainly could manage a little tiny cottage, and I expect I should save in many ways. Yes, Molly dear, Redgarth is certainly not to be thought of. If I can only secure this unexpected post, which seems put in my way!"

[65]

Cecil walked quickly as these thoughts rushed through her mind. She had long left the little High Street behind her, and had gone out into the suburbs of the small town. There was a beautiful country round Hazlewick, and the autumn tints were now rendering the scenery perfect. Miss Pinchin's "Seminary for Ladies" was an imposing-looking house, standing alone in grounds. There were large white gates and a carriage drive, and wide gardens stretching to right and left and to the front and back of the heavy stone building. Cecil opened the white gates, walked up the avenue, and sounded the bell at the front door. Her summons was quickly attended to by a neatly dressed parlor-maid.

[66]

"Is Miss Pinchin in? Can I see her?" asked Cecil.

"I'm afraid Miss Pinchin is particularly engaged," answered the servant.

Cecil hesitated a moment: she knew, however, that such posts as Miss Edgar's were quickly snatched up; desperation gave her courage.

"Please take Miss Pinchin my name," she said; "Miss Ross—Miss Cecil Ross. Have the goodness to say that I have come to see her on very special business."

The maid withdrew, and Cecil waited on the steps. Three or four minutes went by, then the servant reappeared.

"Miss Pinchin can see you for a moment or two, miss," she said. "Come this way, please."

She led the girl down two or three passages, and entered a very small, prettily decorated boudoir, where an elderly lady with iron-gray hair, a sharp face, and a nose beaked like that of an eagle, sat in front of a desk.

"How do you do, Miss Ross?" said Miss Pinchin. "Pray take a seat. Can I do anything for you? Are your brothers well?" [67]

"Yes, thank you, the boys are well," answered Cecil. She had to swallow a lump in her throat.

"I have come," she said, "to offer myself for the post of English teacher in your school. I heard about an hour ago that Miss Edgar had left you."

Cecil's boldness—the sudden direct glance of her eyes—alone prevented Miss Pinchin laughing aloud. Her remark astonished the good lady so much, however, that she was silent for nearly a minute. At last, looking full at the girl, she began to question her.

"I have a great respect for you, Miss Ross," she said; "your mother's daughter would naturally have that from me; but—I scarcely think you know what you are talking about."

"I assure you I do. I used to teach all the English subjects at the last school where I was. I was successful with the girls. They were fond of me; they learned quickly."

"What are your attainments?"

"I know the ordinary branches of English education; I have been thoroughly well grounded. I know several languages also."

"Excuse me, Miss Ross, pray keep yourself to English."

Cecil began to enumerate her different attainments in this branch of study.

"I can give you good references," she said. "I had first prize in English history on several occasions, and my compositions—they were always above the average." [68]

"I have heard that you are a clever girl," said Miss Pinchin; "in fact, anyone to look at your face could see that. You certainly do make the most extraordinary request. Miss Edgar was thirty—how old are you?"

"I shall be eighteen in a week. Oh, please, Miss Pinchin, don't let that interfere! I can't help being young; that fact does not prevent my having the care of four brothers."

"Poor girl! yes, yours is a heavy burden. You might perhaps come to me for a time if— By the way, of course you have different certificates. You have at least passed the Cambridge Junior and Senior?"

Cecil colored, then her face became deadly pale.

"No," she faltered, "but——"

"No?" said Miss Pinchin, rising. "You mean to tell me you have no certificate of any kind?"

"No; but——"

"My dear Miss Ross, I am sorry, but that puts a stop to the entire thing. What would the parents of my pupils say if my English teacher were not thoroughly certificated! I am sorry. Young as you are, I should have been prepared to help you, for your mother's sake, had you been in any way qualified. As it is, it is hopeless. Good-morning, Miss Ross! Good-morning!"



CECIL AND THE BOYS.

## CHAPTER VI. MRS. LAVENDER'S PLAN.

[69]

**W**HEN Cecil found herself outside the gates of Miss Pinchin's school, she felt exactly like someone on whom the gates of Paradise had been closed. She had had a moment of strong and vigorous hope; this had been changed as quickly to despair. Miss Pinchin would have given her the coveted post, had she been certificated. A girl without certificates was nowhere now in the world of learning. No matter how intelligent she was, no matter how really well informed, she had no chance whatever against the cut-and-dry acquirements which the certificated girl was supposed to possess. Cecil metaphorically wrung her hands.

"What am I to do?" she said to herself. "I know I can teach those girls just splendidly, and because I have not passed the Cambridge Junior and Senior, I am shut away from all chance of getting a really good post. Oh, if I could only go to Redgarth, if only for a year; but there, I fear I must put that completely out of my head. Molly's letter was scarcely reassuring, and even if her father is willing to lend me the money, how am I to manage matters for those dear, troublesome, good-humored, noisy boys of mine?"

[70]

Cecil was walking back quickly to the town as these thoughts coursed through her busy brain. She was accustomed to utilize every moment of her time, and anxious and miserable as she felt this morning, these facts did not prevent her accomplishing several little items of necessary housekeeping with directness and dispatch. She returned home in time to hand over materials for a good dinner to Miss Marshall's tender mercies, and then entered her little parlor, sighing more than once as the reflection came to her, that, in all probability, this little home, this poor little haven of refuge, would not long be hers.

The first thing her eyes lighted on as she came into the room was a letter addressed to herself.

"The postman has just brought it, Miss Ross," said the landlady, whisking out of the room as she spoke, and shutting the door after her.

Cecil took up the letter languidly. It bore the London postmark, the writing on the cover was stiff and slanting, and had the tremulous appearance which generally characterizes the writing of the very old. Notwithstanding this, however, it was a careful and well-formed hand. Cecil hastily tore it open, and read the following words:

MY DEAR CECIL:

It is important that I should see you without delay. Can your brothers spare you for one night? I have made inquiries, and find that you will receive this before noon tomorrow. A train leaves Hazlewick for London at two o'clock. If you take it, you will arrive at Paddington a little before five. Do not lose that train, and come prepared to sleep the night here. I will promise not to deprive your young brothers of your company

[71]

for more than one night.

Your affectionate old friend,  
MARY LAVENDER.

P.S.—I inclose a postal order for traveling expenses. First-class fare; don't forget.

A great flood of color mounted into Cecil's pale cheeks as she read this unlooked-for letter. She thought deeply for a moment, then resolved not to lose a moment in going to see Mrs. Lavender.

"The old lady, in all probability, wants to ask me some questions before writing to Molly's father," she said to herself. "Oh, I must put Redgarth out of my head, but how splendid if I only could go! If it were not for the boys, now; but there, the boys exist, and they are the treasures and joy of my life."

Cecil rushed up to her room to make preparations. When Maurice and his three brothers arrived for dinner, they were surprised to see their sister in "her best bib and tucker," as Jimmy expressed it.

"Now what's up, old girl?" asked that incorrigible small boy.

"Nothing so dreadful, Jimmy," she answered. "I am going to London by the next train, that's all; expect me back, all of you, to-morrow. Now I do hope you will try to be good boys."

"Oh, crikey!" said Jimmy, cracking his fingers.

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"And not wake Mrs. Rogers," pursued Cecil, fixing her eyes steadily on the eager faces of the three younger ones; "and, Jimmy, pray don't go down again to the kitchen to eat food on the quiet; you know that if you're hungry you've only to tell me; we have not come to that pass yet, that I would let any of my boys go hungry."

"I won't do it again," said Jimmy, turning away from a look which Maurice gave him; he did not want to meet Maurice's grave eyes. Maurice used to tell him in private that he was a beastly cad when he did mean things of that sort.

"Now, look here," said Maurice, coming to the front, as he always did when he noticed a look of distress on Cecil's face, "I'm going to take care of these youngsters. I promise, on my honor, that they shall be as good as gold, and not do one single thing you don't wish them to. Now, sit down and eat a good dinner, Cecil. Why, you look as white and tired as can be. No nonsense; you're not going to help us. I'll manage the dinner after you're gone. Sit down and have a nice piece of steak. Let me be the head of the house just for once."

"Oh, Maurice, what a comfort you are!" exclaimed Cecil. "I wonder if you'd be such a darling as to——"

"Nonsense! I'm going to be the darling now," said Teddy. "What do you want done, Ceci? Maurice isn't the only one who has got a pair of legs, please remember, nor the only one who has got a head on his shoulders, for the matter of that."

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"You'll do nicely, Teddy, thank you," answered Cecil. "Here's this postal order,—I have filled my name in,—take it to the post office, and bring me back the money. Now be very careful and steady."

Teddy started off immediately on his errand. In ten minutes' time he brought back the necessary fare for Cecil's journey. She bade "good-by" to her brothers, promised to be back in time for early dinner on the following day, and started off to the railway station with considerable interest and excitement. All her low spirits had vanished; life was once more rosy with hope. It was very nice to get away from home worries, even for twenty-four hours; to travel first-class was in itself a pleasing variety. When Cecil really found herself rushing away in this comfortable style toward London, she almost laughed aloud with girlish glee.

Cecil's face was naturally a grave one, but when pleased or specially interested about anything, it had a particularly eager and bright expression. A wideawake look filled her dark eyes; they seemed to take in at a glance all that went on around her; hope shone in their brown depths; smiles went and came round her happy lips; an enthusiastic ring would even come into the tones of her voice. Cecil's morning had been filled with difficulties, but this unexpected and delightful change altered the whole complexion of affairs. Cecil had gone through a terrible year. A year ago she was a schoolgirl, receiving an ordinary education, and looking forward to doing well for herself in the scholastic world by and by; but great trouble had come unexpectedly—the mother to whom she was devoted had died, and unlooked-for money losses had added to the difficulties of the brave girl's position.

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She was now the sole guardian and care-taker of her four young brothers, and although she was possessed of splendid talents, and could have earned plenty of money as a first-class teacher, she had not the required certificates to enable her to take any high position in the educational world. Cecil was too proud to complain, but the feeling that for lack of certain technical knowledge she must always keep in the background—that her gifts, however great, could by no possibility meet with recognition—had a terribly damping effect on her life. Miss Pinchin's remarks to her that very morning had seemed like the final extinguisher to every hope; now, however, she could afford to laugh at Miss Pinchin. After all, what did Mrs. Lavender want her for? Why did she ask her to go to her in such a hurry? Why did she pay her fare up to town? Oh,



yes, hope was again in the ascendant; hope was sending Cecil's young spirits up to a high pitch. How delightful it was to be flying along at express speed in a first-class carriage! how luxurious those padded cushions felt! how lovely the autumn tints on the trees looked! There was Windsor Castle in the distance; now she caught a peep of the river Thames. How beautiful the world was, after all!

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"Oh, I shall succeed!" said Cecil to herself. "After all, I shall succeed! Maurice shall have the wish of his heart, and the three other boys shall start in the world as gentlemen. I will do all this for them. Yes, yes! Oh, I promised mother when she was dying! I vowed to succeed, and I will; I must, I shall. I am young, and the world is before me, I feel the ball at my feet. Won't I give it a good kick when I get the chance? Oh, if only mother had lived, what an old age of happiness I could have given her! But there, I dare not think of that; but I will succeed for the boys' sakes, and for the sake of her sweet memory—oh, yes, oh, yes!"

The train arrived in due course at Paddington. Cecil did not know London well, and she had difficulty for a moment or two in keeping her head in the midst of the whirl in which she found herself. At last, however, aided by an intelligent porter, she threaded her way in safety to a hansom, gave the man Mrs. Lavender's address, and was soon whirling away into a fresh world. The distance from Paddington to Bayswater was accomplished in a little over ten minutes. The hansom drew up abruptly before the deep portico of a tall house, and Cecil, feeling once more nervous and strange, ran up the steps. The door was opened to her by a neat parlor-maid, who told her that she was expected, and took her immediately up a low flight of stairs into a beautiful drawing room.

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"Will you take a seat, miss," she said, "while I go and tell my mistress that you have arrived?"

Cecil sank into a deep armchair, and looked about her. She had never been in Mrs. Lavender's house before, although she had often been regaled with descriptions of it from Molly. Molly's holidays were spent in these rooms. Yes, the drawing room was very pretty—handsome, perhaps, was a better word. There were a great lot of gimcracks, as Maurice would term them, about: heaps of little tables, lots of chairs of every description, pictures, photographs, a stand of lovely ferns, a tall palm in one corner, and just behind the palm, what? Cecil, who was beginning to feel lonely and a little strange, jumped up suddenly, pushed the palm slightly aside, and gazed with delight at a water-color drawing of Molly—it represented Molly's sweet, frank face at its best. The eyes smiled into Cecil's now, assured her of Molly's faithful love, and cheered her inexpressibly.

The door opened behind. Cecil turned eagerly; the parlor-maid had again entered the room; she carried a little tea tray in her hands.

"Will you please help yourself to some tea, miss?" she said. "Mrs. Lavender begs that you will do so. When you have quite finished, will you kindly ring this bell, and I will come and take you to your room? My mistress says she will be glad to see you in her own boudoir at six o'clock, miss."

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"Thank you," replied Cecil.

The maid left the room, closing the door softly behind her.

"What a quiet, hushed sort of feeling I have!" thought Cecil to herself. "At home, doors bang everywhere; don't the boys make a clatter, even when they move! Even Miss Marshall is not the quietest of souls. Yes, everything is restless at home, and here there is peace. I believe I could study here—or no, perhaps instead of studying I should go to sleep. I might become a lotos-eater, there's no saying. Well, there is no chance of my lot falling to me in this quiet place, and perhaps I am glad; but, at any rate, a little rest is delightful, and this tea looks delicious."

Cecil helped herself, pouring the tea into the dainty china, dropping in tiny lumps of sugar, and pouring cream out of a little embossed jug of old silver. She was very thirsty, and ended by drinking all the tea which the little teapot contained, and finishing the wafer-like bread and butter, which was scarcely a sufficient meal for her healthy young appetite.

When she had finished, the maid reappeared to take her to a pretty little room, which, she told her with a smile, belonged to Miss Lavender.

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Cecil hastily washed her hands and smoothed her hair, and punctual to the hour returned to the drawing room. A moment or two later she was ushered into Mrs. Lavender's presence.

The boudoir, as it was called, adjoined the drawing room. It was a quaint little room, furnished in the early French style. Everything about it was extremely delicate. Most of the chairs had high backs, the many small, tables were of finished workmanship, and there was a great deal of old china about. There was a very thick carpet on the floor, and heavy velvet curtains hung from the windows and covered the entrance door. There was a hushed sort of feel in the room, which made Cecil inclined to speak in a whisper the very moment she entered. Mrs. Lavender sat in a high-backed chair by the fire. She was a tiny woman, dressed in the period of sixty years ago. She wore lace mittens on her little hands; her dress was of dull black silk, a white muslin kerchief was crossed over her bosom, and a cap of the finest white lace adorned her snow-white hair.

"How do you do, my dear?" she said, when Cecil came in. "Sit down, pray sit down. Anne,—here Mrs. Lavender turned to the servant,—"please be careful to shut the door quietly, and don't come in on any pretext until I ring for you. Now, my dear Cecil, you will wonder why I have sent for you in this hurry. I have done so because an idea has come to me, and suspense at my age is

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bad and disquieting. I have an idea about you, Cecil. Before I tell it to you, however, I want to know if you are willing to be a sensible girl, and to do exactly, and without any fuss, what I tell you?"

"Yes, I will do anything," replied Cecil. A flush of color rushed into her pale face. "Your letter has excited me dreadfully," she said, looking full at the old lady as she spoke.

Mrs. Lavender sighed. She had a delicate sort of complexion, which belongs to certain temperaments. Her face resembled old china, it was transparently pink and white; her eyes were bright blue. She looked old, but very pretty. All her surroundings seemed in touch with her fragile and *chic* appearance. As Cecil looked at her, she felt suddenly quite out of harmony with everything which surrounded her.

"How big I am!" thought poor Cecil. "I hardly dare to rest on this chair; I am certain if I lean back it will break. As to my hands, they look quite enormous. I dread touching anything. The fact is, there is not room for me in this boudoir. I feel just like a bull in a china shop. Oh, dear, dear! This is not the first time I have seen dear Mrs. Lavender. Why do I feel so nervous before her now?"

The pretty little old lady sat very still while these thoughts were rushing through Cecil's mind.

"There is not the least hurry, my love," she said. "I have long passed the stage of being excited about things. I can give you from six to seven for this little interview. At seven I dine alone. At eight o'clock we will meet in the drawing room, where, perhaps, you will be kind enough to read some of the *Times* articles for me. At nine o'clock I go to bed. You can sit up as long as you like. You will find novels, and improving books, if you prefer them, in one of the bookcases in the drawing room. I lead a very precise life, but I do not require anyone else to follow it. When Molly is here, she always does exactly as she likes, and I never interfere with her. You must copy Molly while you are in this house, my dear. Now, are you feeling composed, and is your excitement dying down? I will tell you why I have sent for you, if you can assure me this is the case."

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"I am quite composed now, Mrs. Lavender," said Cecil. Then she added, with an irrepressible sort of eagerness: "But you don't know how good it is to be excited; how it lifts one out of one's self, at least when one is young, as I am. I was feeling very bad this morning, and now I am full of hope. I am very grateful to you, very, very grateful, for giving me such an exciting, joyous day."

Mrs. Lavender raised one of her fragile little hands. Her manner was deprecatory.

"Don't, my love!" she said. "Believe me, I can quite understand your gratitude, but I really would prefer your not expressing it. I suffer from a weak heart, and the least emotion is bad for me. It is quite possible that the plan which I am about to divulge to you will excite you, as you are of an excitable temperament. If this be the case, Cecil, I must beg of you to leave the room. Express your excitement in any way in the drawing room. There are such thick curtains between this room and that that I shall not hear you, whatever you do. You may dance, if you like, in there, provided you don't knock anything over. Now, can you promise to be calm in my presence?"

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"Yes, Mrs. Lavender."

Cecil locked her hands tightly together. She wondered that anyone could live, that any heart could continue to beat, in such a death-in-life sort of state as Mrs. Lavender's.

The old lady gave her a fixed stare.

"The girl I am fondest of in all the world," she said, "is my granddaughter, Molly. Molly is very fond of you."

"She is my dearest friend," interrupted Cecil.

"I beg of you, Cecil, to hear me out without remark."

"Yes," answered Cecil.

"I had a letter from Molly, in which she entreats me to write to my son, who is, as you know, a judge in the Rampoor Settlement. She entreats me to write to him describing you as a sensible, respectable, well-brought-up girl—a girl who does not in any sense of the word belong to those odious creatures who call themselves 'new women'; in short, a girl who would put no silly thoughts into his daughter's head. You are doubtless aware, Cecil, of the reason why Molly wants me to write this letter?"

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"Yes; I know all about it," replied Cecil. Her face was crimson. "Molly wants her father to lend me money to enable me to join her at Redgarth. Her father fears I am not womanly enough. Perhaps you don't think I am womanly enough, Mrs. Lavender. Oh, if that is so, I beg of you—"

"Hush, my dear, hush! Exclaim presently in the drawing room, but do keep down your emotion while you are with me. I shall have a spasm if you don't; I really shall."

"I will try hard to be quiet," answered Cecil.

A great sigh rose to her lips, but she managed to suppress it.

"Mrs. Lavender is a dear old lady," she said to herself, "but I really fear she will soon ask me not to breathe in her presence. I never felt so horribly restrained in my life. I must make a rush

for that drawing room if she doesn't soon unburden her mind."

"I have not yet written to my son," continued the old lady.

"Oh, dear, and the Indian mail has gone!" answered Cecil.

"May I ask you, Cecil Ross," continued Mrs. Lavender, "if you have the pleasure of knowing my son, Judge Lavender?"

"No, madam, of course not. I did not get to know Molly until years after her father had left England." [83]

"I thought as much," said Mrs. Lavender, nodding her head sagely. "Now, may I ask if the idea has ever occurred to you, that by borrowing money from a total stranger you are putting yourself under a rather unpleasant obligation to him?"

"But not to Molly's father—and I can pay it back," replied Cecil anxiously.

"Allow me to finish what I was going to say, my love. You want that money very badly?"

"In one sense, dreadfully; although, if I had it, I don't know that I could use it."

"Pray don't get confused, Cecil, or my heart will never stand the strain of having to talk to you. In replying to my questions, confine yourself as much as possible to 'yes' and 'no.' Do you want this money badly?"

"Yes, yes, yes!"

"Why repeat it three times? Is not one 'yes' sufficient? You want the money. Why?"

"Because I shall not be able to do what I promised mother to do without it. There are the four boys, all of them young, Maurice only fourteen, and we have such a very little income; and, Mrs. Lavender, I am not certificated, and they won't give any posts to girls now who are not; and oh, I know I have brains, and oh, it's dreadful—oh, it's dreadful! Oh, I wish I could half tell you what I feel about it!"

Cecil stood up as she spoke. [84]

"Sit down at once, Cecil, or go into the drawing room," replied Mrs. Lavender.

"Yes, I will sit down if you wish me to. I am dreadfully afraid, by your tone, you do not intend to write to Judge Lavender. If this is the case, all is lost."

"How impatient you are, little girl!" said Mrs. Lavender, in a kindly voice. "Do you suppose I asked you to come all the way from Hazlewick if I had nothing to suggest? Cecil, my dear, I have long taken an interest in you. I don't love you as I love Molly. Of course that could not be expected of me, but I have a very sincere regard for you. I am a rich woman. My son is a very rich man. Most of my money goes to him and Molly, but there is some—some that I can leave just as I please. On the whole, I am a lonely woman. At my age money has very few attractions for me. All I ask of life now is to be allowed great peace, great and absolute stillness."

"I should think so," muttered Cecil.

"Great and perfect quiet. I am going away soon to the everlasting rest. The life which excites you so much is all behind me. I don't need much money, and when I die, I have no one to leave it to except Molly and her father, and they have more money already than they know what to do with."



**"THERE IS NOT THE LEAST HURRY, MY LOVE," SHE SAID.**

Cecil opened her lips to utter an exclamation.

"Don't!" said Mrs. Lavender. "I know by the shape of your mouth that you are going to say something violent, and I simply can't listen to it. Now, I will tell you briefly why I sent for you. I [85]

take an interest in girls like you. Once, long, long ago, I was excitable like you. I was full of spirits; I thought I could never make enough out of life, I was as poor in those days as I am rich now. On the whole, I was much happier while I was poor. It is a great mistake to imagine that money means happiness. I have made a curious will, Cecil Ross. In that will, I am leaving the money which does not rightly belong to Molly and her father in small sums to several girls whom I have heard or know about. When this will was signed, your name was included."

"Mine?" said Cecil.

"My dear, the drawing room!"

"Oh, I will be good! I won't say another word. Do go on!"

"Your name was mentioned in the will, Cecil. In that will I leave you at my death five hundred pounds. Now, it has occurred to me, after reading Molly's letter, that it would be much kinder, and more useful to you, to have the use of the money now. You are a clever girl. My dear, don't get so red, or you will have an apoplectic seizure. You are a clever girl, Cecil, but you are not half educated according to the modern craze. Five hundred pounds will educate you well. Afterward you will be able to support yourself, and to help your young brothers. Your mother was an excellent woman. I took a great fancy to her when I met her two years ago. My proposal, then, my dear, is simply this—don't borrow money. Borrowed money is a curse, and a weight round the neck of anyone. Don't put yourself under an obligation to my son. Allow me to pay your expenses at Redgarth, and to give you ten pounds a term for pocket-money. Now, don't speak! Think over what I say, and give me your decision after dinner."

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"Oh," said Cecil, "oh, I—I must go into the drawing room for a minute, please."

"Do, dear child, do; go at once. Draw back that curtain; open the door; pray shut it noiselessly."

"She's gone; what a relief! Poor little creature, if she'd let out what she's feeling, she would have killed me on the spot," murmured Mrs. Lavender, sinking back on her high-backed chair with, a gentle and satisfied sigh.

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## CHAPTER VII. AN OUTRAGEOUS PROPOSAL.

[87]



OW interested you look, Cecil!" said Maurice.

The four boys were all waiting at the little station of Hazlewick when Cecil alighted on the platform.

"You look jolly well," interrupted Jimmy.

"Yes, I feel as well as possible," said Cecil.

"Then give us a hug, do," said Teddy.

He flung his arms roughly round his sister's neck, pushing her hat crooked and disarranging her black necktie.

"Oh, I say, how red your cheeks are!" said Charlie. "London must be a jolly healthy place; you were as white as a sheet when you went there, and now you've come back with your eyes shining, and your cheeks like apples. I say, had you lots of fun? What sort is the old lady? Did she give you a good time, and have you brought us back anything?"

"Yes; I have a parcel here," said Cecil.

"I say! gimini! crikey! golluptious!" burst from Teddy's lips. He instantly began to dance a hornpipe, and Jimmy rushed down the platform, head over heels, to the distress and agony of several passengers.

"Oh, do come out of this, boys!" said Cecil. "How can I say anything to you in the midst of all this noise? Yes, I have news. I'm afraid it's rather selfish news—I mean it is very good for me; but—but you may not like it at present. Whether anything can come of it or not rather depends on the way you take it. Oh, I will tell you after tea; you must have patience till then—you really must."

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"When is that parcel to be opened?" asked Charlie. "We can wait for the news, if you will only open the parcel. I say, let's sit by the hedge and get that part done. The news will keep, if you let us see what you've brought us, Cecil. Oh, I say, do have pity on a fellow! My skull will burst if I'm exposed to suspense another moment."

"Nonsense, boy!" said Maurice. He gave a quick glance at his sister, who, under all her excitement, looked tired. "It was awfully good of Ceci to bring anything back, and you're not even to smell the contents of this parcel until she wishes it opened. Come, you know me, you three rascals—so no more words."

Jimmy made a face, Teddy gave a heart-rending sigh, and Charlie danced in front of the rest of

the party.

"Oh, I'll be good!" said Charlie; "I'll be as good as gold, and Ceci will have mercy then; won't you, Ceci? I do hope you've brought me a knife, Cecil—a knife with two blades, and a corkscrew, and one of those things for picking stones out of horses' feet; that's the sort of knife I want. Ben Lester has a knife of that sort, and I bet him sixpence I'd have one before the month was out. You've got me a knife, haven't you, Cecil?" [89]

"Shut up!" growled Maurice. "Take my arm, Cecil. Now, boys, you can run on in front. Tell Miss Marshall that Cecil is back, and ask her to make the tea; and hark, don't you make a row, or I'll punch your ears. Now, off the whole three of you!"

The younger boys rushed on, and Cecil was alone with Maurice.

He was tall for his age; he had broad shoulders and an upright carriage. Cecil found his young, strong arm full of support. She leaned on it gladly, but while she did so, a thrill of pain went through her heart. Had she any right to leave the boys? Could she leave them? Was she not selfish in putting this great chance, which was so unexpectedly offered her, before her duty to the boys? Cecil's mind had been tormented with doubts all the way home, and now, as she leaned on Maurice and walked toward Miss Marshall's lodgings, these doubts seemed to get worse than ever.

"You don't look so well as you did five minutes ago," said Maurice, glancing at her.

"I am very happy, and yet I am very much worried," she said. "Mrs. Lavender sent for me to make a most astounding proposal. I will tell you frankly, Maurice, that it took my breath away yesterday; and I could think of nothing but myself, and the delight of the whole thing. But to-day, and especially since I have seen your dear old face, I fear—I greatly fear—that I shall only be a selfish girl if I think of it." [90]

"No; that I'm sure you won't," said Maurice heartily. "Just tell me what it is before you talk to the other boys. We needn't discuss it, but I may as well think it over while we are having tea."

"You're such an old brick, Maurice," said his sister. "I do declare you've got an old head on young shoulders."

"I'd need to have," said Maurice, with a sigh; "those boys are enough to worry any fellow sometimes—oh, not that I mean to complain; it is nothing at all to what you have to bear. Now, out with your news, Cecil."

"I don't see how it's to be done," said Cecil, turning pale.

Maurice stopped abruptly.

"Out with it before we go a step farther," he said. "Now, then. Why, Cecil, you're trembling, old girl!"

"I am," said Cecil, tears suddenly filling her eyes. "It means so much, and I'm tempted."

"Those young rascals will be back if you're not quick, Ceci."

"Well, here it is then, Maurice; here's the subtle temptation. Mrs. Lavender wants to make me a present of five hundred pounds."

"I say!" exclaimed Maurice.

"Yes—five hundred pounds; she wants to give it to me now for my education. She wants me to go to Redgarth, where Molly is, you know, Maurice. She wants me to join Molly at St. Dorothy's. She will pay all my expenses out of this sum of money, and will allow me ten pounds a term for pocket-money. That is the proposal, Maurice, and it dazzles me—and I'm weak, and I long to take it; but—but,—oh, Maurice, darling, don't look at me with your grave eyes like that,—do you think I'll desert you? No, no—never, never!" [91]

"Stuff!" said Maurice abruptly. He turned his head away; he didn't speak at all for a moment.

"You are angry with me, Maurice, for even speaking about it," said Cecil; "but I promise—yes, I promise! the look on your face is enough. Don't think of it again, dearest, and the younger boys need never know."

"Stuff and nonsense!" said Maurice. "You will forgive me for being a little bit stunned, just for a minute, Cecil. I never thought of life without you just at present, but if you think I'm going to be such a brute as to stand in your way— Oh, I say, Cecil, don't talk to the boys to-night. Let us wait until the morning. I must arrange my ideas. Why, the whole thing is just splendid, Cecil! Think of you, educated as you ought to be! Why, we none of us have talents like you."

"Oh, yes! *you* have, Maurice."

"No, I haven't; not a bit of it. Oh, I don't pretend I'm stupid, or any humbug of that sort, but I'm not like you. Give you advantages and you'd set the Thames on fire. Yes, now, that's the very word. Listen to me now, Cecil; don't say a word to the other fellows until you and I have had a conference and put this thing straight. Promise—we're just home." [92]

"Maurice, you're the dearest fellow in all the world."

"Not a bit of it, only I've got common sense, and I know when a good thing is offered to us all. Now, here we are. Well, you lads, is the tea ready?"

Tea was a very joyous and exciting meal. Even the knowledge that Mrs. Rogers was in the house could not keep the boys from shouting with laughter, and expending their wit on that crooked and bulging brown paper parcel which Cecil had brought back from London with her. Maurice was one of the gayest of the group. When Maurice gave himself away, as the other boys phrased it, they felt that the cords of discipline were thoroughly relaxed; they were almost too excited to eat, and Cecil, in spite of herself, could not help joining in their mirth.

Immediately after tea, however, Maurice got up and prepared to leave the room.

"Where are you off to?" said Jimmy. "She'll open the parcel now. What in the world are you going away for?"

"Oh, I'll be back soon," said Maurice. "You can give the boys those things, Cecil. If you have thought of me, keep it. I will see what it is when I come back." [93]

"Well, of all the rum starts——" began Teddy.

But Maurice slammed the door behind him, and a moment later was seen marching down the street. He walked quickly, his hands shoved deep into his pockets, his cap pulled over his eyes. Presently he reached an ugly and very unpretentious house, which stood a little back from the Grammar School. He rang the bell vigorously. His summons was attended to by a little man with a shock of red hair and a freckled face. The little man had humorous blue eyes, a stern mouth, lantern jaws, and a chin which testified to the extreme obstinacy of his character.

"Now, what have you come about, Ross?" he said. "I really can't be bothered at this hour. I've been working with you boys all day, and it's monstrous to have a man's time taken up out of school hours. No; if you want me to tell you anything about your Latin translation, or that passage in Homer which you made such a mess of this morning, I won't; so there!"

"I want nothing of the kind," said Maurice. "You can scold me when I make you angry, Mr. Danvers. I want to speak to you for a moment. May I come in?"

Mr. Danvers had only opened his door from four to five inches while he was expostulating with Maurice. Now he flung it open with a sort of snarl, and said: [94]

"Come in, if you wish to; come in, if you insist. This is my parlor, bedroom, kitchen, all in one. A pretty cheerful-looking apartment, is it not?"

"It's all right," said Maurice. "I haven't come to see your room, but to see you."

"Well, well; find a chair if you can, lad. I was frizzling bacon when you came in. Do you mind if I go on with it?"

"Let me help," said Maurice.

"Preserve us, no! I like my bacon done to a turn. Hands off, youngster! You can talk to me while I am eating my supper."

Maurice lounged against the window-sill. There was literally not a disengaged seat in the room. Mr. Danvers had described it as kitchen, bedroom, parlor, but it was also, and above all these things, library. Books on the floor, books crowding the bookcases, books in heaps on the windowsill, books on the bed, books on every table and every chair, marked all too vividly the tastes of John Danvers, the classical master of the Grammar School, the most hard-headed, soft-hearted, irascible-tempered, touchiest, most generous man in the whole of Hazlewick.

"Now, then, Ross, you can state your business," said Danvers, as he munched his bacon with appetite. "Do you see that pile of exercise books there? I've got to look through them all between now and ten o'clock. They are every one of them the choice productions of idiotic asses, so you may imagine the treat which lies before me. Now then, Ross, speak out." [95]

"I'd best plump it," said Maurice. "I want to know, Mr. Danvers, if you'll board me and my three brothers? Don't say 'no,' till you think it over. We won't be any trouble, and you've heaps of room in this house."

When Maurice made this astounding proposal, Mr. Danvers' face became a study. His mouth opened until it formed itself into a round O; his blue eyes twinkled with the queerest mixture of anger and uncontrollable mirth. He was in the act of helping himself to a delicious morsel of frizzled bacon; he kept his fork suspended in mid air.

"Please don't speak for a minute," said Maurice, whose face was crimson. "I knew you'd funk it; I knew you'd hate it; I know perfectly well it would be beastly for you. All the same, I want you to do it; it will be beastly for us too, but I want you to do it. Yes, you shall do it, because——"

"Your reasons, lad?" said John Danvers.

He sprang to his feet, pushed aside his meal with a clatter, walked to the door, turned the key in it, and then strode up to where Maurice was, half sitting, half lounging.

"Now, out with your reasons, and be quick!" he said. "I don't want my bacon spoiled and my

evening spoiled; I'll turn you out of this room, you young rascal, if you're not quick! Why am I to turn my life into an inferno? Now, be quick; out with your thought, lad!"

[96]

Mr. Danvers' last sentence was spoken with a certain softening of voice which encouraged Maurice to proceed.

"I'm desperate," he said, "and desperate people come to desperate resolves. It is for Cecil; she's the best girl in all the world, and the cleverest; but she's not half educated. She was at a school, not a tip-top school, but just a middling sort of place. I wish now she'd gone to a decent High School, but mother didn't like High Schools, and anyhow, there she is, nearly eighteen, with more talents than all the rest of us put together, but shut out of everything, because she hasn't got certificates, and all that sort of rot. Well, she's got a chance; an old lady, a friend of ours, wants to pay her expenses at Redgarth College. Perhaps you've heard of Redgarth, Mr. Danvers?"

"I have, and of Miss Forester," said John Danvers. "Women are being taken more and more out of their sphere day by day. Go on, boy—your ideas amuse me; so I'm to enter purgatory for the sake of a girl. Go on, pray!"

"No," said Maurice; "I wish I were the same age as you, sir, or you were the same age as me, and we'd fight this out, not for the sake of a girl in the ordinary sense of the word, but because of the best sister a fellow ever had, and we want to give her a chance—at least I do."

"And you propose to send me to a lunatic asylum?"

[97]

"Not quite; we wouldn't be as bad as that. You own the whole of this house, don't you?"

"What's that to you, you young dog?"

"Yes; but don't you?"

"Fact, Maurice Ross; I also own a digestive system, which is going to be put frightfully out of gear by this night's work."

"Oh, I wish you'd take the matter seriously. We boys want a bedroom, and any ramshackle sort of place to work in. I engage, on my honor, to keep the three younger lads in order. I know a bit of cooking, and we can manage our own meals, and we can pay you for every scrap of expenses you are put to, and you can have a bit of profit over and above."

"You can leave the profit out, young Ross."

"Well," said Maurice, "will you, or won't you? Will you make yourself beastly miserable for the sake of a brave girl? She can't help being a girl, but she can help being brave, and she is—oh, you don't know how plucky she is. It puts me to shame the way she works, and the way she denies herself. Do you know what she's got in the back of her head? To send me to Oxford by and by, to make a man of me, and to provide a comfortable home for the other boys when they are older and need it more. I couldn't ask a woman to put herself out to give Cecil this chance, but I thought a man might, if he were worth the name."

"Upon my word, you're pretty frank, you British schoolboy," said Danvers; but his eyes danced again, and he ceased to cast loving glances in the direction of his bacon.

[98]

"Will you, or won't you?" said Maurice; "that's just it? You needn't deliberate—you can say a frank 'yes' or 'no.' I don't pretend you'll like it—of course you won't; but maybe— Oh, I don't want to cant, but if there's anything in those words, 'It is more blessed—'"

"I know 'em; you needn't finish them," interrupted Danvers. "It's 'yes' or 'no,' then. What a queer world this is! Here am I, bullied by one of the boys in my class, a young ruffian who murders his Homer, and nearly turns my brain over his Virgil; he comes and beards me in my own private den, with the most astounding, outrageous, unheard-of proposal—and it's 'yes' or 'no' with the monkey. What will you do if I say 'no,' sir?"

"I'll be as I was before," answered Maurice; "but you won't, sir."

"I won't! Is that the way you take it?"

"No, sir; I see yielding in your face. I wouldn't have come to another master in the whole school."

"You needn't blarney me, Ross; blarney is the last straw. Now, you've stated the fact from your point of view. Allow me to tell you what this will mean to me. Lunacy, an asylum, in three months. Tell me to my face, is there a girl living who is worth that?"

"It won't be all that," said Maurice, with one of his slow smiles; "and Cecil is worth nearly that."

[99]

There was a look in Maurice's eyes just then, that made Danvers turn his head aside.

"Upon my word, there must be something in the girl," he said to himself. "What a lad this is, after all!"

Aloud he said, after a brief pause, "And suppose I agree?"

"Cecil will be perfectly happy and contented."

"But she doesn't know me, and I never laid eyes on her in my life."

"Oh, yes, you did! you must. She goes to church with us every Sunday."

"I never look at women when I can help it," said Danvers. "I keep my eyes on my book in church, and when your head master preaches, I shut them; no, I don't go to sleep, so you needn't wink, you dog! I can think better with my eyes shut."

"Well, at any rate," said Maurice, "Cecil knows about you; she knows we'd be safe with you."

Danvers uttered a deep groan.

"Oh, get out of this, Ross," he said; "don't let me see your face again until to-morrow at school, so out you go—quick—run—get out of my presence! A pretty nut you've given me to crack."

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## CHAPTER VIII.

[100]

### MR. DANVERS ORDERS FURNITURE.



WHEN Maurice had really left the house, John Danvers returned to his untidy, complex room, and threw open both windows.

"Stuffy," he muttered, sniffing as he spoke. "Let in plenty of air—nothing like air. Now, then, for my supper. Digestion will be all wrong to-night. Oh, good Heavens! what sin have I done, that this appalling dilemma should be presented to me? Won't think of it! Supper comes first, then all those themes. Never heard of a lad like Maurice Ross in all my life before—won't think of him. That passage in Cæsar which I read this morning is worth pondering over; meant to go to sleep on it to-night—will still. The cheek of that young beggar! won't think of him; I vow I won't! This bacon is destroyed; 'willful waste makes woeful want'— That's what comes of listening to cheeky— Won't revert to that dog."

John Danvers pushed up his red hair until it stood upright on his forehead. Then he sat plump down on the nearest chair, placed a thin hand on each knee, and gazed straight before him at all his books. He made an admirable scarecrow, sitting thus; and would have been the delight of every boy in his class, had they had the privilege of gazing at him. The bacon frizzled and burned on the pan, but he took no notice of it. Finally he put his supper away untasted, then lit his lamp, and sat down with thirty exercise books before him.

[101]

"As if this were not enough," he muttered. "For what sin am I so sorely punished? A girl wants to learn what she'd better not know, and I'm to go to Bedlam. If I were another man, I'd say 'no.' I always knew I was composite, and this proves it. I'm beastly weak; wish I weren't. Shouldn't think of it a second time, if I hadn't this abominable vein of good-nature running through me. That's the composite element which has destroyed my chance in life. For the sake of a girl— Faugh! If it were a boy indeed! I take an interest in those torturing young beggars in spite of myself, and Maurice Ross is my favorite, and he knows it, the dog! Well, I'll sleep it over. Hang it, though, I don't believe I'll sleep a wink!"

John Danvers ate no supper that night. He was quite unaware of this fact, however, himself; he also failed to correct any of the exercise books, and the boys who had made a sad hash of their Latin and Greek got off scot-free the next morning. Next day in school he avoided Maurice Ross' eye. In the afternoon he started off for a long walk by himself. It was a half-holiday, and he could do this with impunity. On his way back he called at Miss Marshall's house.

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"Is Miss Ross in?" he asked of the landlady, who knew him well, for he was one of the characters of the place, and was known to be a woman-hater.

Miss Marshall ran upstairs, and came down with the information that Miss Ross was in.

"I'll see her for a moment, if she has no objection," said Danvers.

Miss Marshall led the way upstairs.

"How do you do?" said Danvers, when he found himself in the presence of the girl for whom he was to go to Bedlam.

Cecil was seated by her writing-table; there was perplexity on her face, dark rings under her eyes; her sweet mouth looked slightly fretful. The fact is, she was making up her mind to decline Mrs. Lavender's offer.

Danvers came in and stood in front of her.

"Won't you sit down, Mr. Danvers?" said Cecil, who of course knew the little man very well indeed by sight.

"No, thank you, madam; I prefer to stand."

Cecil stood also. She looked at the little classical master in some wonder.



"Fine young woman," he muttered to himself. "She'd make a capital milkmaid; education thrown away on her; women's brains are smaller than men's. Providence doesn't mean them to meddle in things too deep for them. I don't do it for her sake, not a bit of it; it's the lad, fine lad; life before him, life half over with me; old dog gives way to young dog; way of the world—way of the world."

[103]

"I wish you'd take a chair, Mr. Danvers," said poor Cecil, who thought that the little man with his red hair sticking up over his head, and his shining blue eyes, and his dogged mouth and jaw, must have taken leave of his senses.

"Not worth while, madam. I've come to say that, if you wish it, I'll house those boys, give them house-room, beds to sleep in, plenty to eat and drink. I'll take 'em for what you can afford; they'll be safe enough with me. I'm a dragon on boys, Miss Ross, a very dragon on boys. You'll be quit of 'em, I came to say it. You can fix up things with your brother Maurice; and they can come to-morrow if they like. Communicate with me through Maurice; he's a fine lad. Good-day to you, Miss Ross!"

Before Cecil had time to say a word, Danvers strode out of the room. He ran downstairs so quickly that someone might almost have propelled him from behind, and rushed out of the house as if he were shot.

"I have done it," he said, as soon as he had got into the street. He gasped as he spoke. "Good gracious!" he said; "what an awful thing it is to come face to face with a woman, and a young one, too! She's a fine girl, I don't deny it; good eyes, firm, nice mouth. She looked at me, all the same, as if she meant to eat me. Good Heavens! what a heat I'm in; this sort of thing will kill me if I have much more of it."

[104]

Danvers walked down the street; he held his head in the air, and his soft hat was well slouched back. Several people who knew him well met him, but he noticed no one. His bright, kindly blue eyes were fixed upon the kindly sky. In spite of himself, against his will, there was a glow of pure happiness at his heart. He would not acknowledge the happiness. He kept on muttering:

"John Danvers, you dog, you've let yourself in for a pretty mess! Fancy four boys, four devouring young monsters, careering over your house, rushing into your private den, shouting into your ear, dancing the devil's tattoo over your very bedroom. It's too awful to contemplate. I'll not think of it. I vow and declare I'll turn my thoughts to something else. What about that passage in Cæsar I construed last night? It's a fine thought and a comforting one. After all, there's nothing like going back to the fountain head of knowledge, and taking your ideas straight from the original well. Yes, Cæsar is good meat, nothing namby-pamby there. I mean to go on with my translation during the coming winter. What am I saying? What am I saying? What chance have I to translate anything? Bedlam without and Bedlam within will be my portion from this day forward. How blue the sky is, though! it's a fine evening. The breeze is pleasant, quite spring-like. Good Heavens! I did have a job when I stood face to face with that girl; but Maurice is a fine lad, and he's young, and he has his life before him. Shouldn't be surprised if he made a good Latin scholar yet. By the bye, didn't I see a Greek lexicon on that girl's table? Outrageous, monstrous, indecorous! A woman has no right to look into these mysteries. She's made for bread and butter and cheese and household drudgery. Some men may go to the length of considering her ornamental, but, thank Heaven! I have never so completely lost my senses. Well, I've done it, but not for the sake of a woman—no, Heaven forbid! Now, then, to complete the sacrifice."

[105]

Danvers suddenly hastened his steps; he turned abruptly into a little side street, and, stopping at the door of a second-hand warehouse, he entered in a hesitating manner. Apart from his books and boys, Danvers always exhibited nervous hesitation. The man in the shop, a person of the name of Franks, came up to greet him.

"Can I do anything for you, Mr. Danvers?" he asked.

Danvers frowned when his name was mentioned. He had not the faintest idea of the name of the owner of the shop, and nothing annoyed him more than the fact that every soul in Hazlewick seemed to know him perfectly well.

"Good-evening!" he said abruptly. "The fact is, I've called in to ask you to send in some furniture suitable for a dog's—I mean a boy's bedroom. There are four boys; the rascals—I mean the young fellows—are coming to stay with me. I want a room furnished—you'd better send a man round to look at it—the usual things, of course. Send in the furniture to-morrow. Good-evening!"

[106]

"But I beg your pardon, Mr. Danvers," said the perplexed shopman, "your order is a little vague; you have not told me what class of furniture you require."

Danvers took off his hat, and pushed up his red hair perfectly straight.

"Simple, very," he said; "no luxuries, a bed apiece, some basins and jugs; you know the sort of thing. I am in a hurry. I will wish you 'good-evening!'"

"We have got some nice iron bedsteads," began Mr. Franks, "neat and plain. I suppose carpets will be required. If you will have the goodness to step this way, sir——"

Here the shopman started, for Danvers had vanished.

"Well," he said, turning to one of his men, "if this aint a rum start! Here's our Mr. Danvers ordering in furniture, promiscuous like, and four young gentlemen are going to live with him. You tot up a tidy lot of things, Blake, and let me know what the sum total comes to; four boys, he says, and they are to be provided for simple. What does this mean?"

The assistant ran off with a laugh, and that evening a good-sized bill was entered against Mr. Danvers' name in Frank's book. [107]

That good little man returned to his home, and after supper took out his account books. He looked carefully into his banking account, found that there stood to his credit about one hundred and fifty pounds in the local bank, wondered vaguely what all the furniture would cost, perceived that he could pay for it, and then dismissed the subject from his mind. He sat up late over his translation of Cæsar, and did excellent work. He forgot all about the boys, and slept soundly when he went to bed. On returning to his house the next day at noon, the circumstance of their speedy advent was brought painfully home to him, however. A large furniture van stood outside his modest door. Danvers kept no servant, and the men were getting impatient at having to pull the bell in vain; a crowd of small boys and girls were collected around the van, and several neighbors were poking their heads out of the adjacent windows. Danvers felt a sudden thrill run through him. He opened the door abruptly, and told the men to take the things upstairs.

"To what room, sir?" they asked.

"Any room," he answered.

He rushed into his private sanctum, and locked the door with violence. In this refuge he had a violent tussle with his temper. The tramping of strange feet was heard all over the hitherto silent house. The poor little man sat down on the nearest chair, and looked the very picture of abject misery. He was far too unhappy even to think of dinner. By and by, the sounds of alien feet died away. The men slammed the door behind them, and drove off in the now empty furniture van; the rabble of boys and girls melted out of sight. Danvers was beginning to breathe, when a somewhat timid ring was heard at the front door. His smoldering ire burst forth afresh; he strode to open it with his spectacles on the middle of his forehead. A stout, elderly woman was standing on the steps; she dropped a profound courtesy. [108]

"Your business!" he said abruptly.

"If you please sir, I've come to offer for the situation."

"What do you mean?"

"Seeing as you're expecting company, sir, and it's known that the place is vacant——"

"There is no place vacant," interrupted Danvers; "you can go. I don't require your services."

He slammed the door rudely, and went back to his parlor.

The stout woman's appearance, however, had set him thinking; he saw a fresh woe ahead of him. He had taken steps to furnish a room for the boys, but who was to cook their breakfast, and dinner, and supper, and make their beds, and in short do the sort of things which women, in his opinion, were sent into the world for?

"It grows worse and worse," he muttered. "It simply resolves itself into this: I must not only have four boys driving me to Bedlam, but the she element must be introduced into my house—a charwoman! To this pass have I come. 'Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher; all is vanity.'" [109]

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## CHAPTER IX.

### THE CLEARING OF THE WAY.

 [110]

MAURICE," said Cecil, when her brother came in to tea that evening, "I have had a most astonishing visitor."

Maurice colored faintly. It darted through his mind that Danvers might have called, but he scarcely thought that fact possible.

"No less a person," continued Cecil, "than your eccentric master, Mr. Danvers. He came in here, and stood bolt upright on that spot on the carpet, and looked as fierce as ever he could at me, and addressed me as madam."

"Oh, nevermind!" said Maurice. "Danvers is the best old brick in existence. The fact is, I thought he might call. What did he say, Cecil? He came about something, of course?"

"I should rather think he did. Maurice, you wicked boy, there is a mystery at the back of this, and you are in it. Oh, you bad, bad, wicked boy, what does this mean?"

The other lads had not yet put in an appearance. Cecil and Maurice had the parlor to themselves.

Maurice came up close to his sister, and put one of his big schoolboy hands on her shoulder.

"Go on, Cecil," he remarked; "tell me what Danvers said."

[111]

"Why, this," said Cecil, "he told me that he would house you all. 'I'll give them house-room,' he said,—his language was so abrupt, Maurice,—'beds to sleep in; plenty to eat and drink.' He repeated twice that he was a dragon on boys, and that I'd be quit of you; he said that I was to fix up things with you, and that you could all go to him to-morrow. Now, what does this mean?"

"Exactly what he said," replied Maurice, "and didn't I tell you he was a brick? Now it will be all right for you."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, of course, you can go to Redgarth."

"Maurice, did you know of this? Had you anything to do with it?"

"Had I anything to do with it?" repeated Maurice slowly. "Rather. Do you think old Danvers *likes* to have boys in his house, and that this sort of offer was spontaneous? No, I put the screw on. I scrooged him into a corner last night, and he had no help for it. He wriggled a good bit, I can tell you, Ceci, but I had him on toast, and kept him there until I knew he'd do what he did do. Now, it's all right, and you can go to Redgarth."

"But, Maurice, dear, I don't understand."

"Well, you will understand in a minute. I'll put it to you straight enough. You know we can't stay here, because of that blessed Mrs. Rogers and her sleep; and you can't stay here, because you are wanted at Redgarth. You are the future ornament of that place of learning, and they can't do without you another day, so we fellows have to put up somewhere, and Danvers' is the place. Danvers lives in a house six times too big for him. The house was left to him by his old uncle, the miser. Danvers is our classical master: he lives within a stone's-throw of the Grammar School. As he says, he is a dragon, and we could not be safer anywhere than with him. We can go to-morrow or the next day, or any day you fancy. We'll be in the very lap of learning in Danvers' house, and if we don't all turn out classical prodigies, it won't be his fault. Now, Cecil, I see yielding on your face. I'm not going to have it said that I bearded old Danvers in his den for nothing."

[112]

Cecil's heart was yielding already, but several questions were yet to be asked and answered. Would Mr. Danvers see to the health of her boys? Maurice assured her that her boys were in such a robust state of existence that no seeing to was necessary. Would he feed her boys, and make and mend for them? Maurice said that they must be great asses if they could not manage that for themselves.

"In short, we're going," he said; "you can heap up obstacles as much as you like in your own mind, Cecil; but we're going. Danvers has yielded; that's the main point. He'll like us after a bit; he doesn't think so, but I fancy we can do a good lot for the poor old chap. I know his ways, I always could manage him, and I mean to go on doing so. What about that letter you've got to write to Mrs. Lavender?"

[113]

"I have written it; it's there. I want you to post it when you go out."

"What have you said?"

"That I—Maurice, dear, I could not leave you."

"Where's the letter?" said Maurice.

"There," said Cecil, hesitation in her tone.

Maurice strode across the room, took the letter, and threw it into the flames.

"You write over again, the minute you've finished your tea, and tell her you're very much obliged, and accept like a good, grateful, little girl," he said. "That letter has got to get into the post to-night, and another to Miss Forester, asking her when she can have you, and your darling Molly might have a line also. Now, then, I'm ravenous. Oh, I say, cress and shrimps for tea!"

While Maurice had been making these rapid arrangements with regard to his own and Cecil's future, mysterious noises of a muffled character had been heard outside the door; the handle had been tried several times in vain, for Maurice had long ago taken the precaution to lock himself in with his sister. Now he abruptly turned the key.

"Come in, you fellows," he said; "grace first, and then fall to."

The three boys entered with a certain amount of demureness, but the sight of shrimps and water-cress was too much for their gravity. Cecil's face was very pale; she was feeling too excited to eat. The four boys rapidly cleared the board. When they had finished, Maurice looked at his sister and spoke.

[114]

"I have a bit of news for you, lads," he said.

"Oh, Maurice! perhaps we had better not tell them to-night," interrupted Cecil.

"Well, we *did* hear something through the keyhole," interrupted Jimmy, in a modest tone. "We took the keyhole turn about, so it was a little confusing. Perhaps you might as well finish, Maurice. I think I'm to go to a place called Redgarth, but I'm not quite sure."

"You shut up, you rascal!" said Maurice. "You know it's very dishonorable to listen through keyholes."

"Fudge!" said Jimmy; "we're all one family. What's good for the goose is good for the gander. Now, am I to go to Redgarth? and where is Redgarth? and what am I to do when I get there? Is it a holiday resort, or a horrid place where they stuff you with books?"

"Don't take any notice of him, Cecil," said Maurice. "Now, it's just this, boys—we four fellows are going to give our sister, the best sister in all the world, a chance."

"Hip, hip, hurrah!" shouted Charlie.

"Oh, Charlie, for goodness' sake think of poor Mrs. Rogers!" interrupted Cecil.

"I can't be thinking of that old beggar forever," muttered Charlie. [115]

"Shut up, or I'll box you!" cried Teddy.

"Well," continued Maurice, when the din had a little ceased, "we are going to give the best sister in the world a little chance."

"I should think so! fifty, if she'll have 'em," said Jimmy.

"Well, we can only do so by denying ourselves."

The three round, schoolboy faces assumed a blank expression.

"Of course we'll deny ourselves," said Maurice, springing to his feet; "we're not such cads as to think of doing anything else, even for a minute. Cecil is going to Redgarth, because she has got splendid brains, and her brains must be trained and filled with the right sort of stuff."

"That sounds like roley-poley pudding, and 'stuff' is the jam," muttered Jimmy, under his breath.

But the others were too eager to attend to him.

"Where do *we* come in?" asked Teddy, in an anxious voice.

"Oh, we're all right," said Maurice, in a lofty tone; "we're going to put up at old Danvers'."

This news was so absolutely astounding that the three boys were dumb for a minute.

"I say, you're joking," said Jimmy then.

"Not a bit of it. Danvers can take us in; we go there next week."

"But he's so jolly—so jolly *queer*," said Charlie; "you can't mean it, Maurice? Danvers hates boys, except in school, and then he's always jacketing them. Danvers is a classic, and I've no turn for classics. It—it'll kill me, Maurice." [116]

"What a cad you are to think of yourself!" said Maurice; "it won't kill you any more than the rest of us. I'm glad you've got more stuff in you, Jimmy, and Teddy knows better than to stand in his sister's light. Come along out, all three of you; we'll thrash the thing bare, and come back prepared to help Cecil in every way. Ceci, see you get those three letters written. Now, lads, out you come."

Maurice drove his boys in front of him, and was soon seen walking quickly down the street with them. Teddy and Jimmy were in their hearts just as miserable as Charlie, but as Maurice seemed to take it for granted that they intended to behave in a very noble way, they thought it as well to live up to their supposed characters.

Cecil, from her window, watched them as they went down the street.

Yes, she was going to Redgarth now, really going; the dream of her life was to be fulfilled; the last obstacle had been rolled away. She would acquire learning, she would gain certificates, she would win honors. By and by, she could take her rightful place in that brilliant world of letters and literature to which her exceptional talents entitled her. Nevertheless, at this happy moment Cecil Ross shed the bitterest tears of her whole life. [117]

"Oh, my boys, my boys!" she moaned. "Oh, Maurice, darling, I do trust you are not too good to live!"

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## CHAPTER X. TREACHERY.

 [118]

DON'T believe it for a moment!" said Kate O'Connor.

"Well, of course, it may be exaggerated," replied Hester Temple; "and I, for my part, have no opinion at all of that mean little Matilda Matthews; still my feeling is, that there is never smoke without fire, and— Why, what is the matter, Kate?"

"Don't say another word!" answered Kate. "I am in a temper, and you are making it much worse. I took such an awful fancy to Molly; but if she is that sort,—if she really pretends to be your friend, and abuses you behind your back,—why, I shall have nothing more to do with her."

"You won't require to have much more to do with her," replied Hester. "You know, don't you, that her great friend, Miss Ross, is coming this afternoon? I saw Molly with a wild gleam of excitement in her eyes this morning, and when I asked her if she were threatened with softening of the brain, she replied: 'She's coming; she's really coming to-night!' and then went off, singing to herself in quite an idiotic style. You will have to give up your snug little corner in her room, *chérie*. I wonder where you'll go now."

[119]

"As if that mattered!" replied Kate. "Do you think that sort of thing troubles me?"

"Why, Kate, I thought it did, quite awfully. You are the girl who has made all the fuss about the Dwellers in Cubicles. You invented the odious phrase, and now it's running like wildfire all over the place. What do you mean by not caring? Of course you care."

"Yes, of course, I care," answered Kate, in a meditative voice. "Molly was a dear little thing; at least I thought her a dear little thing. You really can't think how unselfish she was. She gave me two drawers in her writing table for my exercises and translations; and she used to sit bundled up near the window, while I occupied the place of honor by her table. She said in such a pretty way: 'You know, Kate, I'm not working for a scholarship, and you are. I am only having an all-round sort of time, and I can work up my notes quite well here, so do have the table. I wish so much you would.' Of course I took the little thing at her word, for she has a wonderfully honest, downright sort of expression."

"It's hopeless to go by that sort of thing in life," replied Hester, in a gloomy voice.

"So it seems; but I hate learning the wickedness of the world. Look here! I don't believe that story of yours."

"You needn't, my dear; I'm half sorry I told you."

"The best thing would be to clear it up," continued Kate, in a thoughtful voice. "I could go straight to Molly and get her to confront Matilda, and find out the truth. That girl ought to be well shamed; she's a disgrace to the school. If Miss Forester knew her real character, she'd expel her; I'm sure she would."

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"She's a hateful girl," responded Hester; "and the worst of it is, she's certain to come here at the half term. She's not really stupid, you know, and she has been working herself up, for she's quite mad to get admitted to St. Dorothy's."

"The place won't be worth living in when she comes," replied Kate. "There, don't keep me now, Hester; if that divinity of Molly's is really coming to-night, I must take my things out of her room, and if she is the sort of girl you describe her, I'd rather do so when she's not there."

"Then you won't clear the thing up?" said Hester, in a somewhat anxious tone.

"Not to-night, anyway; I'll sleep on it. The fact is, I've a frightful lot of work to get through before I can close my eyes in natural sleep."

"Poor old thing!" replied Hester; "I wish I could give you a corner of my room, but I can't manage two chums, and the Denbigh girls never give me a moment to myself."

Hester nodded and walked away, and Kate went slowly upstairs. There was a slight frown between her dark brows. She pushed her frizzy, wild Irish hair back from her forehead. Her rosy lips wore firmly set. She approached Molly's door and knocked; her knock had a decidedly aggressive sound. There was no one inside to listen to it, and she presently opened the door and went in. She had just unlocked her own private drawer in Molly's writing-table, and removed her exercise books and translations, when Molly herself quickly entered the room.

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"Oh, is that you, Kate?" she exclaimed; "dear old Kate, I am so dreadfully sorry on your account."

"Oh, don't mention it, pray," answered Kate, in a cold voice. "I always knew that I was only here on sufferance."

"Well, I can't help being glad about Cecil," answered Molly. "I'd like so much to tell you something of Cecil's story. If you knew what she is, and what she has to do, you could not help taking an interest in her. Do come over to the sofa and let us have a chat, won't you?"

"No, thanks; I'm a great deal too busy."

Kate kept her eyes lowered. She would not permit herself to glance at Molly, whose caressing tone was softening her in spite of herself. Had she yielded to her better nature, she would have rushed up to her friend, repeated Matilda Matthews' cruel and unkind words, and much after-trouble and misery would have been averted. But Kate, notwithstanding her brightness and good-nature, had a strong vein of obstinacy in her character. She was very affectionate, but she had also a great deal of pride, and that pride was cut to the quick by the words which Hester had repeated to her.

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"I can't stay now, thanks," she went on; "I have to work up my notes of the lectures I heard this

morning, and have not a minute to spare."

"But Kate, Kate, dear!" cried Molly.

Kate had now approached the door; she turned on hearing Molly's voice.

"Yes, what is it?" she exclaimed; "I wish you wouldn't keep me!"

"I won't more than a minute or two. Perhaps you don't know that Cecil Ross has got the cubicle next to you in dormitory A."

"Has she? I'm afraid that does not affect me particularly."

"Oh, but I thought—I hoped—— Kate, what is the matter?"

"Nothing."

"Then you will be good to her, won't you, Kate? She's never been at a big school of this kind before."

"She must take her chance," replied Kate. "It strikes me she won't be so badly off with you to be her champion."

"Of course, I'll be her champion," replied Molly, her face turning crimson, for she began to be really angry at last.

"Then if you're so afraid for the comfort of the precious thing, why don't you give up your room, and sleep in the cubicle next me in dormitory A? My manners may not be refined, and I may not be a real lady, and my poverty may make it essential for you to be kind to me; nevertheless——"

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"Kate, Kate, I won't stand this!" cried the astonished Molly. "What in the wide world do you mean? You speak and look as if you were angry about something; you speak and look as if you were angry with *me*—with me, who love you so! What is it? You must and shall tell me."

But Kate O'Connor's only reply was to slam the door of Molly's room with violence, and rush away up to her own dormitory.

There she flung her exercise books and translations on her little dressing-table, threw herself down upon her bed, and burst into floods of bitter weeping.

"Oh, she can't have said it!" she groaned to herself; "she looked so sweet, and she seemed so astonished when I threw those taunting words at her. And yet—and yet, no one else knows; I have never confided my real story to anyone but Molly Lavender. Matilda is a wretch, but she could not have invented all this. Yes, there must be some truth in it; and if Molly is that sort of girl, I will never, never, have anything more to do with her. All the same, I'm miserable, for I was beginning to love her as I have loved no one else since I left dear old Ireland. Oh, dear, dear, if I were only back in the old time! Think of home in the summer, the cows, Cusha, Bess, Star, Whiteface; don't I see them now walking slowly up the valley with the evening sun behind them, and their dear old tails switching, and grandfather standing by the hedge at the corner of the lane, and crying 'Kate, Kate, come along and watch the milking!' Oh, yes! I was happy in those days; I had no ambition then, only to be the fleetest runner, and the best swimmer, and the best rider of any girl in the country round. Oh, for a gallop now on Black Beauty's back! oh, for a sniff of the mountain air! oh, for a taste of the buttermilk and scones at supper time by grandfather's side! Well, it's all over; he's in his grave, and the cows are sold, and so is the old house, and the place belongs to strangers, and there was just enough money left to educate Kate O'Connor, and turn her into a fine lady."

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"A fine lady! How I hate the term! I declare I think I'll go to-morrow and tell every single girl in this house all about myself. How once I ran about barefooted, and how I used to know a great deal more about making butter than about Greek and Latin, and how my one gift was, just that I could sing like a bird, and whistle so well that the little wild birds themselves would come out of the hedges and cock their bright eyes at me, and whistle, too, when I lured them long enough. I'd like to tell them all—all those conceited girls—that I'm not ashamed of the old days, and that I'd rather be back in them than be the very grandest of them all. Oh, Molly, I did think you were faithful to me! I remember your face when I told you something of the old life; how soft your eyes grew, and you held my hand and pressed it a little, and then you said you wished you could write a poem about it. But you are a traitor, Molly Lavender, and you *told!* You must have told, for no one else knows. Granted even that you didn't say the horrid things which Matilda Matthews accuses you of saying, you are a traitor, and I'll never be your friend again as long as I live."

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"Kate," called a voice near her ear from the other side of her dormitory, "did you not hear the supper gong?"

"No, bless you! has it rung?" called Kate, springing to her feet.

She hastily smoothed and tidied her hair, put on a white blouse, and ran downstairs, looking handsomer and more *débonnaire* than ever, because her cheeks were slightly flushed, and her eyes all the brighter on account of the tears she had shed.

Kate O'Connor's table was the most popular in the dining-hall. Since Molly's arrival at St. Dorothy's, her place had been at Kate's left hand. By Molly's side now, on this occasion, sat a slim

girl in black. Kate noticed her the very instant she entered the room.

"Behold the divinity!" she said, under her breath.

She sat down in her accustomed place by the tea-tray, and studiously avoided Molly's brown eyes.

"Kate!" whispered Molly, in an anxious tone.

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"What is it, Molly Lavender?" replied Kate, with some irritation. "Oh, I'll attend to you presently."

"I want to introduce you to Cecil Ross. Cecil, this is my friend, Kate O'Connor."

Kate raised her eyes, and encountered for the first time Cecil's grave, full glance. She found herself coloring high. Instead of her usual frank and hearty rejoinder, she now gave a somewhat stiff bow, and immediately turned her attention to the requirements of the tea-table.

Molly went on talking to Cecil. As she did so, she smothered a faint sigh. All day long she had been looking forward to the evening. When she had awakened that morning she said to herself that the happiest day of her life had dawned. Cecil had arrived at last. Cecil was by her side, but Molly felt uncomfortable, hurt, and astounded. What was the matter with Kate? Molly's quick eyes had taken in the traces of recent tears on Kate's fair face. Was it possible that anyone so frank, so good, so noble, could stoop to so mean a thing as jealousy? Was it really possible that Kate was jealous, and of Cecil, Molly's oldest, lifelong friend?

"If she would only listen to me," thought Molly to herself, "I would tell her Cecil's story. She could not but love her, if she knew all that Cecil has had to undergo; if she knew how brave and dear Cecil really is. I did so hope that Kate and Cecil would be great friends, and now Kate is going to be really horrid. What can it possibly mean?"

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The supper that evening was, therefore, at Kate's table, a constrained and unhappy affair. Molly was too anxious to be at her best. Cecil was feeling shy and lonely. She was very glad to be at St. Dorothy's, and delighted to find herself by Molly's side; but her thoughts were back with the boys. She was missing Jimmy's fun and nonsense; her heart was aching for Maurice, with his thoughtful face and dear, manly ways. She was wondering if the boys were as lonely as she felt, and almost regretting that she had taken the great step which was now irrevocably accomplished.

"You are tired, Cecil," said Molly, glancing at her friend.

"My head aches a little," she replied, in a low tone. "Do you think I may go to bed after supper, Molly?"

"Of course you may. We'll ask Miss Leicester, and I'll come up with you to your cubicle and help you to unpack."

"Will you? That will be very nice."

Molly and Cecil had a long talk in the little cubicle in dormitory A. Kate, who came upstairs presently, heard them whispering together through the wooden partition. Twenty-four hours ago she would have joined them, and in two minutes, by the quick infection of her own high spirits, have caused all Cecil's heartaches to vanish, and Molly to be the happiest girl in the world. Now she sat down moodily on a chair in front of her little dressing-table, and began to work up her lecture notes. But the task was so uncongenial that she soon stopped. The soft voices in the dormitory next her own kept on their low talk. She could not hear a word they said, but the noise irritated her. No one could be more passionate than poor Kate when she chose. To-night all the worst side of her character was in the ascendant. She felt as if she almost hated Molly and her friend. She moved softly about her cubicle, afraid that the two girls might hear her. Soft as her movements were, Molly detected them. She called out a little timidly for her.

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"Is that you, Kate?"

"Yes; what do you want?" replied Kate. "I am very busy."

"I hope we're not disturbing you," answered Molly. "My room is quite at your disposal this evening; there is no one there."

"Thanks! I prefer to remain where I am," answered Kate.

Molly's sigh was so profound at this reply that it could almost be heard through the wooden partition. She bade Cecil "good-night," and a few moments later went downstairs to her own room. Kate heard Cecil then moving very quietly about in her cubicle. All her instincts of chivalry and hospitality urged her to go to the strange girl in order to offer her services, or at least to assure her of her friendship and sympathy.

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"She has a nice face," thought Kate to herself. "Nice! it's more than nice. What a splendid forehead she has! and her eyes have a keen, strong look in them! Then, how clever her mouth is; so firm, and proud, and self-reliant. I don't wonder Molly likes her. Yes, she has heaps of character. I expect she'll take the lead of us all. She is the sort of girl I ought to hold out the right hand of fellowship to, and I can't—I can't, because she is Molly's friend, and Molly is a traitor. There, my lectures must go to Hong-Kong to-night; I don't care if I do get into a row to-morrow.

Is life worth living, after all? What is the use of anything when there's no constancy and no honor in the world? Who would have thought that Molly, of all people, was a traitor?"

The other girls came up into the dormitory. Julia Hinkson, whose cubicle was at Kate's left side, knocked on the wall, and made other tokens of her affectionate presence.

"You can't come in to-night," called Kate, "I have a headache, and wish to go to bed."

"Oh, what a bother! I had a lot to tell you," exclaimed Julia.

"I wonder if she has heard it, too," thought Kate to herself.

She made no reply to Julia, but got quickly into bed. After a long time, she fell asleep.

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## CHAPTER XI. THE SUMMERHOUSE.

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NIGHT'S sleep refreshed Kate, and she awoke the next morning in a much better temper with herself and the rest of the world. She now resolved not to be too rude to Molly, to cultivate Cecil Ross' acquaintance up to a certain point, and, if possible, to get the exact truth out of Matilda. She went down, therefore, to breakfast looking somewhat like her usual self. Molly quite cheered up when Kate nodded to her and asked Cecil a few questions with regard to the sort of night she had had, and also her prospects for the day.

"I feel a little nervous, of course," answered Cecil; "but I long to know Miss Forester. From all I have heard of her, she must be a wonderful woman."

"Miss Forester is about the cleverest woman in the north of England," answered Kate, with a little ring of her old enthusiasm in her voice.

"Oh, Kate, how good you were to me my first day at school!" exclaimed Molly.

Kate looked at her fixedly, and her brows darkened.

"Of course; it is one's duty to be kind to strangers," she said, in a careless tone. "Your friend, Miss Ross, will have no trouble at all, Molly, for you'll take her under your wing, and everyone knows that you are a prime favorite with Miss Forester."

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"Why do you call Cecil Miss Ross?" said Molly; "and why——"

She stopped abruptly. Her frank but troubled eyes asked whole volumes of questions, but her lips were silent. Kate felt touched in spite of herself.

"The right thing would be to go straight to Molly and tell her everything," whispered conscience in her breast.

But she would not listen to it.

"If Molly is mean enough to repeat my greatest confidences, she may go," thought the proud girl. "She is all right now; she has got her dearest friend. She does not want me any longer. Catch me ever telling her anything private again. Of course she told, for no one else knows. Matilda could not have invented the story. Yes, Julia, what is it?"

"Can I see you for a moment after prayers, Kate?" asked Julia Hinkson.

"If you have anything important to say. I never looked at my notes last night, and want to work them up a little before lecture."

"I won't keep you five minutes; I—— The fact is, there is something you ought to know."

"Very well; I will speak to you in the hall," answered Kate.

The girls had now to go into the dining room for prayers. This short service over, Molly hurried her friend upstairs, and Kate and Julia found themselves alone in the entrance hall.

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"Now, out with it, Julia, for I am in an awful hurry," said Kate.

"It's only fair you should know," said Julia. "You've been so kind to Molly Lavender."

"Oh, dear, dear,"—Kate put her hand to her forehead,— "why will people harp on my kindness to poor Molly? It strikes me that she has been the kind one to me. Now, what have you got to say, Julia?"

"Only that if I were you," said Julia, "I would not repeat things too much to a girl of that sort."

"What do you mean?"

Kate's face became crimson.

"Dear me, Kate, how mad you look!" exclaimed Julia. "I don't think I'll say any more. You can take a hint, can't you?"



"No, I can't! I hate hints," answered Kate. "Out with the whole thing this minute, Julia. What have you to say against Molly? What confidence has she betrayed?"

"Matilda is the one who told me. Matilda is making the greatest use of it: she's telling everybody all over the school."

Kate's brow was now as black as thunder.

"Oh, Kate, Kate, don't look so awful! you terrify me, you really do."

"What has she been saying?" asked Kate. She clutched Julia by her shoulder as she spoke. [133]

Julia was rather a coward, and she shrank when she found herself in Kate's firm grip.

"Tell me at once what Matilda has been saying about me?" she asked.

"Oh, Kate, you do frighten me so awfully!"

"All right; come along this minute to Molly Lavender's room; perhaps she'll explain if you won't."

"Oh, I'll tell, if you don't look so frightful, and if—if you'll promise not to betray me."

"Of course I won't betray you, you little coward; I am not that sort. Now, then, out with it!"

"Well, then, Kate—— Oh, dear, dear, how your eyes do flash! Of course I don't believe it, Kate, not for a minute. Matilda says that Molly told her. Kate, I wish you wouldn't pinch me so. Molly told her that—that you are not—of course you *are*—but Molly told Matilda that you are not a lady; you used to be a dairymaid, and you didn't wear shoes and stockings, and you are awfully poor. Oh, Kate, of course it's a lie! but she says that you are here on charity."

"That will do," said Kate; "you have said quite enough. Now, of course, I'm not going to betray you. Get along with you, and keep it dark that you told me a word of all this."

"But you don't suppose I believe it, Kate, dear. You will give me leave to contradict it, won't you? They are all talking about it." [134]

"Let them talk," said Kate.

"But I may contradict it, may I not?"

"No!"

"Then it is——"

"It is nothing; you may not contradict it; it is not your affair. Go now, and keep your own counsel. Be off, and leave me alone."

As Kate uttered these last words, she gave Julia a little push. Julia was only too glad to leave the angry girl to herself.

Matilda Matthews was having a very good time in one of the tennis courts that afternoon. The tennis season was nearly over; the weather was getting even more than autumnal. Matilda was by no means an active girl; she disliked games almost as much as she disliked study. She was not a favorite in the ordinary sense of the word. Nevertheless, girls like Matilda can exercise a considerable influence over certain orders of mind. Matilda was the acknowledged scandalmonger of the school. Her tidbits of information, although, as a rule, by no means savory, were often highly seasoned. She had the reputation of setting more girls by the ears, of destroying more friendships, than anyone else in the place. Still it was thought best by the prudent members of the school to keep on Matilda's right side. Her friendship was not really valued, but it was considered safer than her enmity.

From the first day of her arrival, Matilda had taken a violent dislike to Molly Lavender. Molly had snubbed her, and Matilda could not stand being snubbed. She looked out, therefore, for a means of revenge, and an opportunity arose all too quickly. Matilda was the sort of girl who could sneak and spy. She had almost a genius for this sort of dirty work. Her ugly little person was constantly seen where no one expected to find her. She cultivated her talents with assiduity, for by these means she acquired power over her fellow-students. On a certain occasion, about a week ago, Kate and Molly had taken a long walk together. On their return home they had entered the extensive recreation grounds which belonged alike to all the houses of residence. They were both tired, and walking across the wide field, had entered the little summerhouse where the cricket bats, tennis bats, and other implements of sport were kept. They sat down together, and began to talk. [135]

It was on this occasion that Kate had been drawn out to speak of her early home. It was then that she had first mentioned her old grandfather, the summer evenings, the cows and horses, and all the precious things of her vanished childhood. She had spoken with feeling, and Molly had given her a whole world of sympathy. Neither of the girls knew that Matilda, who happened to be alone in this part of the grounds, had crept to the back of the summerhouse, and deliberately listened to their conversation.

The summerhouse was built of wood; there was a hole in a certain notch, and to this hole Matilda applied her rosy ear. She heard everything, and metaphorically clapped her hands with [136]

delight. Now, indeed, she was possessed of a dangerous weapon. It was within her power to sever a friendship which she detested, and to humble proud Kate O'Connor in the eyes of all her companions. Matilda was too clever not to go warily to work. It would never do for the girls of the school to find out that she had gained her information by eavesdropping; she must draw Molly out to drop a hint or two with regard to Kate. By the aid of this hint, and her own perfect knowledge, Matilda could soon set a ball of gossip and ill-will rolling through the place.

The next day, at lecture, she tried to make herself agreeable to Molly. She was generally so spiteful that the change in her conduct could not but be hailed with relief.

"How splendidly you are getting on!" said Matilda, when the lecture had come to an end. "I did not think you would at first, but now I see that you are very clever."

"That is not the case," answered Molly, in her blunt way. "I have simply got the most average abilities; but the fact is, a girl must be very stupid who does not improve in the atmosphere of such a place as this."

"You talk like a book," said Matilda. "Well, there is one thing I do envy you."

"What is that?" asked Molly.

"Your friendship with Kate O'Connor."

"Do you?" replied Molly. "I am glad you can appreciate her; there is not a girl in the school like her."

"I will tell you what I think about her," said Matilda slowly. She avoided Molly's eyes as she spoke. "She is so completely out of the common that she must have had quite an uncommon life. I should not be a bit surprised if she were one of those brave girls who have known poverty, and have risen above it. I should call her, if I were asked, one of nature's ladies. After all, nature does make noble, queen-like sort of women now and then, whatever their position in life. Is that not true, Molly Lavender?"

"Yes, it is perfectly true," answered Molly, wondering at Matilda's discernment. "There is no one in the school I respect like Kate."

"Do you think I have gauged her character correctly?" asked Matilda, in her softest tones.

"You have, Matilda, quite wonderfully."

"She is one of nature's ladies, is she not?"

"Indeed she is."

"She has known poverty, and has risen above it?"

"Yes, she has had a noble life," answered Molly. "I am so glad you appreciate her."

"I long for her friendship," said Matilda, with a sigh; "but alas! it is not for me; she would despise a girl of my sort."

"Not if you lived up to her," said Molly, turning round and gazing full at Matilda's low-class face.

Something in the expression of the bad girl's eyes caused Molly to recoil and draw into her shell. But she had said quite enough for Matilda's purpose, and the scandal which was to wreck a beautiful friendship began to circulate through the school on that very afternoon.

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## CHAPTER XII.

### KATE'S LITTLE PLAN.

**A**FTER morning lectures on the first day of Cecil Ross' arrival at Redgarth, Kate O'Connor walked suddenly into the classroom where Matilda was putting up her books. As a rule, Kate did not take the slightest notice of Matilda. Now she walked straight to her side, and asked if she were going back to dinner.

"Yes," replied Matilda, drawing up her little squat person, and trying to look imposing and not frightened; for Matilda, like many other people of her special genus, could be a rare coward on certain occasions. "Yes," she said; "why not?" She tried to throw a pert tone into her voice.

"Why not, of course," replied Kate, standing very upright, and tall, and handsome by her side. "I also am going back to dinner, and as our road home lies part of the way together, shall we start at once?"

"But you don't really want to walk with me?" said Matilda, shrinking back.

"On this occasion I happen to wish to walk with you," said Kate. "I have something to ask you."

"Oh!"

Matilda's freckled face became mottled. She stooped down under the pretense of tying her shoe.

"I am in a great hurry," she said. "Will not this afternoon do?"

"No, it will not do. I shan't take up any of your valuable time. I shall simply walk with you across the quadrangle. Now, come on, or some other girls will join us."

"But I promised to walk with Rosy Merton."

"Rosy Merton must look for another companion. Come, Matilda, I shall think you have reasons for shirking my society if you make any more excuses."

"How could you possibly think that?" said Matilda, with a little nervous laugh. "Everyone knows that to be seen walking with Kate O'Connor is a distinction."

Kate made no response.

"Are you ready?" she said.

Matilda shouldered her bag of books, and the two girls left the school together.

Several curious pairs of eyes saw them go, and the news began to circulate through the class room that Matilda was going to get her deserts from Kate. Matilda's story with regard to Kate was now known to every girl at St. Dorothy's. They listened to the envious, wicked girl's spiteful words with avidity, disliking her cordially all the time, and feeling rather more interested in Kate than they had done hitherto.

Julia Hinkson was one of the girls who saw the pair walk off together, and Julia felt her heart sink down into her boots, as she expressed it. [141]

"Now," said Kate, when they had got beyond the school precincts, "I want to ask you a very plain question, Matilda. Oh, you need not turn away, for I am determined to ask it! Pray slacken your steps; there is no hurry."

"There is. I have a great lot of work to get through," mumbled Matilda. "I thought I could get five minutes before dinner to work up my French verbs. I am going to try for the governors' scholarship, you know, Kate."

Kate made no response for a minute. Then she said in a slow, deliberate voice, which she scarcely recognized as her own: "I am not interested in your studies, Matilda; if I know anything about you, your path and mine in life will always be far apart. I have asked you to walk with me to-day because I have heard a report which troubles me very much. About three weeks ago I happened to tell certain facts with regard to my early life to my friend, Molly Lavender. The story I told her has now, it appears, become common property at St. Dorothy's. More than one girl has told me this. No, excuse me, I do not intend to mention names. In each case I am told that you are responsible for the report which has been circulated about me; I am told, further, that you have got your information from Molly. I want to know if this is the case."

Matilda did not speak at all for a moment. [142]

"Is it true, Matilda?"

"Why do you ask me?" replied Miss Matthews, giving her fat shoulder a little shrug. "Your action and manner tell me all too plainly that you have not a spark of respect for me. If I were to tell you, would you believe me?"

It was now Kate's turn to be silent.

"If you do not intend to believe me, what is the use of my speaking?" continued Matilda.

"On this occasion I think I must believe you," answered Kate.

"Very well; repeat your question."

"Did you hear the report about me from Molly Lavender?"

"Yes."

Kate felt herself turning pale. A cold dew stood out on her forehead; she pressed her hand with a quick movement to her heart.

"I said I'd believe you," she answered, after a pause. "I will not press for further confidence. Our roads divide here. Good-morning!"

Kate rushed off to St. Dorothy's.

She appeared at dinner with flushed cheeks and bright eyes. Her manner had undergone a complete revolution. She was no longer stiff nor defiant. She addressed herself almost as much as formerly to Molly, who received her first advances with delight, but presently turned away her head with a sigh. This voluble, excitable Kate was not the Kate O'Connor of old. A certain element which had made her slightest remark delightful had left her voice. Molly thought, as she listened to her gay and excited words, that she would rather have her silent and distant. But Cecil, who did not know Kate, and the other girls at the dinner table were charmed to have her bright and [143]

cheerful once more.

When the meal came to an end, Kate rushed off to find Miss Leicester.

"I want to ask a great favor of you, Miss Leicester," exclaimed the girl.

"What is that, my dear?"

"My birthday will be on Saturday. I shall be seventeen on that occasion; I want to know if I may celebrate the event by a little party, to which I want to ask all my friends and acquaintances belonging to the school."

Miss Leicester considered for a moment.

"We don't much care to have entertainments of that sort during term," she said.

"Yes; but this is a most special occasion. I do beg of you to let me have it."

"Where do you propose to entertain your friends, Kate?"

"I think Hester Temple will let me use her room; it is a good large one."

"My dear, I can't, of course, really object. You want to have a little supper?"

"Yes; if I may."

"You may, Kate; you are a good girl; we all like you, and I am not going to refuse the first request you have ever asked me."

"Thank you a thousand times! How truly kind you are! Will you add to the favor you are conferring on me by being one of my guests?" [144]

"If you really wish it, of course, my dear; but will it not spoil the fun?"

"I don't think there will be much fun."

"What do you mean?"

"Will you come, Miss Leicester? I really can't explain myself."

"Kate, you don't look happy. Is anything the matter, my dear child?"

"You will know if you come on Saturday. Of course there is nothing the matter—I mean nothing of consequence. Please come! I am Irish; I am subject to moods—to many moods."

"Yes, I will come, Kate. Have you got money for your little entertainment?"

"I have an unbroken sovereign in my purse—more than enough. Thank you a thousand times for giving me leave."

Kate went off with her head in the air. She met Hester coming downstairs.

"Hetty," she cried, running up to her, "I am going to have a birthday on Saturday!"

"Are you indeed, Kate? and how bright you look!"

"Why not? Have you any objection?"

"No, I am sure I have not," replied Hester heartily. "I am only too delighted. I felt like cutting out my tongue, Katy, for having told you what I did last night."

"Oh, I don't bother myself with reports like that!" replied Kate, in a low tone. "Most people have gossip spread about them." [145]

"Then you are not going to quarrel with Molly Lavender?"

"Quarrel with her? Certainly not. Hetty, I want to ask you a favor."

"What is it?"

"I want to celebrate my birthday."

"Indeed, lucky you! have you got money?"

"Yes; an unbroken sovereign. I mean to give a feast."

"Delicious! Bon-bons, do you mean?"

"More than bon-bons. I thought of lemonade, sandwiches, ginger-beer, chocolate, cakes."

"Nectar for the gods!" cried Hester, with enthusiasm.

"I spoke to Miss Leicester, and she has given me permission," continued Kate.

"Oh, the angel!" exclaimed Hester. "Then it is not going to be a case of stolen sweets; eh, Kate?"

"No; it is to be all rectitude, noble example, true hospitality; the most aboveboard sort of thing in existence."

"It won't be such fun as if there were a little spice of wickedness in it," quoth Hester.

"Hetty, you shock me! I shall be seventeen on Saturday. At seventeen one ought to discard wickedness as one would a worn-out shell."

"All right, love! Of course I approve, but did you not say that you wanted to ask me a favor?"

"Rather; I want you to lend me your room for the great occasion."

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"Of course I will; what is more, I will help you by every means in my power. Of course Molly is coming to the birthday feast?"

"Of course she is; she is to be one of my most distinguished guests."

"And that new girl, Cecil Ross?"

"She shall also be invited; Molly shall not be deprived of her dear friend's society."

"Kate, I am certain you are jealous of Cecil Ross."

"Furiously jealous," answered Kate, with a light laugh.

"Oh, but you needn't be! Molly loves you; she was crying about you this morning."

"What a very unpleasant thing to tell me!" said Kate. "Am I in such a deplorable condition, in either mind or body, as to require tears?"

Hester opened her lips to speak, but Kate suddenly clapped her hand across her mouth.

"Not a word more, Hetty," she exclaimed; "I have really no time to consider Molly Lavender's feelings at the present moment. I mean to ask all the girls whom I know to my birthday feast, even Matilda Matthews."

"Oh, that horrid creature! I wouldn't if I were you."

"You would if you were me."

"But surely you are not going to take up a girl of that sort?"

"Did I say so?"

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"No; but to ask her to your party!"

"That is no special sign of friendship," replied Kate; "both friends and acquaintances are to be invited. Well, this is Wednesday, and I have no more time to spare. I must go to my cubicle now to write invitations."

Kate ran off.

That afternoon the girls at St. Dorothy's, and several girls in other houses of residence, received short letters from Kate O'Connor. The letters ran as follows:

"Kate O'Connor requests the pleasure of your company to a birthday supper on the twentieth inst., at eight o'clock.

"R.S.V.P."

Molly found her invitation lying on the top of her bureau; there was one also for Cecil. The girls began to talk and wonder, but Kate kept her own counsel. Her eyes were brighter than usual, and she held herself more aloof than of old. All the girls to whom the invitations had been sent longed for Saturday—all, with the exception of Matilda Matthews. Matilda was devoured with curiosity, she was proud of being invited; but mixed with her pride and her sensations of curiosity was a strange, incomprehensible feeling of fear.

So many girls accepted the invitation that Hester's room was discovered to be quite too small for the festive occasion. A good-natured neighbor, however, Lucy Anderson by name, came unexpectedly to the rescue. She suggested that the supper should be in her room, and that the guests should assemble in Hester's. This could be easily managed, for the two rooms had communicating doors. Kate was now very busy, and Hester became her right hand.

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A week ago she would have consulted Molly with regard to all the arrangements for her birthday party; now Hester was the favored one. Kate was in her gayest, most *débonnaire* mood. Her Irish wit rose to fever point; she kept those girls with whom she chose to be intimate in ceaseless giggles and wild peals of mirth. As she scattered her *bon-mots*, she scarcely laughed herself, but the light in her sparkling eyes was infectious, and the smiles which came at rare intervals, and showed her pearly white teeth, had something fascinating about them. Hester was alone in the secret with regard to the capacities of Kate's sovereign. Hester was clever with regard to the laying out of a limited sum of money. Between twenty and thirty girls had accepted Kate's invitation. Girls of the ages of from fourteen to seventeen are proverbial for healthy appetites; wise Hester therefore suggested that the cakes should be plain and abundant, rather than rich and scanty; that the lemonade should not be made entirely with fresh lemons; in short, that several little economies should be practiced in order to make the feast, if simple, full and plenty.



KATE'S PICTURE.

There was no hitch in the arrangements. Each girl was requested to bring her own cup and saucer, her own spoon, plate, and glass. When the hour arrived, Hester met the invited guests at the door, and quickly relieved them of these little accessories to the feast. Laughter, talk, and high good-humor marked the auspicious hour. Kate herself, the acknowledged queen of the evening, was one of the last to appear. This fact rather astonished Hester, who, although behind the scenes in one sense of the word, was completely in the dark as to Kate's real motive for calling her friends together. She walked into Hester Temple's pretty rooms when they were quite full, and nodded to her assembled friends with a bright smile and a word of welcome. Her dress on this occasion annoyed more than one. It consisted of a cotton blouse and a short dark-blue serge skirt. The blouse was slightly old-fashioned in make, and looked as if it had often visited the washtub. Kate's luxuriant hair was arranged more simply than on ordinary occasions, her cheeks were flushed, her eyes were wonderfully bright; she wore neat black stockings, and a stout little pair of shoes.

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"Dear me, Kate, what a funny costume!" said Lucy Anderson. "Why, you look exactly as if you were dressing up to do the part of a dairymaid."

"Well, it's a very good part to do, isn't it?" said Kate.

She laughed merrily, and, going into the supper room, began to help Hester in dispensing the viands. Matilda Matthews, who was sitting near one of the doors, looked strangely uncomfortable when Kate came in; she felt somehow as if Kate were laughing at her. She did not like that dairymaid dress, and wondered if she could quietly escape without anyone noticing her exit.

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The thought had scarcely darted through her mind before Kate approached her.

"I am so glad to see you," she said; "you must not sit there by the door; you are a stranger in this house, and as a stranger, I wish to show you special attention. Pray come up and sit here. You won't! Oh, yes, I am sure you will, to oblige me! Here's our new girl, Cecil Ross. I will introduce you to Miss Ross; she is a very distinguished-looking girl, and will make her mark at St. Dorothy's. You always like to be in the swim; don't you, Matilda? Well, you ought to know Cecil. Come, I shall have pleasure in making you both acquainted with each other."

Matilda found herself absolutely tongue-tied. Kate's words were polite enough, but beneath them she felt the strong and iron will of the resolute and thoroughly enraged girl. The two walked across the room together; they made a striking contrast. The phrase "One of nature's ladies" darted through more than one girl's mind as she looked at Kate. Matilda was much overdressed. She wore a dirty rose-colored silk blouse, and a tawdry skirt trimmed with quantities of cheap lace. Her light hair was frizzed and distorted out of all grace, her freckled cheeks were mottled, and her dull eyes were destitute of life and fire. Cecil rose gravely from her seat by Molly's side, when Kate brought Matilda up to be introduced to her.

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"Miss Matthews—Miss Ross," said Kate. "Matilda Matthews hopes soon to be an inmate of St. Dorothy's," continued Kate. "You are the new girl at present, Miss Ross. Matilda hopes to be in that enviable position at the half term."

Cecil bowed gravely. Matilda squeezed her fat person into a chair by her side.

"Did you ever see anyone more plebeian in your life?" she whispered to Cecil, when Kate moved off.

This remark slightly relieved her feelings, and there was a good deal of venom in the tone in which she uttered it.

"I don't understand you," replied Cecil gravely.

"Well, I wonder you don't; I suppose I must explain myself. Our hostess looks like a dairymaid, *n'est ce pas?*"

"I am not particularly acquainted with the appearance of dairymaids," replied Cecil. "I think

our hostess quite the prettiest girl I have ever seen."

Matilda shrugged her fat shoulders.

"*Chacun à son goût*," she repeated.

Cecil looked at her in a puzzled way. She felt surprised at Kate's going to the trouble of introducing her to such a girl, and after saying a few polite words, turned again to talk to Molly. Molly was in white, and looked one of the sweetest girls in the room. Her simple white dress, the innocent, open expression of her face, gave her something the appearance of a daisy. Cecil, pale, and in deep mourning, made a strong contrast to her friend. The festivities of the evening were now at their height. The girls laughed and joked, and walked from one room to the other. Kate was here, there, and everywhere. The birthday party became so hilarious that Kate's somewhat peculiar dress was forgotten; all was eager conversation and high mirth. Still, Matilda had her own reasons for feeling uncomfortable. Again and again her eyes sought the neighborhood of the door. But whenever she began to make her escape, Kate was down upon her.

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"You are eating nothing, Matilda," she said on one of these occasions. "Come into the supper room. Oh, how hot you look! a little lemonade will do you good. Come in here; come with me. Hester, will you give Matilda Matthews a glass of lemonade?"

Hester hurried to comply. As she did so, Kate stooped to whisper to her:

"I don't want that girl to slip out of the room," she said. "Watch her; follow her; keep your eye on her."

"Kate, what is the matter with you?"

"Nothing, nothing! Only keep your eye on Matilda Matthews."

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The supper was over at last; even schoolgirls' appetites were satisfied.

"Now, then, let's clear the room," cried Kate.

A few eager hands and legs were immediately at her service. The trays, piled with plates, cups and saucers, and glasses, were conveyed into the passage outside. A moment or two later Miss Leicester came in. She wore a black velvet dress with a long train, and looked particularly dignified and handsome. Kate ran to the door to bid her welcome.

"How sweet of you to come!" she cried. "You are just in time for my birthday speech."

"Are you going to make a speech, dear child?" said Miss Leicester.

"Yes; a little birthday oration. I hope you won't mind."

"No; I shall be interested to hear what you have got to say."

Kate led Miss Leicester to the chair of honor. All the girls had now collected in Hester Temple's pretty room.

"It is awfully hot," whispered Matilda to her nearest companion. "For my part, I think this a very stupid sort of entertainment. The food was awful. Fancy asking a person to come and eat seedcake, and that dreadful lemonade made with tartaric acid. I shall have the stomach-ache to-night. Don't you think this affair very slow, Jenny? What do you say to our going home?"

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"No; I'm enjoying myself," said Jenny Howe. "Did you hear Kate say that she was going to make a birthday speech? Kate is such a bright, clever creature, I am quite longing to hear what she has got to say. By the way, Matilda, I don't believe a word of that horrid story you told me about her."

"Did I say anything?" queried Matilda. "I'm sure, if I did, I've forgotten all about it. Of course, I admire Kate O'Connor. She is a little peculiar, but she can't help that."

"Hush!" said Jenny; "she is going to begin her speech. Try not to be so spiteful, Matilda."

Matilda flushed more hotly than ever. She looked in the direction of the door, and made a sudden dart toward it. Hester Temple was standing close to it.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Home; I am suffocating. This room is too hot for me."

"I'll open the window, and you can stand near it. You really can't go now, Matilda; it would be awfully rude; just when Kate is going to make her birthday speech."

Matilda looked round her wildly; there was no means of escape. She resigned herself sullenly to her fate.

There was a little empty space in the middle of the room, and into this space Kate now lightly stepped. She looked around her to right and left. Her eyes, bright as stars, met Molly's. They did not rest a moment on her old friend's face. From Molly she looked full at Matilda.

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"There is a seat in front for you," she said. "Come forward, Matilda; you are choking, back there in the crowd. Come and sit near Miss Leicester."

"Yes, my dear; here is a comfortable chair, in which you will be quite cool," said Miss Leicester.

Poor Matilda was dragged unwillingly to the front. Kate's eyes danced more brightly than ever, and smiles of delight soon rippled all over her face.

"It was so kind of you all to come to celebrate my birthday," she began. "I am seventeen to-day; quite old for a girl. I have been at St. Dorothy's exactly a year. It has been a very happy year to me. I have made a good many friends. The girls in the house have been particularly kind to me. I want to thank all the girls here for their kindness. I want also to say something else."

Here her manner suddenly changed. The gay sparkle and fun went out of her face. She pressed one hand for an instant to her left side; her eyes, troubled and misty, were fixed on Miss Leicester's face.

"I think Miss Leicester knows all about me," she said. "She knows my origin; she knows what I was before I came to St. Dorothy's."

"Kate, dear, I would rather you did not allude to that subject," said Miss Leicester, distress and astonishment in her tone. [156]

"I am very sorry to disobey you, Miss Leicester, but I have thought it all out, and I think it is best," replied Kate. "I am ashamed of nothing. I should like now to describe the life—the early life—of a girl."

Here she looked quickly from one eager face to the other.

"The girl is myself," continued Kate. "If I were to shut my eyes now, I should see a picture. Perhaps I can describe that picture to you with eyes open. There is a little farm, far, far away in the west of Ireland. The country is beautiful, although somewhat wild. The mountains seem in parts to reach the very sky. Now and then the clouds come right down and cover them. The grass is very green, and the streams make a merry sound as they ripple past the little farmstead. The house would be thought a poor one by most of you. It has a thatched roof; there is a kitchen, and a great open hearth. On the hearth the fire blazes merrily. A lot of bacon hangs from the rafters across the ceiling. There is a deal table in the middle of the room, and a great dresser at one side. The table is clean and white, as white as snow. The dresser is white also, and the plates and cups and saucers, and jugs and bowls, and the tins and saucepans, all shine with good washing and good rubbing. You see, it is a very humble kitchen, and there is no parlor, nor drawing room, nor any regular sitting room in the little old house. Upstairs there are two bedrooms. You go upstairs by means of a step-ladder. One of the rooms is prettier than the other. It has a lattice window, and there are lots of monthly roses, creepers, myrtle, and other flowers twining about it. A sweet smell comes in when you open the window, and you hear the robins and swallows chirping in the eaves, and you get a sweet whiff of strong air from the mountains opposite. The little room inside is very poor, but the window and the view without are lovely. The inner room looks out on the yard or byre. You can see the cattle from this window; the four cows in their stalls, and the dairymaid, with her red elbows, milking them. I am not the dairymaid, but I go to superintend the milking. At the back of the kitchen is the dairy. The dairy is lovely; it is cool and sweet and dark. On the hottest day in summer you feel a breath of ice on your cheek when you enter here, and the milk and cream look good in the large glass pans; and the churn stands open, waiting to receive its daily portion of cream; and there are piles of yellow butter standing on the shelves, and great dishes of fresh eggs not far away. [157]

"I think I have described the house well enough to you now. You must see for yourselves that it is just the sort of place where poor people would live. The people who live in it are an old man and a girl. They keep no servant; they do their own work. There is a dairymaid who comes morning and evening to milk the cows and help the girl with the butter, and there are two men who help with the land, and that is all. The old man and the girl have the house to themselves most of the time. I should like to describe that old man. He does a lot of rough work; he lays the fire for the girl day after day, and fills the kettle for her, and won't allow her to do anything except the lightest part of the daily toil; but, for all that, he is quite a gentleman. I say nothing about the girl. She may belong, in every sense of the word, to the class from which she springs, but the old man is a king in his way. He has a very noble head, and hair as white as silver. His eyes are dark and soft, his nose aquiline. When he stands up, he looks dignified; when he looks at you, you get a peep at his grand soul. [158]

"That old man is between seventy and eighty years of age. He has spent his entire life in one county, and he is known all over the place. The old people know him, and the young people, and the children; and there is not an individual who does not love him. Not an evil word has ever been flung against him. During the whole of his long life no one can accuse him of having ever done a mean thing, of having oppressed the fatherless and the widow, of having taken money that did not belong to him. All during his long life he has lived by the golden rule, 'Do to others as you would be done by.' He is not a learned man, but he knows his Bible very well, and he can quote whole pages from Shakspeare. He also understands nature splendidly. It is wonderful to hear him when he talks about nature's secrets. There is nothing that grows on the land, or feeds on the soil, or flies in the air, or lives in the sea (which is not far away), that this old man does not know about. He can tell you about the habits of all the birds, and the ways of all the fishes, and about the medicinal uses of a great many herbs, and the food uses of all the vegetables and the fruits. It is delightful to hear him when he speaks, for he chooses his words with grace, and his grammar is perfectly correct. He has the most beautiful mind the girl ever came across in the whole course of her life. It is an idyl and a poem to live with him. [159]



"I must now tell you something of the life of the girl. She is naturally very fond of books, but she has not much time for them. She gets up at five o'clock in the morning, summer and winter; she is busy from early morning till early bedtime. There are the cows to see to—she loves those cows. She wishes she could describe to you the look in Cusha's eyes. Cusha has the most perfect brown eyes of any creature in all the world. The girl cannot think of them now without tears coming into her own. She loves the memory of the other cows, too, but Cusha comes first. She has even milked Cusha—yes, with these hands; look at them. She and Cusha enjoyed themselves at these times. The girl has not only the dairy to see to and superintend, but she has also the poultry yard. Do you like fluffy little balls of yellow chickens? There is nothing vulgar about them, is there? The girl walked about the yard, and through the gardens, with the chickens pressed to her neck, and cuddled in her arms, hundreds and hundreds of times; and there are the goslings, almost prettier still. You see for yourselves that she must have plenty to do.

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"She has also the flower garden to see to. All the mignonette, and the sweet peas, and the roses; the great hedges of Scotch roses, white and red, are her care. She lives with her flowers. The old man talks to her about them while she tends them. It is strange, but it seems to me there is nothing vulgar nor commonplace in her life. She has no time for commonplace thoughts, nor for slander and gossip, nor evil speaking. She is not to be praised for not indulging in these things; she has simply no time for them. In the evening she studies. She reads Shakspeare and many books of history, and she always ends up with the Bible. She goes to bed quite early. Perhaps I have not half described her life; perhaps also I have told you enough.

"The girl—the girl who now stands before you—lived this beautiful ideal life until she was nearly sixteen years of age; then God thought it right, for reasons of his own, to take it away from her. The old man, the grand old king of the hamlet, was found dead in his bed one morning. It was a very fitting end for him, and he was quite ready to go. But the girl! somehow or other, her heart broke then. She has never been the same since that dreadful summer's morning. The sun of her early happy youth seemed to set for her then, and though the bees hummed, and the birds sang, and the flowers bloomed, and all the creatures of the world went on in their happy way, the girl felt that nothing could be perfect with her again until she joined the old man in the land beyond the sea.

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"Great troubles came to her after this. Perhaps some of you here would not have thought them so. The little old farm, the shabby, dear old house, had to be sold, and Cusha went to strangers, and the other cows followed her example, and the chickens and goslings, and all the other live stock, even to dear Black Beauty, the farm horse, who was so sweet and noble that the girl can't talk about him without tears—they were all scattered far and wide, and the girl herself was left with money in the bank; not much, but a little. Then she remembered her grandfather, and she said to herself, 'For his sake I will stop fretting, and I will make the most I can out of my life.' She wrote to Miss Forester, and Miss Forester wrote back, and begged of her to come to Redgarth. She came, and in the fresh, glad, full life she tried to drown her sorrow.

"But," continued Kate, stopping abruptly, and turning with flashing eyes from Molly to where Matilda crouched by Miss Leicester's side, "she can never drown the sorrow which tells her that the old beautiful life is over. Lately, quite lately, a report has reached this girl, which for a day or two drove her nearly mad. There are certain girls at St. Dorothy's, and at other houses of residence, who think the ideal life which she used to live desecration. This fact cut her to the heart. Perhaps, girls," continued Kate, "I am not a lady in your acceptation of the word, but I wish to tell you all to-night, every one of you, that I would not change with you. I would not give up that old memory. I would not give up that near relationship to the grand old king of that humble hamlet for any you could confer on me. You know everything now. You can gossip as much as you like. You can speak of me as low, as uneducated, as of humble birth. Do you think I care? No, not now; now that you know the simple truth. I have only one word more to say. Among the gossip which has reached my ears, I am told that I am the recipient of Miss Forester's charity. I am quite certain that Miss Forester would give charity in the kindest and most thoughtful way, but my grandfather was proud as well as great, and he left me enough money when he died to give me all the advantages of this home of learning. Girls, I may be poor and humble, but I am *not* here on charity."

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As Kate uttered her last words, she walked quietly out of the room. She had spoken with force; there had been an earnest ring in her voice, and a look about her eyes which had caused a queer sensation in the minds of all who listened to her. When she went toward the door of the room, no one stirred to call her back; there was a dead silence. After a time, Miss Leicester rose to her feet and spoke.

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"I am very much surprised at all this," she said. "Has anyone in this school dared to be unkind to Kate O'Connor? Has anyone dared to gossip about her, or laugh about her? No, I don't expect an answer to-night, for this matter must be thoroughly investigated."

Then she also left the room.

Her departure was the signal for a perfect babel of tongues. The girls of St. Dorothy's were immensely excited. Matilda sought an opportunity to find her way to the door; no one noticed her departure now, and she rushed out of the house trembling a good deal, and glad when she found herself in the open air. Matilda was a thorough coward. She perceived at a glance that the full weight of public opinion would be against her, if her part in this sorry story were known.

"There is nothing for it now, but for me to take up Kate O'Connor," she said to herself; "to

make much of her; to consider it the finest thing in the world to have been a dairymaid and a peasant girl when you were a child. Kate is wonderfully clever, and she has scored a point in her favor. By and by, however, there will come a reaction, and then my hour will have arrived."

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## CHAPTER XIII. CECIL INVESTIGATES.

**D**O sit down, Molly! Where are you going?" said Hester Temple.  
Molly Lavender paused when Hester said these words to her.

"I want to find Kate," she said. "There is something dreadful the matter with Kate. She looked at me as if she thought I had said something. Oh, I must go to her; don't keep me."

"Perhaps you had better," said Hester, giving Molly a queer glance.

Molly ran out of the room. Hester was dragged down on an ottoman between two of her friends. They were both excited.

"Do let us talk the thing over!" they said. "Did you ever know anything so dramatic? and didn't Kate look charming? I'm sure one wouldn't mind being a peasant, or a dairymaid, or anything else, if one could look as she did just now."

"It wasn't the look so much as the words," said a tall, dark girl who stood near. "I scarcely looked at her, but her words were like a poem. I never knew anyone choose her language so well. I suppose she inherits her talent from that wonderful old man. How I wish I were an artist, that I might sketch that scene which she depicted the old man and the girl! Anyone in all the world would be proud to be *that* girl. Oh, what is it, Miss Ross? Did you speak?"

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Cecil had been waiting all this time to find an opportunity.

"The thing to do," she said, "is this. We must not waste our time in admiring the beautiful picture which Miss O'Connor sketched for us; we must get at the bottom of the mischief which has been going on. Molly Lavender and Kate were great friends; now Kate is unkind and cold to Molly. Did you say anything, Hester?"

"Well, the fact is," said Hester, "I am not greatly surprised."

"Why? Do you know anything of this?"

"Something; please don't look at me so indignantly, Cecil. We all love Molly, and it was quite the last sort of thing we expected her to do."

"But she did nothing. What do you mean? Molly loves Kate with all her heart; there is nothing she would not do for her. What is this mystery?"

"Perhaps the mystery is being put straight now," said Hester. "Molly did the very best thing she could, when she said she would go to Kate. Kate is excited and softened now, and if Molly goes to her and confesses, and says she is sorry, I have not the least doubt that Kate will forgive her."

"But," said Cecil indignantly, "Molly has nothing to be sorry about. If ever a girl in the world was as true as steel, it is Molly Lavender. Come," she added, "I am a stranger at present at St. Dorothy's, I don't know any of you girls, but I do know Molly Lavender. She and I were at school together when we were children, and have been great friends all our lives."

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"Then of course you take her part," said Hester.

Cecil's eyes flashed fire.

"I do," she answered with spirit, "and I insist on knowing the truth. What has Molly done?"

"Well, it is this. Kate, for all her high spirits and her fun and nonsense, has a lot of reserve about her. She will hardly tell her innermost thoughts to anyone. Not a soul in the place, except, of course, Miss Forester and Miss Leicester, knew about the story which she told us to-night. We thought of her just like any other girl. We did not know that she had a romance at the back of her; we did not know anything about her origin. Of course she is, in every sense of the word, a perfect lady, and we just thought, if we thought at all, that she had been brought up like the rest of us in a comfortable home, and with all the usual refinements of life. Well, when Molly came, Kate took a great fancy to her, and Molly seemed equally fond of Kate. You know Molly Lavender is rich, and she has a bedroom to herself, and all kinds of little luxuries which the girls who live in dormitories can't aspire to. Well, when poor Kate began to sigh, and tried to get up a society in the cause of the Dwellers in Cubicles, as she called them, Molly was one of her most staunch supporters; she shared her room with her night after night until you came, Cecil. In short, they were inseparable, and scarcely ever apart; and one day Kate opened her heart to Molly, and showed her that picture which she sketched so graphically for us all to-night. She never told another soul, and of course she thought that she was safe with Molly. What do you think happened? In less than a week the story began to be known all over the school. Not dear Kate's

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own beautiful story, but a vulgar, common edition of it. Kate was no lady, Kate used to do menial work, Kate was received here on charity! You know how silly schoolgirls can be over this sort of thing; and although everybody liked Kate, there were some silly girls who began to look down on her. At last it reached my ears, and I thought it only fair to tell her."

"Who did you trace the report to?" asked Cecil.

"Well, of course, Matilda Matthews was in it. You know what a horrid, disagreeable girl Matilda is. There is no girl in the whole school so disliked, and how Molly could have so completely forgotten herself as to give Matilda her confidence passes my comprehension. There is not the least doubt that she did tell her, for the simple reason that Molly alone, in the whole school, knew the truth."

When Hester had finished speaking, there was a little pause. Cecil was standing up, her face was white, her eyes stared straight in front of her; she was evidently thinking hard. Hester looked at her, and so did several of the other girls, expecting her to make some response, but she did not speak.

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"Kate was cut to the heart," continued Hester. "I could see that; not that she said a great deal to me. She evidently made this little plan to let the whole school know the real truth. For my part, I think it very brave of her to stop gossip in this way; but I am very sorry indeed about Molly Lavender."

"Thank you for telling me," said Cecil.

"Have you nothing to say?"

"Nothing at present."

"Do you mean to do anything?"

"Yes, everything; but I have nothing to say on the subject at present."

Cecil left the room. On her way up to her own room she met Molly. Molly's eyes were red, her face pale.

"Have you seen her, Molly?" asked Cecil.

"No; she locked herself into her cubicle, and would not see me. I called to her through the door, but she would not reply. Cecil, what does it all mean?"

"It means treachery," said Cecil. "I have got to the bottom of it now. This thing must be put right, somehow. I made Hester tell me the whole story."

"Kate seems to suspect me," said Molly, putting up her hand to her head. "I never felt so puzzled in my life."

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"Well, come into your room, and let us talk it out," said Cecil.

The girls entered Molly's room. She turned on the electric light, and they sat down side by side on her little bed.

"It is a great matter to know the truth," said Cecil. "The facts of the case are simply these: Kate confided her story to you."

"Yes; about three weeks ago."

"Well, since then it has got into the school, and Kate suspects that you betrayed her confidence to Matilda Matthews."

"How dared she?" said Molly, coloring crimson. "What kind of girl must she think me?"

"Well, Molly, we must get to the bottom of it somehow. There is not the least manner of doubt that you are the only person in the school who had been told Kate's secret until to-night. Of course you never told: you would not breathe a word—that goes without saying. We need not waste our breath over that. The thing to find out is, how Matilda got her knowledge."

"I have not the faintest idea," said Molly. "I remember the day when Kate told me. We had taken a long walk together. She is a great botanist, and she was explaining to me some wonderfully interesting things about some plants which we had come across in our walk; then we went into the playground, and we sat in the summerhouse. It was a warm day for the time of year, and we were both tired and hot from our walk. There was not a soul anywhere near—not a single soul. Some girls in the distance were playing hockey; we did not take any notice of them. I asked Kate quite suddenly how she knew so much about plants. She looked at me—she gave me one of those straight glances which always somehow went to my heart, and then, she began to speak about her grandfather. The moment she mentioned him, she began to get enthusiastic. She drew such a picture that I became almost beside myself with delight and appreciation, that fact drew her on to tell me more. She described the cows and the little cottage, and the view from her bedroom window. Perhaps she did not make such a graphic picture of the whole thing as she did to-night, but the story was the same. I never loved her more, nor respected her more. Of course it was told in the greatest confidence, and it never passed my lips—never, until now when I am telling you."

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"It is no secret now," said Cecil; "all the world knows, or, at least, all our school world knows, that you have been confided in, and that you are supposed to be the betrayer. How in the world did the story get out?"

"That I can't tell," said Molly. "It is a mystery which I can't explain."

"Are you quite certain there was no one near?"

"Quite, quite, quite! Don't you know the house in the playground, Cecil? It is nothing but a bare room—just a few chairs and a couple of benches, and lots of hooks on the walls to hang up our cricket and tennis bats. We had the summerhouse to ourselves, and there was not a soul in sight."

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"I must try and get to the bottom of this," said Cecil.

"What do you mean to do? I feel quite in despair. I shall, of course, tell Kate the moment I see her that I am quite innocent, that she is unjust in suspecting me; but I greatly fear, from her manner to-night, and from her refusing to see me, that she will not believe my word."

"Dear Molly, she shall believe you yet," said Cecil, in a caressing voice.

Molly leaned up against her friend.

"It is such a comfort to have you in school, Ceci," she said. "Oh, it is very wrong of me to think so much of myself in this matter."

"How can you help it, you poor dear? You, of all people, to be suspected of this sort of thing; but, never mind, I am going to take it up now."

"I can't imagine what you will do."

"I don't quite know myself yet, but I am not sister to four brothers for nothing. If you only could guess, Molly, what scrapes those boys have been in—the kind of things even Maurice has been suspected of doing. But I have always got them to confide in me; and somehow, when we talked the thing out, and straightened it a bit, and got the tangles out of it, as it were, we always began to get glimpses of daylight. Of course I could not interfere in the boys' affairs as I can in yours, but I have before now set quite hopeless sort of scrapes—indeed they seemed so at the time—straight."

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"Well, I wish you would take me up," said Molly.

"I intend to, you may be sure, and also that poor Kate O'Connor. Of course I am angry with her for suspecting you, but it is impossible not to love her and be interested in her. Now, Molly, I want you to promise me one thing."

"What is that?"

"Just tell Kate the truth quite simply to-morrow; don't exaggerate, and don't protest. Tell her you know she suspects you, assure her of your innocence, and then leave the matter in my hands; don't say another word. Of course it is easy to guess who is at the bottom of all the mischief."

"Who?" inquired Molly.

"Why, Matilda Matthews! Did you notice how anxious Kate was to keep her in the room this evening, and how often Matilda made for the door? I was quite amused watching the clever way in which Kate kept her victim within sight. Of course I could not guess her motive at the time; now I see that she wanted to shame Matilda thoroughly."

"Yes; I hate Matilda!" said Molly. "I never did hate anyone before, but I hate her! Of course she has made the mischief; but how did she find out? That is the puzzle of all puzzles, Cecil."

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"Of course it is a puzzle," said Cecil; "but we'll drag it into the light of day somehow. Now, Molly, I'm dead tired, and I think I must say good-night."

"Good-night!" said Molly.

A moment later her friend went away.

Cecil ran upstairs to her own cubicle. It was next to Kate's, and as she laid her head on her pillow she thought she heard a sound something like a sob not far away. She longed to speak and give a word of comfort, but she knew that anything she said would be overheard by other girls. There was nothing for her to do but to bide her time.

Cecil's new life was full of the keenest interests. Her examinations had been successful. She had taken a high place in the school. Miss Forester had already singled her out for special notice. It was arranged that she was to try for the great yearly scholarship given by the governors of Redgarth to the best pupil, and her head was absorbed with the new and vivid interests which her different studies were bringing to her. Nevertheless, Cecil had lived an unselfish life; she loved Molly with all her heart and soul, and determined not to leave a stone unturned to get her out of her present difficulty. She lay awake for a short time thinking about her, suppressed a sigh as she thought of the valuable help Maurice, not to say Jimmy, could give her in this emergency; for Maurice was the soul of common sense, and Jimmy was a born detective. But as the boys were far away, she had to trust to her own ingenuity. Suddenly an idea darted through her mind. Why

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not write to Jimmy and ask his advice?

"I never knew such a lad for ferreting out mysteries," thought Cecil. "I need not give him any names, but I'll just put the case in a few strong words, and see what he suggests. The thing to find out is this: How did Matilda get her knowledge? I'll put the whole case to Jimmy."

Cecil knew that she would have no time to do this in the morning. She got softly out of bed, lit her candle, sat down before her writing-desk, and wrote the following letter:

DEAR JIMMY:

You know you are fond of mysteries. Can you make anything out of the following? You must forgive me for not mentioning names. The case is just as I am putting it. There is a very nice girl in this school; she is what you would call a brick; she has a friend who is just as nice in her own way. The friend is the sort of true girl who would not tell a secret for all the world. One day these two girls were sitting together in a little summerhouse, made of wood, in our large playground. The one girl told the other girl a secret. It was an important secret, and just the sort which any person who had a grain of honor in him or her would rather be cut in pieces than tell again. Well, Jimmy, in some mysterious way the secret has got out; everyone in the school knows about it, and the poor dear girl, who would rather have her tongue cut out than betray her friend, is supposed to have been treacherous, and to have betrayed her friend's confidence. In some dreadful way the secret has got into the hands of a very unscrupulous girl in the school, and she is making use of it, and we're all unhappy. There was not a soul anywhere near the summerhouse when the one girl told the other the secret. How did the mischievous, cruel girl get hold of it? That is what I want to know. Now, Jimmy, dear, set your keen detective wits to work and give me a clew, if you can. Give my love to Maurice; I will write to him on Saturday. I hope you all try not to make poor Mr. Danvers too unhappy.

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Your loving sister,  
CECIL.

P.S.—Write by return, if you can. Set your keen wits to work, Jimmy, and give me a solution of this mystery as you love me.

Cecil felt absurdly cheered when she had written this letter. She went back to bed, and soon afterward fell asleep.

The next morning Kate came down to breakfast looking just as usual. She was watched with great interest when she entered the breakfast room, but except that she held her head a little higher than usual, and that her cheeks were even brighter than of yore, there seemed no change whatever about her. She talked a good deal during breakfast, and even addressed Molly Lavender as if nothing special had happened. Cecil watched her with anxiety; Molly avoided meeting her eyes. Immediately after breakfast followed prayers, and then the girls went up to their rooms to get ready to go to school. Molly ran up to hers, put on her hat and jacket, snatched up her exercise and note books, and went and waited in the hall. Kate, as a rule, was one of the first to go to school. Molly felt her heart beating faster than usual as she heard her light footsteps coming downstairs.

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"Kate, I want to speak to you," said Molly, the moment Kate entered the wide central hall.

"Well, what is it, Molly?" answered Kate.

She had been looking quite bright and cheerful when she came into the hall; some words of a little song which she used to sing to Cusha were bubbling from her lips. Kate had a voice sweet and true as a lark's. The gay sound stopped when Molly addressed her. Molly's brown eyes met hers fully.

"I must say it," said Molly; "you shan't hinder me. I know you suspect me, Kate."

"We won't say anything more on the subject now, Molly," replied Kate, in a gentle tone.

"We must," replied Molly, with spirit. "Do you think I am going to live under suspicion? Look at me, Kate, and tell me if I seem like the sort of girl you suspect me of being."

"No, you don't; that is the cruel thing," said Kate, giving her a critical glance.

"Kate, won't you believe me?" said Molly. Her voice grew full of entreaty. "I never betrayed anyone in all my life; I never told a lie in all my life; I never broke a confidence since I was born. I have plenty of faults, but these are not mine. Is it likely, Kate, that I would tell what you told me in such confidence? Is it likely—is it?"

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"No," said Kate, "it is not likely, but——" She paused.

"Yes, Kate, yes! what do you mean by 'but'? Do you still believe that I betrayed you?"

"How can I help myself, Molly?"

Molly's eyes grew full of tears. The voices of several girls were heard approaching.

"Listen," said Kate, going quickly to Molly's side. "I spoke to Miss Leicester this morning. She

said that, after all, mine was a sort of false humility last night. She was sorry that I told my story to the school. I am not sorry; I am glad that everyone knows. I hate deception, and there is no deception now. I would give all the world not to believe that you broke my confidence, Molly; but I told no one else."

"I never broke it," said Molly. "I had not the faintest idea why you were cold and distant to me until last night. Now, I wish to tell you emphatically that I am innocent—innocent as a baby."

Kate looked full at her; the girls were entering the hall. Molly laid her hand on Kate's arm.

"You do believe me—you must!" said Molly.

"No!" replied Kate.

Molly rushed away.

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## CHAPTER XIV. THE LITTLE HOLE IN THE SUMMERHOUSE.

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ON a post card came Jimmy's reply. It was decidedly enigmatical and short.

"Look out for eavesdroppers. Your affectionate brother."

The post card was lying on Cecil's plate when she came in to dinner on a certain Saturday afternoon. She hastily slipped it into her pocket. On Saturday afternoon there was, of course, a half holiday. Only those who were working very hard for a coming examination dreamt of turning to books on such a lovely day as this.

Kate, who seemed to have completely recovered her spirits, and who was more popular than ever at St. Dorothy's, was off on a long botanical expedition with several other girls. Molly had a headache, and preferred a quiet time in her own room. Cecil meanwhile felt Jimmy's card burning a hole in her pocket.

"Look out for eavesdroppers," she repeated to herself.

Until she received her brother's frank communication, it had never occurred to her to solve the mystery in this way.

"Eavesdropping is such a schoolboy trick!" she said to herself. "I doubt whether there is anything in Jimmy's solution, but such as it is, I am bound to act on it. I shall visit the summerhouse this afternoon."

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Cecil went to her cubicle as this thought came to her, and hastily put on her hat, jacket, and gloves.

"Are you coming with us, Cecil?" called out Kate, who was just preparing for her own walk in the cubicle near by.

"Not to-day," replied Cecil.

"I wish you would; you have more taste for botany than all the other girls at St. Dorothy's put together. I know some rocks where we can get lovely specimens of rare ferns. Do come!"

"No; I can't," replied Cecil.

Her door was a little open; Kate came to it now, and pushed in her laughing face.

"It strikes me," she said, lowering her voice to a whisper as she spoke, "that you do not greatly care to be friends with me."

"Yes, I do, Kate," replied Cecil, "but you are unjust to Molly; you are making Molly suffer very much. There is no one near now, so I am able to speak what is in my mind. Molly is in trouble because you do not believe her. You accuse her in your own mind of a most base and dishonorable act."

"Oh, how you worry me!" said Kate. "Do you think that I would believe anything against Molly if I could help myself? Do you think I *want* to doubt?"

"You shall not long," said Cecil, with spirit. "I have made up my mind not to leave a stone unturned to set this matter straight. Go for your walk, Kate, enjoy your botany, but try and remember that, because you have so little faith, you are making a most loving and loyal heart suffer. Go! I think you are a noble girl in many ways, but I am surprised at your want of faith."

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Kate looked as astonished as if someone had suddenly slapped her in the face. She stood silent for a moment, opened her lips once as if she meant to say something, changed her mind, and went softly away. A moment or two later Cecil left the house.

"I feel as if I were engaged on a very dirty, disagreeable bit of work," she said to herself. "I *must* find out if it would have been possible for anyone to have overheard Kate's and Molly's

conversation. Let me see, an idea comes to me. Why should not Matilda Matthews herself help me to unravel this mystery? Matilda is always dying to be seen with the St. Dorothy girls. I must pander to her weakness a little now. After all, it is in a good cause."

Matilda lived at Dacre House. It was one of the most fashionable of the houses of residence; only really rich girls could afford to go there. Matilda's father and mother had more money than they knew what to do with. Matilda was their only child, and they did not care what expense they lavished on her. Cecil had never yet been to Dacre House. It was at the other side of the great school quadrangle. She soon found herself walking up the wide flight of steps, and ringing the hall door bell. A neatly dressed servant quickly answered her summons. [181]

"I have called to see Miss Matthews. Do you happen to know if she is in?" inquired Cecil.

"I don't know, miss; I'll inquire. Will you come upstairs to the drawing room, please?"

Cecil obeyed.

Dacre House was richly and expensively furnished; there were Turkey carpets on the stairs; the drawing room was a very large and luxurious apartment. Cecil looked round her with a sense of dissatisfaction. She missed the plain, but exquisite, neatness of St. Dorothy's.

"I am glad I am there," she said to herself.

At this moment Matilda entered the room. She quite blushed and giggled when she saw Cecil.

"How do you do?" she said, in a sentimental voice. "Is not the day lovely?"

"Yes," said Cecil. "I want to know if you will come for a walk with me, Matilda?"

"With you?" asked Matilda, her dull eyes lighting up. "Do you want us to be chums?"

Cecil hated herself—she found that to gain her object she must really act with guile. Never before had straightforward Cecil stooped to this sort of work.

"Never mind, it is in the cause of friendship," she said to her aggrieved conscience. Aloud she replied: [182]

"I have not thought whether we are to be chums or not. I simply want a companion to spend the afternoon with me."

"Don't you like the girls at St. Dorothy's?" asked Matilda, in a low voice.

"Of course I do! they are delightful. We can discuss them when we are out—that is, if you are coming."

Matilda had every intention of coming. It was all very well to be rich, and to be surrounded by luxuries, and to be fawned on by girls poorer than herself, but she knew in her heart of hearts that she lacked those things which girls like Cecil Ross and Molly Lavender, and even poor, low-born Kate O'Connor, possessed. She lacked sadly all that nobility of spirit which shone in Cecil's eyes, and was reflected in every tone of Molly's sweet voice. She hated the girls who possessed those gifts which had been denied to her. She underwent unceasing mortification from the fact that her own figure was squat, her own face plain and freckled, from the knowledge that no amount of fine dress could make her look the least like a lady.

"Yes, I'll go," she said, after a pause. "I did not mean to go out this afternoon, for I have just had a new novel sent to me by post, and I meant to sit by the fire and enjoy it, but as you have been good enough to call, Cecil, I won't refuse your request. I dare say you find it rather lonely at present, but you will soon have plenty of friends. Perhaps you know that I am going to St. Dorothy's at the half term. When I go there, I'll promise to do my best for you." [183]

"Well, run and put on your hat now," said Cecil, "and let us start."

"Where shall we go?" asked Matilda, when the girls had left Dacre House.

"Shall we go to the big playground first? I have not half seen it."

"We'll go there, if you like; but I don't care for hockey, lacrosse, nor any of those mannish games. My father is old-fashioned; he likes me to be thoroughly educated, but he always says, 'Be feminine before all things, Matilda.' I think hockey, and cricket, and cycling so very unfeminine, don't you?"

"Not at all," replied Cecil. "Of course, taken in excess, they may be bad; but, really," she added, "I have not studied the subject."

"Nor have I—not seriously. I hate discussing all those women's questions; we're always having them in our debating society. After all, what is the use? I, for one, mean to marry well. My idea is to marry a man twice my own age, because he will make a pet of me. I'd rather be an old man's darling, than a young man's slave; wouldn't you, Cecil?"

"I don't intend to be either," replied Cecil.

"Do you mind my leaning on you?" asked Matilda. "I'm quite certain we'll be chums. I like your face; you don't know how I admire independent sort of girls like you. How fast you walk! It quite blows me to walk as fast as that. Ah, that's better, let me catch on to your arm; you don't mind, [184]

do you?"

If Cecil had spoken the truth, she would have said, "I mind intensely." As it was, she made no response. Matilda took silence for consent. One or two of the St. Dorothy girls passed them, and stared when they saw who Cecil Ross' companion was.

"What conceited creatures those schoolgirls are!" said Matilda. "And of all the girls in the place none give themselves such airs as those who live at St. Dorothy's. Well, here we are at the playground. What do you mean to do, now we have got here, Cecil? For my part, I am not a good walker; I require plenty of rest; I have none of the muscle which characterises the modern girl."

"I should think not," thought Cecil to herself. Aloud she said:

"If you are tired, we can sit in the summerhouse."

"A good idea," responded Matilda; "we can watch the girls at their cricket and lacrosse from there. Let us go straight to the summerhouse, and look on at the different games. I don't object to looking on, but I hate joining. When first I went to Dacre House, I was forced to join, but now, thank goodness! I am past that stage. Of course, when I go to St. Dorothy's, I shall be more or less my own mistress."

"What a big world this great school is!" said Cecil.

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"Yes, isn't it?" replied Matilda. "But though it's big, it's narrow, too. Do you see that set of girls over there? They are most of them in dark blue, with white sailor hats; they live in Miss Ford's house. Miss Ford and Mrs. Churchill put on the most fearful airs, and so do their girls. The girls in those two houses are the aristocrats of the school; one or two of them have titles, and several are honorables. Father made a great effort to get me into Mrs. Churchill's house. Father is first cousin to Sir John Jones, and Sir John Jones was made a baronet ten years ago; but Mrs. Churchill is so exclusive, and when she heard that father had made his money by tallow, it was decided that I had better go to Dacre House. Don't you think all that sort of thing very ridiculous?"

"I am incapable of judging," replied Cecil. "I suppose as long as the world lasts there will be distinctions of class."

"Oh, good gracious! how frightfully conservative and old-fashioned you are!"

"Not at all; you mistake me. I am indifferent myself to all that sort of thing. I have come to school to study; I want to get the governors' scholarship, if I can."

"You belong to the distinction of talent. I have no doubt you are clever; you look it. For my part, I hate study, and, if it were not for mother, would not dream of going to Cambridge. But mother's heart is set on it; Sir John Jones' daughter is at Girton now, and she hopes I may make her acquaintance. I know that is the real reason she is sending me, but I hope you won't repeat it."

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Cecil shut her lips; she was quite silent.

They soon reached the summerhouse, and seated themselves in such a position that they had a good view of the field. Several games were going on vigorously, and Cecil's thoughts reverted to her brothers. She wondered if they, too, were having a good time on that bright Saturday afternoon.

"By the way," said Matilda, in a low, wheedling sort of tone; "talking of rank and all that, don't you think it is odd of Miss Forester to allow a girl like Kate O'Connor to come to Redgarth?"

"Why?" asked Cecil calmly.

"Why? Need you ask? Her origin!"

"What about her origin?" asked Cecil.

"Well," Matilda giggled, "I think she has explained all that herself."

"She has told us of a very beautiful life which she led in Ireland," said Cecil. "I fail to see where her low origin comes in. Hers was the sort of life which Tennyson, if he were now alive, would write a lovely ballad about."

"Oh, if you take it in that spirit, I have not a word to say," replied Matilda. "I knew there were some silly, romantic, sentimental girls at St. Dorothy's, but I did not know that you were one. I am glad it has not been my lot in life to milk cows, and clean dairies, and weed stupid little gardens."

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"And read Shakspeare, and the Bible, and the book of nature," continued Cecil, in fine scorn. "Such privileges are only accorded to the few."

"I suppose Kate is one of nature's ladies," said Matilda, in a reflective tone. "I suppose you are all going to take her up more heartily than ever, after her extraordinary exhibition the other night?"

"After the very beautiful poem which she recited in our presence," cried Cecil. "Yes; we will all take her up warmly."



"I could see that there was a good deal of hurt feeling behind all that fine oration," responded Matilda, after a pause; "I expect she was very angry with her dear friend Molly Lavender for betraying her."

"Molly never betrayed her," replied Cecil, with firmness.

"Oh, my dear Cecil! how can you believe that story? Why, Molly even hinted two or three things to me."

"Did she? I was going to ask you about those two or three things," said Cecil.

Matilda fidgeted uneasily.

"I don't mean that she said *much*," she interrupted.

"Precisely; perhaps you will tell me what she did say."

"How can I recollect now?"

"You must recollect," said Cecil suddenly. "The fact is this: Molly declares that she never repeated a single word of Kate's confidence to you. You must tell what she really said, Matilda, and perhaps the best way—the very best way—is to tell me in Molly's own presence." [188]

"You frighten me," said Matilda. "You know how I hate getting into rows. There is not a girl in the whole school who hates that sort of thing more than I do; I believe you brought me out here on purpose."

"I thought perhaps you would help me," said Cecil. "The fact is, I am very unhappy about this. Molly is supposed by Kate to have betrayed her secret. Kate and Molly were great friends; now their friendship has been completely broken. Molly's word is beyond suspicion. Do you know, Matilda,"—Cecil stood up as she spoke,—"*do you know that it was in this summerhouse, just here, that Kate told Molly that beautiful story of her early home which she repeated again for our benefit a few nights ago?*"

"Was it?" replied Matilda. Her mottled face grew red; her small eyes did not dare to meet Cecil's. "I am sure," she added sulkily, "I don't care where it was told; I knew nothing about it. Molly herself told me the very little I know; other girls seemed to have heard of it at the same time."

"Molly never told you," said Cecil; "that is a lie!"

"How dare you, Cecil Ross, accuse me of anything so unladylike? I shall not stay another moment in your presence." [189]

"Yes, you shall," replied Cecil. "I don't mean to conceal my motives any longer from you. I suspect you of having got your information, not from Molly, who would rather cut out her tongue than betray her friend, but in some underhand way. Yes, I am very angry and very determined, and I am not the sister of four brothers, and I have not got to fight my own way in the world, for nothing. I know I am a new girl at St. Dorothy's, and a new member of this great school, but that will not deter me from trying to clear up this mischief as soon as possible."

"Oh, what a shabby, mean wretch you are!" cried Matilda. "I shall leave you at once."

"You need not stay long, but you shall until I do what I have come to do. This door is open, but I see that it can be shut, and that there is a key to it. I mean to lock the door while I explore this summerhouse."

Cecil walked quickly to the entrance as she spoke. She was a head and shoulders over Matilda, and had twice her physical strength. Matilda rushed to the door to escape, but Cecil was too quick for her. In a moment the door was locked; the key was in Cecil's pocket. She turned round and faced her angry companion. Matilda was now as frightened as she was angry. She had never met determination like Cecil's before. She sat down on the nearest chair and began to cry. [190]

"Oh, how awfully shabby and unkind you are!" she cried. "What can you mean to do with me?"

"Nothing; you shall help me to search the summerhouse."

"What for?"

"Just to see if, by any possibility, Kate's and Molly's conversation could have been overheard."

"I won't do it, Cecil Ross; I won't!"

"All right; you can sit in that corner, and I'll search by myself."

Cecil felt herself at that moment endowed with all Jimmy's detective qualities; she moved the simple furniture, and poked about for a time without success, but suddenly observing a row of bats on the wooden wall, just on a level with the bench on which she and Matilda had been seated, she removed them one by one. Behind one of the bats was a notch of wood, out of which a hard wood kernel had been carefully removed. A round hole was therefore distinctly visible, against which a person from outside might put either an ear or an eye.

"This hole looks rather suspicious," said Cecil. "Matilda, will you kindly come forward, and let me see if you are the right height to use such a peep-hole with advantage?"

"I won't! I daren't!" said Matilda. "I hate you, Cecil."

"Well," said Cecil, "you have only one thing to do. I know by your face that you are guilty. I was not, of course, at all certain when we started out on our walk this afternoon, but now I know. If you refuse to confess, I will go to Miss Forester and tell her what I suspect."

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"A nice life you will have at Redgarth, if you begin by telling tales!" said Matilda, in faltering tones.

"I don't care a bit about that. I'm not going to have that old bugbear cast up against me; it will not prevent me on this occasion from doing my duty. You have just confessed that Molly told you certain matters which gave you the clew to Kate's past. Had you not better tell me everything at once?"

"Oh, what a fearful, fearful girl you are!" sobbed Matilda. "Oh, I won't stay another day at Redgarth!"

"If you confess the simple truth," repeated Cecil, "I will do my utmost to shield you. I mean I will do all in my power to prevent the school generally, and the teachers, knowing of your baseness. Of course, Kate and Molly must know directly. Now, you can choose."

Matilda sat huddled up against the wall. It would have been difficult to see a more abject figure than hers.

"Molly told me," she began at last. "I asked her if Kate——"

"Wait a moment," said Cecil suddenly. "I have changed my mind about hearing you alone. Molly is at home; she is in her room. You shall come to her at once; you shall tell me in her presence *exactly* what occurred."

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"I won't! you can't force me!" cried Matilda.

At this moment the handle of the summerhouse door was forcibly turned from without.

"Who has locked the door?" cried Miss Leicester's voice.

"That is right," said Cecil, with a sigh of relief. "Miss Leicester will soon put things straight. Wait one moment, Miss Leicester, and I will let you in."

"Oh, don't, I beg of you, betray me to Miss Leicester!" cried Matilda.

"Will you come to Molly at once, then?"

"I will; anything rather than that Miss Leicester should know."

"All right; if you even attempt to escape, I will repeat to Miss Leicester all that I have said to you."

As Cecil said these last words, she turned the key in the door, opened it wide, and stood before her astonished principal.

"My dear," said that good lady, "why did you lock the door?"

"I was having a very important talk with Matilda," said Cecil.

"But to lock the door! It is not the custom, Cecil."

"I am sorry; I won't do it again," said Cecil.

"Can you not give me your reason?"

"I am dreadfully sorry, I cannot."

Miss Leicester looked from one girl to the other: there was a look in Cecil's eyes, an expression about Matilda's mouth, which made her feel that the solution of a very unpleasant mystery was about to be made.

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"Don't lock the summerhouse again, dear," she said, in a kindly voice to her pupil. She then walked past the two girls to fetch her tennis bat, which was hanging on the wall.

"Come, Matilda," said Cecil. She held out her hand as she spoke; Matilda took it grudgingly.

On the way to the playground, she had been glad enough to show all the world that she was one of Cecil Ross' friends; on her return, she would have been only too thankful to be miles away from this very determined young person. But in vain did she look from right to left for a loophole to escape. After a few minutes' quick walking, the two girls found themselves at St. Dorothy's; a moment later they stood outside Molly Lavender's door. Cecil knocked softly.

"Come in," called Molly's voice.

Her headache had grown so bad that she had been forced to lie down, but she started upright when she saw who was following Cecil into the room.

"I am sorry to disturb you," said Cecil; "but I think it is worth while, for the matter I have come about is somewhat important. Matilda wants to say something to you, Molly."

"What?" asked Molly. "Won't you sit down, Matilda? How do you do?"

Matilda flopped down on the nearest chair. She took off her hat, and wiped the moisture from her hot forehead. [194]

"This is a very disagreeable business," she said, "and I can't imagine what Cecil Ross is about."

"Yes, you know perfectly well," said Cecil. "The fact is this, Molly: I had a walk with Matilda this afternoon. We sat in the summerhouse; we spoke of you and Kate O'Connor. While we were there I told Matilda that some of the mischievous reports with regard to poor Kate had been traced to her. In reply, she said that she had only circulated what you yourself had told her."

"What *I* told her?" repeated Molly, her eyes and cheeks alike flaming.

"Yes; and I thought the matter so important that I insisted on her coming here to tell her story to you direct."

"But I never told you anything, Matilda," said Molly.

"Yes, you did," said Matilda, driven to bay; "but I won't repeat it. I won't say anything unless—unless you, Cecil, promise."

"Oh, I'll promise! and so will Molly," said Cecil, in a somewhat careless and very scornful tone.

"What are we to promise?" said Molly.

"Matilda does not want to get into trouble with the authorities," said Cecil. "We can shield her from that, I suppose—that is, if she tells us the whole truth without any reservation." [195]

Molly put her hand to her brow.

"I am quite bewildered," she said. "I never told you anything, Matilda. Oh, I must leave the matter in your hands, Cecil! Promise her anything, only get her to tell me the truth now."

"Well," said Matilda, "don't you remember one day at lecture when I spoke to you? You hated my doing so, I know."

"Of course I did," said Molly.

"Well, I spoke to you about Kate."

"I begin to remember," said Molly. "I was glad, for you spoke kindly of her."

"I asked you," continued Matilda, "if you did not consider Kate out of the common. I said that very likely she was one of those brave girls who had known poverty and had risen above it. I asked you if you did not think her one of nature's ladies. You replied that every word I said was the perfect truth. I went on to ask you: 'Has she not known poverty and risen above it?' You replied: 'Yes, she has had a noble life.'"

"And is that all?" said Molly, springing from her sofa and beginning to pace the room. "Oh, how mean, how mean you are! You drew me out on purpose. I only spoke in a general way. Oh, Matilda, how could you be so frightfully underhand?"

"That was not the way you got your information," said Cecil, in her calm, clear voice. "What about the little hole at the back of the summerhouse, which I proved by measurement to be exactly on a level with your ear?" [196]

Matilda colored crimson.

"You must tell everything," continued Cecil, "or I shall take this story straight to Miss Forester."

"If I must, I must; after all, why should I care what girls like you think about me? I——" She paused.

"Go on," said Cecil; "we're both listening."

"There is not much in it, after all. What an awful fuss you do make! I was at the back of the summerhouse, tying up my shoe. I heard Kate and Molly talking; the hole in the wood was quite handy. I did listen for a bit, I heard something."

"And you questioned Molly on purpose," said Cecil; "in order to give color to the horrid story which you meant to tell."

"The fact is, I hated you, Molly Lavender, from the first," said Matilda. "You snubbed me and were disagreeable; I thought I'd have my revenge, that's all. I suppose I may go now?"

"Not a bit of it," said Cecil. "Before you leave this room, you have got to write down every word you have just told me. Here is paper; here are pens and ink; seat yourself; write away."

"Oh, but I really don't want to put the thing on paper!"



**MATILDA WAS NOW AS FRIGHTENED AS SHE WAS ANGRY.**

"All right; then Miss Forester shall hear this little story."

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"Before I write anything," said Matilda, "I must know to whom my confession is to be repeated?"

Cecil spoke without hesitation.

"Kate O'Connor must know first of all," she said; "also Hester Temple. I have given you my word that what we say shall not reach any of the authorities, but Molly and Hester and Kate and I must have a consultation with regard to whether the other girls in the school are to know the truth or not. Now, sit down; write, and be quick about it."

The miserable Matilda saw no help for it. Cecil was a great deal too strong for her in every sense of the word.

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## **CHAPTER XV. THOSE HIGH ROCKS.**

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**A**T last the unpleasant task was over, and Matilda, vowing vengeance against everyone, returned to Dacre House. When they were alone, Cecil and Molly looked at each other.

"How splendid you are, Cecil!" said Molly. "How can I ever thank you? I can scarcely tell you what a load you have lifted from my mind."

"You must thank Jimmy, then," said Cecil. "I should never have discovered the truth but for him."

"Your brother Jimmy?"

"Yes."

Molly raised her eyebrows.

"Really, you are quite enigmatical," she said. "How can Jimmy, who is far away, have anything to do with the matter?"

"He is our detective," said Cecil, who was feeling so happy that she felt inclined to skip. "I put the case before him, mentioning no names. The wicked boy had the audacity to reply on a post card. The words of the oracle were as follows: 'Look out for eavesdroppers.' That little sentence gave me the clew; I took Matilda to the summerhouse, began to talk over the occurrence, told her with all the emphasis I could that you and Kate had sat together on the very bench where she and I were then resting, when Kate made her confidence to you. Matilda, fortunately for the non-success of her wicked plans, has a tell-tale face. I soon got her into the center of a circle, and hedged her in. Oh, it was a horrid business! How thankful I am that it is over!"

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"I feel my heart as light as a feather once again," said Molly. "Let us go at once to find Kate;

she is sure to be returning from her botany expedition by now. Cecil, you don't know what Kate was before this cloud came over her; she was the life of the whole house. Oh, you will love her as much as I do!"

"I'm quite sure I shall," answered Cecil. "I like her immensely already. When I have forgiven her for doubting you, I dare say I shall see that she is just as charming as you have described her."

"You have cured my headache," said Molly. "I can't stay indoors any longer; let us go and meet Kate and the others."

The girls were soon out of doors. The day was a crisp one in late October. There was a feeling of coming winter in the air, but all nature was still peaceful and smiling. The trees still wore their autumn dress; grand crimson and yellow robes decked the landscape.

Molly and Cecil walked some little distance. They soon found themselves in the country. Suddenly Molly uttered an exclamation. Kate and her companions were coming slowly to meet them. [200]

"How tired Kitty looks!" said Molly. "Why, she quite lags behind the others. I wonder what is the matter."

"Run up to her with that paper in your hand and tell her everything," said Cecil. "Get her to walk behind with you; your news will soon revive her. Run at once, Molly; I will undertake to manage the other girls."

Molly set wings to her feet. She soon joined the botanists, who stopped and began to talk eagerly.

"I hope you've had success," said Molly. "Why, what's the matter, Kate?"

"Nothing," said Kate abruptly.

Her face was very pale; there were great black shadows under her eyes.

"We can't think what's the matter with her," said Lucy Rae, one of the botanists. "She was as lively as the best of us until we were coming home."

"I have a headache; it will soon pass off," said Kate. "Don't take any notice of me; I shall soon be quite my ordinary self."

"I want to say something to you, Kate," said Molly suddenly.

Kate looked at her with irritation.

"I am not in the mood to discuss things," she said; "it is quite true that I have a bad headache."

"I won't worry you, dear," said Molly, in her gentlest tones. "Let us walk slowly behind the others." [201]

Kate opened her lips to protest.

Then she changed her mind. She raised her hand to her head, brushing it across her forehead in a bewildered manner. Cecil drew the other girls on, and Molly and Kate were alone.

"Kate," said Molly, the instant this was the case, "I am so happy I can scarcely speak rationally. The load is lifted from my mind. I have found out everything. You would not believe me yesterday when I told you that I never betrayed our confidence."

"I don't remember about yesterday," said Kate.

She turned round and gazed full at Molly. Molly stepped back and stared at her in astonishment.

"You don't remember what you said to me?" she exclaimed.

"No; I can't remember anything. Oh, how my head aches! I feel sick and giddy."

"Lean on me, Kate. What is the matter with you? You look dreadfully ill. Has anything happened? Oh, I thought you'd be so happy when I told you!"

"Don't tell me anything just now, Molly. The fact is, I can't listen. Oh, my head, my head!"

"But just let me say this much. I'm dreadfully sorry you've a headache, but just listen to this much. Cecil has discovered everything. Matilda was at the bottom of the whole matter." [202]

"Matilda!" repeated Kate. She looked quite dazed. "What about her?"

"Kate, she listened behind the summerhouse; she overheard all our conversation. There was a hole in the wood; she listened through that hole. She heard all your story, all about your grandfather and—Kitty, darling, what *is* the matter? How ghastly you look! Let me help you across the road to this bench. Sit down; lean against me."

There was a stone bench at the opposite side of the road. Molly led Kate to it. She sank down, sick and trembling.

"I'm dreadfully sorry you've such a frightful headache," continued Molly; "but are you not glad?"

"To tell you the truth, Molly," replied Kate, "I don't know what you are talking about. You want to tell me something, but I want to tell you something else, far, far more badly. Something has happened, Molly, and I will tell you while I remember it. The feeling in my head is so dreadful that I don't believe I shall be able to remember anything long. Do you see these ferns in my hand—this sort; it is very rare. I wanted to get it, I was determined to get it. It grows high on the rocks by the shepherd's meadow. I would climb up. The other girls had left me, they were botanizing on their own account a little way off. I gathered some specimens; then I stretched out my hand for a very fine frond, I—I lost my balance—I fell on my head. I didn't remember anything for a bit. I suppose I was stunned. After a time I got better. I thought the dreadful pain and giddiness would pass off. I managed to walk toward the other girls. I determined to tell them nothing. But, oh, Molly, I feel so sick now, so dreadfully ill! Don't talk to me just now, for I really can't listen. It worries me even to see you so earnest and excited. May I lean on you? Can you help me to get home?"

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"Yes," said Molly, "I'll do all in the world I can for you, but you must not try to walk with only my help. Just rest where you are, Kitty; lean back, close your eyes. I'll run after Cecil and call her."

"No, don't! I can't bear the others to know. I did wrong when I climbed those high rocks; I broke one of Miss Forester's rules. She makes it a condition that we shall do nothing dangerous. The others mustn't know. If only I can manage to get home and go to bed, I shall be all right tomorrow. Don't speak to me at all for a minute."

As Kate said these last words, she leaned up against the stone wall by which the bench stood, and closed her eyes. After a time she grew better: the terrible giddiness and acute pain passed; she was able to take Molly's arm and go slowly in the direction of Redgarth.

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## CHAPTER XVI. THE PROMISE IN THE CATHEDRAL.

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HERE was consternation at St. Dorothy's: Kate O'Connor was ill; on her arrival home, she was almost unconscious. The doctor was hastily summoned; she was ordered to bed. Miss Leicester had a room made up in the quietest part of the house; she was moved there, and Molly begged hard to be allowed to nurse her. At first everyone hoped that a night's rest would put her right, but the next day the doctor said something about concussion of the brain. He said absolute quiet was necessary; he would not even allow her to be moved to the sanatorium. A trained nurse was sent for, and the girls began to walk about the house with hushed steps and pale, anxious faces.

"The worst of it all is," said Molly to Hester, "that if she thinks at all, poor Kate still believes that I have been unfaithful to her."

"Oh, she does not think of anything specially now," said Hester. "When she is well enough, you must tell her; you must not fret, Molly."

"I can't help it," answered Molly. "I loved Kate very, very dearly, and now she is ill, very ill; and her last thought of all must have been that I was unworthy of her friendship."

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"Well, it is a good thing that Cecil and I know the truth now," said Hester, in a cheerful tone. "What Kate wants is rest; she will be herself in a few days, I make not the slightest doubt; then we'll manage to tell what a stanch, little thing you are, Molly. By the way, I do think Cecil a splendid girl. How cleverly she got that horrid Matilda to own up to her sneaking, detestable, sly ways! Certainly Cecil has done Matilda a lot of good; she has taken all the conceit out of her. I only do wish something would induce her to leave the school. Fancy a girl like that coming to St. Dorothy's! If Miss Leicester really knew what sort of girl she is, I think she would ask Miss Forester not to admit her."

At that moment Miss Leicester came into the room where the two girls were talking.

"How is Kate now?" said Hester, going up at once to the principal.

Miss Leicester's face was pale and grave.

"She is very ill," she answered.

"What do you mean by that?" asked Molly, who felt her heart beating with a quick, nameless sort of dread. "Do you mean that—that Kate is in danger?"

"She is very ill," repeated Miss Leicester. "Yes, I suppose there is danger; I fear there is no doubt about it. The doctor has just left; she is unconscious. She must have had a very bad fall. Molly, my dear, she spoke to you about it: did she give you any idea of the height from which she fell? None of the other girls are able to give us any information."

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"She only said that she had fallen," answered Molly, "and that the fall stunned her. She hoped

that she would be all right after a little, and did not wish the others to know."

"I am not surprised at that," replied Miss Leicester; "she disobeyed a very strict rule. That is the last sort of thing I should have expected from Kate."

"Oh, don't be angry with her now!" said Molly, tears filling her brown eyes.

"No, poor dear child!" said Miss Leicester. "The whole thing is very miserable, and to complicate matters, Nurse Wilkins has been taken ill herself, and has been obliged to leave suddenly. We hope to get another nurse by this evening, for the doctor has telegraphed to London, but in the meantime——"

"Oh, let me go to her!" cried Molly.

"Perhaps you may help a little presently, Molly," said Miss Leicester, looking at her earnestly. "I have noticed that you have a very gentle way, dear; but at present Cecil is with her."

"Cecil!" exclaimed both girls.

"Yes; it seems that Cecil knows a good deal about illness; she nursed her mother through a very long illness. She came to the door to inquire for Kate just when poor Nurse Wilkins had to leave. She came in as if there were nothing unusual the matter, and took her place by Kate's side. Kate was moving her hands restlessly and plucking at the bed-clothes, which is such a bad sign in illness, and Cecil took both her hands and held them, and then she grew quiet. Perhaps you may help after a little, Molly; but I should be sorry to disturb such an excellent nurse as Cecil at present."

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Miss Leicester left the room, and Molly, sinking down on the nearest chair, burst into tears.

"If Kate dies I shall never feel happy again," she said, with a sob.

"But she won't die," said Hester; "she's a great deal too strong and young. Why,"—Hester wore a troubled look,— "she's only just seventeen. Girls of seventeen don't die merely from a fall. She's bad, but she'll soon be better. Don't cry, Molly!"

"Girls often die," cried Molly. "Oh, Hester! can nothing be done to save her? I wonder if Miss Forester knows how bad she really is."

Hester went up to one of the windows and began to drum her fingers on the glass.

"It's all wretched," continued Molly. "I can't tell you what I feel, Hetty. If only Miss Leicester would let me help in any way, I should not feel so dreadful. I feel, somehow or other, as if *I* were responsible for Kate's illness."

"Oh, now you are getting horridly morbid!" said Hester. "What had you to do with it?"

"Nothing in one way, of course; but if all this had not happened, Kate would have gone out with me, and not with the other girls, and I would not have let her climb up that awful rock just to get those miserable ferns. Oh, dear! I thought I should be so happy at St. Dorothy's, and now this seems to cast a blank over everything."

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"The worst of it is," said Hester, after a pause, "that even if Kate does get well—I don't doubt that for a minute—even if she does get well, she won't be allowed to study for a good while, and then she'll lose her scholarship. I know she has not a great deal of money. She was quite certain of getting the scholarship, and after that, of course, she could, by and by, take a good position as a teacher. After a brain attack of this sort, she won't be allowed to study for some time. Of course one ought not to think of that just now, but in Kate's position, where there is not much money, it is, of course, important."

"Yes," said Molly. "I wish I were with her," she added. "One can scarcely think of examinations at the present moment, can one, Hester? Oh dear; oh, dear! I think I'll just creep upstairs and see if I can help Cecil in any way."

Hester said nothing, and Molly left the room.

She went upstairs, turned down a long passage, and at last paused before a door, over which a heavy curtain had been hung. She turned the handle very softly, and entered the room. All the blinds were down; the light was shaded. At first, Molly could hardly see; then she noticed Cecil's familiar figure seated by the head of the bed. The figure on the bed was lying straight and still; there was no movement or sound of any sort. Kate looked at that moment as if she were dead.

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Molly crept up close to the bed; she did not speak at all, nor did Cecil. Presently Cecil stretched out her hand and touched Molly softly on the arm. Molly knelt down close to Cecil. Cecil began to stroke her hair, and, in some inexplicable way, the younger girl felt soothed and comforted by the gentle, firm touch. Kate lay without movement; she scarcely seemed to breathe.

"Is she dead?" asked Molly, in a tremulous whisper.

"No," answered Cecil; "no—not yet."

"Cecil, she can't recover! no one could look as dreadful as that—as still—as—as like marble and recover."

"Don't talk," answered Cecil; "she may hear us."

At that moment the room door was opened, and Dr. Groves, the clever doctor who had undertaken the case, came in; he was accompanied not only by Miss Leicester, but Miss Forester. Miss Forester gave a glance of surprise at Molly and Cecil, and then turned to Miss Leicester.

"I thought you had got a trained nurse," she said.

"Yes," replied Miss Leicester, "but Nurse Wilkins was suddenly taken ill. Cecil offered to help me until I could get someone from town. I did not know that you were here, Molly Lavender." [210]

Molly looked up with eyes of entreaty.

"Let me stay," she said. "I promise to be perfectly quiet, and to do exactly what I am told."

"Yes, let her stay," said the doctor. "There is scarcely any nursing required at present; the patient only requires watching. You may make a little noise, if you like, girls. I don't like this long-continued insensibility. I shall be glad of anything to arouse my patient."

As he spoke he went to one of the windows and drew up the blind. It was evening, and the western sun streamed into the room. Some of its rays fell across the foot of the bed where Kate lay. Her long, black eyelashes lay heavy on her cheeks, her rich profusion of brown hair was flung back over the pillows, her face had a deathly pale, almost waxen, hue; she breathed so faintly that she scarcely seemed to breathe at all. The doctor bent over her and, lifting the eyelids, looked steadily into the eyes. "Bring me a candle," he said suddenly.

Molly started up to fetch one. She returned in a moment or two with a lighted candle in a candlestick, and gave it to Dr. Groves. He passed the light backward and forward before Kate's eyes, she never seemed to flinch. He dropped the lids again, and looked anxiously at Miss Forester.

"I should like to speak to you alone," he said. [211]

Miss Forester took him immediately into the next room. The two girls sat where they were left, with beating hearts. What was the verdict? The doctor's face was very grave.

Miss Leicester, after a moment's hesitation, followed Miss Forester and the doctor into the next room. The girls, who were left behind, heard earnest conversation, an ejaculation or two from Miss Leicester; then footsteps going downstairs; then a great silence—the motionless, indifferent figure on the bed—the awful calm which might mean the end of all things.

Miss Leicester came back presently into the room, her eyes were red as if she had been crying. She stood close to Kate, and looked down at her; her eyes filled up with tears. Molly and Cecil felt their hearts in their mouths.

"What is it?" said Molly at last; "don't—oh, don't keep us in suspense any longer!"

"Come into the next room, Molly, and I will tell you," said Miss Leicester. "Cecil, dear, you shall hear afterward; but if you will stay now quite quiet with dear Kate, you will be helping us best."

Cecil nodded, her eyes were bright, she gave Molly's hand a little squeeze, and Molly rose and followed her mistress into the other room.

The moment she got there, she began to speak with excitement.

"I know what you are going to tell me, and I can't bear it," she said. "Don't tell me, don't! Tell the others, but not me. I—I *can't* bear it! There is the cathedral near—let me go there. I—I know what you are going to say, but I can bear it best if I am just alone in the cathedral." [212]

"You are excited, Molly, and carried out of yourself," said Miss Leicester. "That is not the best way to meet trouble."

"No, no!" answered poor Molly, "I know that. I am ashamed of myself. If things were different, I should not mind quite so much, but as they are—as they are—if Kate dies, I shall never be happy again."

"You and Kate have not been as perfect friends as you used to be," said Miss Leicester suddenly.

"No," answered Molly, "that is true, that is the bitter part of it all. Kate was angry with me; believing what she did, she had reason to be. I can't tell you, because it is a secret."

"Had it anything to do with Kate's speech on her birthday?"

"Yes; but oh, please don't ask me any more! for I've promised not to tell. If Kate were well now, all would be explained, and all would be happy. I had just got at the truth on Saturday I had gone out to tell Kate, but Kate was suffering then from the effects of her fall, and she could not listen. She believes me to be guilty now of what I never did. Oh, I shall never be happy again if she dies!"





**MOLLY CREPT UP TO THE BED, AND  
KNELT DOWN CLOSE TO CECIL.**

Miss Leicester laid her firm hand kindly on the young girl's shoulder.

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"It is a great trial for you, Molly, dear," she answered. "No one can help you in a time of trouble like this but God himself. Sometimes God sends trouble of this kind, just to force us to go direct to him. Perhaps that is the reason why you are going through such a dark cloud, dear Molly."

"But oh, tell me about Kate!" interrupted Molly. "How selfish I am to think only of myself! What does the doctor say of Kate?"

Miss Leicester paused for a minute.

"I cannot conceal the truth from you," she said then. "At the present moment Kate's life is in the greatest danger. Dr. Groves is anxious to consult Sir John Williamson, a great London specialist, about her case. He is going to telegraph to him to come down to Redgarth, and we hope he may arrive to-night. If Sir John Williamson approves, Dr. Groves is inclined to try a certain operation, which may remove the pressure which is now injuring poor Kate's brain. If the operation succeeds, she will get quickly better; if not——"

"Oh, is there any fear?" said Molly.

"There is," replied Miss Leicester; "it is a very serious operation, but Dr. Groves recommends it, because he thinks it is the only chance of restoring Kate to health."

"And when will it be performed?" asked Molly.

"In all probability Sir John Williamson will perform it to-night. We have just heard that an excellent nurse will be here between nine and ten o'clock. The doctor can arrive by the midnight train, and all may be satisfactorily over before to-morrow morning. That is all I know myself, dear Molly. Cecil and I will stay with Kate until the nurse arrives. Perhaps you will tell the others, dear. I trust to you to be brave and calm, and to do what is right in every way. We must have courage. Things look very dark for Kate at present, but all hope is not yet withdrawn."

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"Thank you for telling me," said Molly. "Yes, I will try to be brave."

She went slowly out of the room.

In the passage she paused, and gave a longing glance at the door over which the heavy curtain was hung.

"Oh, Kate, Kate, you *must* live!" she said aloud. "I will pray ever so hard for you. You must not die, dear, darling Kate; I have asked God to spare you, oh, I think he will, I think he will!"

Molly went hastily to her room, and put on her hat. She had a craving, which she could scarcely account for, to be alone in the cathedral. The doors were always open, anyone could go in at any moment. Inside there was perfect calm, a great peace, a great stillness. Molly craved for this stillness now inexpressibly. She managed to slip out of the house without anyone noticing her, and running down the broad carriage-drive, soon reached the beautiful old porch. She went in, heard the swinging doors close softly behind her, and going as far as some of the free seats,

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entered one and threw herself on her knees.

Up to the present Molly Lavender had had what might be considered, in every sense of the word, a happy life. Her mother had died before she was old enough to understand her loss. Her grandmother had treated her with uniform affection and kindness. Judge Lavender, although a peculiar, and in some ways a selfish, man, had been good to his only child. Molly had been happy at school. Hers was an affectionate as well as an enthusiastic nature. She had been liked by all her schoolfellows. In particular she had been loved by Cecil Ross. Molly had given quite a passion of girlish affection to this friend of her childhood. Cecil and Molly had been chums for many years now.

When Molly came to St. Dorothy's, she was just in the humor to take up a fresh friendship. She had never met anyone like Kate before; Kate had fascinated her. Still, in her heart of hearts she loved Cecil best, but there was something about Kate's gay ways, her brightness, her wit, her fun, which appealed to a fresh side of Molly. Molly had been very proud of Kate's confidence. She had held her little head high when Kate confided in her and made much of her. Then came the dreadful time of reaction—the time when Kate snubbed Molly unmercifully. Molly Lavender was too well born, too rich, too endowed with that sort of things which girls esteem, to have had much experience hitherto of snubbing. Schoolgirls quickly find out whether their companions are encased in the triple armor which good birth joined to money confers. Molly was fifteen, but she had never been really snubbed before. She was astonished and puzzled. The fact that a girl who was of no birth in particular had done this, did not affect her. Molly was too true a lady, in the best sense of the term, not to recognize a real lady when she met her.

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She loved Kate deeply, and her conduct hurt her; it hurt her to the point of intense pain. Kate's speech on her birthday had caused Molly's ears to tingle and her heart to swell. She had admired the proud girl, as she stood before her schoolfellows and spoke of the old poetry, the old charm, the old idyllic life, which had passed away forever. Molly had longed to stand by the side of this girl and show every other girl in the school how noble and splendid she was, but the girl herself had repulsed her. The girl, with her own hands, had cast Molly aside. Then had come the explanation; the mystery was cleared. Molly was innocent of the crime imputed to her. She had been given the means to amply exonerate herself; then she had met Kate, and Kate was too ill to listen to her; and now, now Kate O'Connor, beautiful, good, talented, was about to die.

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Molly found herself face to face with her first trouble. Many girls of her age had known worse, but to Molly it was full of intense bitterness; a pain which almost reached agony's point. She was hopeless and frightened. It was awful to meet death like this. Death, the invincible, the inexorable! What right had death to come and claim one so young, so full of life, so eminently fitted to do good in the world? Above all, what right had death to come and snatch away Molly's friend?

"She mustn't die," sobbed the girl. "Oh, please, God, don't let Kate die, make her better! let the operation succeed. Give the doctors great wisdom, give them skill, help them to save her life. Oh, God, I am a miserable, weak girl, but I do beg very hard for this—this *great* boon! oh, do spare Kate's life! Oh, God, do listen to me! if you will spare her life, I'll try very hard to please you; I'll try to be *so* good; I will give up my life to you. Oh, God, hear me! let it be a bargain between us; spare Kate, and then I'll give up my life to you."

Molly's prayer scarcely comforted her. Still it excited her a good deal; she felt hopeful; she wondered as she left the church if the great God up in heaven, the Maker of all things in heaven above and earth beneath, had heard her little, childish prayer; if he was inclined to consider her poor little bargain. She wondered, she hoped; then she went slowly back to St. Dorothy's.

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Miss Leicester was not present at supper. Molly found herself forced to take the head of Kate's table. As she had heard the latest news of Kate, she was immediately made the heroine of the hour. All the other girls flocked round her, asking eager questions in awe-struck voices.

"Is she really in danger, Molly?" asked Hester.

"Yes," said Molly, "yes; but I can't talk of it now."

"Oh, we must know everything!" said Amy. "It is perfectly awful. Why, of course, we all loved Kate better than anyone else in the house! It did not matter a bit about her running about barefooted long ago, nor her grandfather being a sort of peasant king. Kate was just Kate, and we all loved her; oh, she mustn't die!"

"Do sit down, Amy, and eat your supper," said poor Molly. "What is the good of our saying that sort of thing? If God wishes it, she will die; it all rests with God."

"Yes, that is true enough," said Hester. "After all, none of us can do anything; let us get over this horrid meal, and go into the drawing room. For my part, I have no heart for study to-night. I don't know if anyone else has."

"Not I," answered Molly; "my notes and everything must go to the wall. I simply can't think of such stupid things as psychology and physiology, and all those awful inductions and deductions, while my mind is in a whirl."

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"Nor I, nor I!" said several other girls.

Supper proceeded in a mournful fashion, and the girls trooped into the drawing room. The

pretty room looked cheerful enough, the electric light burned brightly; the piano stood invitingly open. Hester shuddered as she passed it.

"To think that Kate was rattling out waltzes on that piano not a week ago!" she said. "Molly, come here; you have not half told us what you know. Now, you must out with it all, whether it pains you or not. What did the doctor say?"

Molly made a struggle to swallow a great lump in her throat.

"He said that Kate's life was in danger," she answered. "A doctor is coming from London to-night."

"Oh, mercy! then it must be serious," said Alice Rae, a rosy-faced girl of nearly twenty. "When my father died, a doctor came from London. We all gave up hope when he was sent for."

"Are you sure of your facts, Molly?" asked Hester. "A London doctor costs a great deal, and everyone knows that Kate is not well off."

"Well, a doctor has been sent for," said Molly, "for Miss Leicester told me so. His name is Sir John Williamson; he is a great specialist on brain affections. Kate must have hurt her brain very badly when she fell. Miss Leicester says there is something pressing on the brain which causes Kate to be quite insensible. Dr. Groves wants to perform an operation." [220]

"Oh, horrors!" cried Mary Wilson, a room fellow of Kate's. "Are you certain—positively certain, Molly Lavender?"

"Yes," answered Molly, who felt important in spite of all her misery, while she was imparting these ghastly details to her hearers. "Sir John Williamson will be here to-night, and if he agrees with Dr. Groves, they will perform the operation."

"To-night!" cried Hester.

"Yes," said Molly, nodding. "Miss Leicester says it will be all over in the morning, and we shall know—we shall *know* whether——" Her lips quivered, her eyes sought the ground; she found that she could not proceed with her speech.

"Think of it, girls!" said Hester "Think of its happening while we're all asleep!"

"No, I shan't sleep," said Molly.

"Nor I," echoed Amy.

"I am sure, if I do sleep, I shall have the most terrific nightmares," cried another girl. "Oh, dear Kate, what fun she was! Do you remember the name she gave us all in the dormitory—the Dwellers in Cubicles? Why, she made quite a storm in the house with her proposal that selfishness should be evicted. Oh, dear; oh, dear! but, somehow or other, I don't feel that she is going to die." [221]

"Nor I," said Hester, trying to speak cheerfully. "Dr. Groves can't have at all given up the case, or he wouldn't propose an operation. You may be quite certain the London doctor will soon set her right; let us try and be cheerful, let us hope for the best."

"We might all of us remember Kate to-night when we are praying," said Amy, turning scarlet as she spoke.

"Oh, yes, yes, of course!" said the others, in the shy way in which schoolgirls allude to their deepest feelings.

"I wonder if Miss Leicester will come down to prayers," said Amy, after a pause.

"I don't know; perhaps there won't be any," said Hester. "How I wish," she added, with a sudden, vindictive smile, "that *horrid* Matilda were here!"

"Little wretch!" cried Amy. "Why should we be inflicted with her at this moment? Surely we have trouble enough."

"But for her it would never have happened," said Hester.

"Now, what in the world do you mean, Hetty?" cried half a dozen voices.

Hester looked mysterious. Molly's face became very white.

"I am bound in honor not to tell, girls," said Hester. "You must take the hint for what it is worth, and draw your own conclusions. You have observed a cloud between Kate and Molly." [222]

"Yes, yes, of course we have!" cried half a dozen voices.

"Well, Matilda was at the bottom of it; I can't tell you particulars. But for Matilda, Kate mightn't have gone on that botany expedition. But for Matilda, Molly, at least, would have accompanied her. There might not have been an accident; Kate might be well and happy, and working hard for her scholarship at the present moment."

"You make me burn with curiosity, Hester," cried Amy.

"I dare say, well, I can tell no more."

"You've told too much," said Molly.

"Have I? Well, I'll be mum. Only listen to me, girls. Matilda is coming to St. Dorothy's."

"Yes; worse luck!" groaned one or two.

"When she comes, let's boycott her," said Amy suddenly.

"What fun!" cried the others, clapping their hands. Molly covered her face with hers.

She thought of her bargain in the cathedral; of her prayer to God, of her vow to give herself up to him absolutely, if only he would spare Kate. Did this kind of talk please him? Were uncharitableness, vindictiveness, revenge, the sort of things he delighted in?

"Oh," she said, rising to her feet, and speaking with an effort, "it frightens me to hear you talking like that, girls. If Matilda is bad, we have no right to try and make her worse. Oh, I did hate her myself, but I mustn't! I must get over it. Think of Kate—think of that beautiful picture she drew for us."

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"Yes, poor darling," said Amy, with a sob. "I shall never forget how she looked when she talked of her grandfather, the peasant king, and the little cottage, and the flowers, and the sweet life she used to lead."

"Well, do let us forget about Matilda," said Molly. "If we can't think kindly of her,—and I find it very hard to think kindly,—let us try not to think of her at all; at least not to-night."

Hester stared very hard at Molly. When, by and by, the other girls had dispersed, Hester came up to Molly, and said in a low voice: "I don't understand you; I thought you hated Matilda."

Molly looked at her with frightened eyes.

"Oh, I do!" she said; "but I want to *unhate* her."

"Molly, you've no right to coin words."

"It expresses what I mean," said Molly.

"But you have not told me your true thought," said Hester; "what is it?"

"I am afraid of doing anything the least bit wrong to-night," said Molly again. "I think it may make a difference about Kate."

"I don't understand you," said Hester.

But Molly did not explain.

Miss Leicester came down at ten o'clock for prayers. The girls all stood up while she read the evening hymn; as a rule they sang it, but there could be no singing at St. Dorothy's to-night. At the end of her short prayer, she said a word or two about Kate.

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"Spare her, if possible, O Father," said the principal, in her solemn voice; "but, oh, in any case help us to say, Thy will be done."

"I can't say it; I can't!" whispered poor Molly, to her own struggling heart. "Oh, God! please remember what I promised to you in the cathedral."

Then she went upstairs with the others.

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## CHAPTER XVII.

### SUSPENSE.

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THE night passed somehow. When Molly laid her tired head on her pillow she fell asleep. She awoke quickly, however, aroused by the sound of wheels on the gravel sweep outside the silent house. Remembrance came quickly to her, and she knew what had happened, the great specialist from London had arrived. Molly wondered if Cecil would perhaps come to visit her. Her heart began to beat wildly; she sat up in bed. Kate's room was in a distant part of the house, but the sound of rather heavy footsteps coming up the stairs came distinctly to Molly's ears; they died away in the distance. Once again there was silence; it was broken, at long intervals, by the hurried closing of a door, by rapid but quiet footsteps, then again followed the awful, awful quiet—that sort of quiet which tries a young and anxious heart as nothing else can do in all the world.

Molly lit her candle; she took down a book of history from her shelves, and tried in vain to read; her eyes followed the printed words without in the least taking in their sense.

"In tracing the history of nations," she read, "we discover a threefold purpose——"

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"Kate, dear; oh, beautiful Kate!" cried Molly's heart.

The book seemed full of Kate; all the ancient story sank down into the depths of the paper, and

Kate's history and Kate's danger seemed alone to fill the closely written pages. Molly shut up the book, and clasped her hands.

"How I wish Cecil would come to me!" she moaned once or twice.

The little clock on her mantelpiece struck the hour of midnight. The sound was echoed outside by the big cathedral clock, then the chimes rang out. Molly shuddered as she thought of the cathedral, where she had prayed, and of her vow to God. Perhaps God was angry with her for trying to make a sort of compact with him. Oh, what was right? What was the good of prayer? If one could not pray in one's extremity, what was one to do? Molly felt frightened as she remembered her vow. Oh, why did not Cecil come to her? How could she keep her senses, lying there in her little bed, while Kate was perhaps traveling along that valley from which there was no return? Molly wondered, as the night went on, if Kate would be afraid to die, but then she remembered that Kate would know nothing about it until after she was dead. She wondered if she would be frightened then, and how her spirit would feel without her body. She wondered if the old grandfather, who was so good and noble and sweet, would come to meet the girl he loved in the other world, and would lead her gently away up to the throne of God himself. And then she wondered if God would smile at poor Kate, and tell her that he had thought over everything, and saw quite clearly that her life down here would be too full of struggle, and so he had called her early to a happier home. [227]

Here Molly's reflections caused her to burst into bitter sobs. She was sobbing loudly when her room door was suddenly opened, and Cecil came in.

"Oh, Cecil, Cecil! what news!" cried Molly. "Oh, Cecil, how I have longed for you! do tell me quickly what news, what has happened? Cecil, is she—is she dead?"

"No," said Cecil; "no!"

"Oh, come and sit by me, Ceci, and put your arms round me, I am so miserable, and so, so *frightened!* Come over here; let me feel your touch."

"Why, you want some sal volatile; you are quite unstrung," said Cecil.

"But oh, do tell me what news!"

"Well, they are going to perform the operation."

"Oh, isn't it over yet?"

"No; they are just going to begin."

"And have you been sent away?"

"Yes; I can do nothing further. Miss Leicester is there, and Miss Forester has come."

"Oh, I can't, *can't* stand it!" said Molly. "Suppose she wakes and screams—suppose it hurts her frightfully." [228]

"No, it won't, they are going to give her chloroform. Molly, you must try and control yourself. It is selfish, too, to make a fuss just now."

"I know it is," said Molly; "but I have been alone so long, and I have got so fearfully nervous. I don't mind half so much now you are here. You will stay with me, won't you, Cecil?"

"I will, if you like; I will lie down beside you, if you like."

"Oh, I can't sleep; I can't think of it! Do talk to me. What did Sir John Williamson say?"

"I don't know; I did not hear. They are going to perform the operation; it will take a little over an hour."

"And then?" said Molly.

"Then they will know," answered Cecil.

"Oh, Cecil! how soon after?"

"Very soon, Miss Forester says. I heard her telling Miss Leicester that Dr. Williamson is certain there is a small piece of bone pressing on the brain. If that can be successfully removed without injuring the brain in any way, Kate will recover consciousness, and then there is no reason why she should not quickly get better."

"Do you think she'll get better, Cecil?"

"How can I say? I hope so."

"Have you—have you prayed about it, Cecil?"

"Yes, of course." [229]

"So have I," continued Molly; "I prayed in church. I can't believe it was a very good prayer, and I can't make it any better. Miss Leicester prayed too, but she prayed differently. Miss Leicester said: 'Thy will be done.' I did not say that. I—I made a vow."

"Dear little Molly," said Cecil, "I never saw you so excited in all your life before. What vow did you make?"

"I promised to give myself up to God. I thought I would go as a missionary, or something, if only he would make Kate well. Was it wrong of me to pray like that, Cecil?"

"I don't know," answered Cecil.

She sat quiet and still on the edge of Molly's bed. Her strong face was quite pale, her eyes were calm and steadfast, her lips wore a gentle, chastened sort of look. Molly, who was in a fever of excitement and misery, could not help gazing at her in wonder.

"Are you not very anxious?" she asked.

"To a certain extent I am, Molly, but there is no use in losing my self-control. I don't think we two girls can do anything more in this matter, just now. If you don't rest, you will be ill; and that will cause a lot of fresh trouble and misery to a great many people. I will give you a little sal volatile, and then you must lie down, and I will hold your hand, and perhaps you will fall asleep."

"I can't sleep."

"You must try. I won't stay with you, if you talk any more."

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"Oh, then, I'll stay perfectly quiet! but I know I shan't sleep."

Cecil prepared the sal volatile, and bringing it to Molly's side, made her drink it. Then she straightened the bed-clothes, and, laying her cool hand on Molly's hot forehead, sat down beside her. In spite of herself the tired girl's heavy eyes closed, and she slept.

It was quite early in the morning when she awoke. Cecil was still seated by her bedside. She started up with a cry.

"Oh, Cecil, what has happened? Is she—is she alive? I have been dreaming about her all night. Have you—have you heard anything?"

"No; but we might go and inquire now," said Cecil.

Molly sprang eagerly out of bed.

"Oh, you darling! Let us go immediately!" she cried.

She put on her dressing gown, and, taking Cecil's hand, stole softly with her out of the room. The long corridors were all deserted; the first dawn of the cold daylight was creeping in through the windows; the cheerful house looked ghastly and deserted. Molly shivered as she accompanied Cecil to the door of Kate's room. The girls had just reached the door when Dr Groves came out.

"Oh, sir!" cried Molly, "oh, please tell me——"

"Tell you what, my dear?" said the doctor kindly.

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"Is she—is she dead?" said Molly.

"Dead? Not a bit of it," said the doctor. "I am glad to tell you that my patient is better this morning. Oh, my dear child, what is the matter? Pray don't make any noise outside this door."

For Molly had burst into such a choking fit of sobs that her self-control was in danger of giving way.

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## CHAPTER XVIII. CONSECRATED.

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IX weeks after the events mentioned in the last chapter, Kate O'Connor had very nearly recovered her normal state of health. She was still at St. Dorothy's, but the doctor had forbidden all return to work until after Christmas. Christmas was drawing near now, and the girls were talking a good deal about it. Matilda Matthews had been an inmate of St. Dorothy's for three or four weeks. The boycotting idea had been quite abandoned. Molly was the one who put a stop to that; she had been consistently kind to Matilda from the first. Matilda had shrunk from Molly, and was rather surprised when the young girl came to meet her on the evening of her arrival, talked to her pleasantly, and did her best to make her feel at home and at ease. Matilda was given a very nice room to herself, and Molly suggested to her that she should invite some girl who was going in for the same branch of study to share it with her in the evenings.

"Such a step will make you popular," said Molly; "besides being a kind thing to do."

"I don't care a straw about being kind," answered Matilda frankly, "although I should naturally like to be popular. I did not know you were the good-natured sort you seem to be, Molly Lavender. I thought you'd hate and detest me after the shabby way I treated you; but as you are inclined to be agreeable, I am quite willing to meet you halfway. I may as well tell you now that I

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never took particularly to you, but I was much impressed by Cecil Ross, and if she were not quite the shabbiest girl in the world, I should wish to be her chum. Well, say now, why should not you and I be chums—chums for life, I mean. You don't want to share my room, but I can do all kinds of odd things for you. I can be awfully good-natured to girls who *really* cotton to me; and when you go to London— You live in London, don't you?"

"Yes; with my grandmother," answered Molly.

"Oh, I expect you have a horribly dull time! My father has a house in Portman Square. You shall come and drive with me in the carriage; and oh, say, wouldn't it be prime if I coaxed father to give a ball at Christmas, and I invited you to it?"

"I am not out yet," answered Molly, "so I do not think grandmother would allow me to go."

"Well, I mean a children's ball; you are not too old to enjoy it, are you?"

"I am fifteen—not at all too old; but I don't think grannie will wish me to leave her in the evenings." [234]

"Your people are very rich, aren't they?"

"I believe they are; but what does that matter?"

"What does that matter!" echoed Matilda, with a curl of her lips. "Dear, dear! I think you must have taken leaves out of Kate O'Connor's book. By the way, they say—stoop down and I'll whisper to you—that that young lady will be obliged to stoop to charity, after all; that sainted grandfather of hers did not leave her much money, and her illness has swallowed up a considerable portion of what was reserved for her educational expenses here."

"Surely that is not our affair."

Molly turned scarlet as she spoke; she had to place the most violent control upon herself to remain another moment by Matilda's side.

"I do want to be good to you," she said. "I am sure we all at St. Dorothy's want to be good to you, Matilda,—at least, I think we all do,—but oh, please, if you wish to have a nice time here, you must give up that sort of thing."

"What sort of thing?" asked Matilda.

"You must not repeat what you think other people have said; you must try hard not to make mischief. As to Kate, I will not listen to a word against her; in fact, I won't talk about her to you at all."

"Oh, hoity toity!" said Matilda, tossing her head.

Molly soon afterward left her. [235]

"How am I to be kind to such an awful girl?" she whispered to her own heart, but then she remembered her vow to God. She was trying with all her might to keep it, but nothing seemed quite right.

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It was within a week of the end of the term, when, one morning, Molly received a letter from her grandmother. It ran as follows:

MY DEAR MOLLY:

You will be wondering what I intend you to do during the Christmas vacation which is now so close at hand, and you will doubtless be preparing for your usual time with me. Well, my dear child, I am sorry to disappoint you. I know, darling, that you love me very much, and it is a great pleasure to me to have you; but, after careful consideration, I have made up my mind that I must not have that pleasure this Christmas. It would be very selfish of me to have you in the house, Molly, for I could do little or nothing to give you pleasure while you were with me. My health, my dear child, is not what it was; I suffer terribly from insomnia, and can stand none of that noise and racket in which the young delight. In short, it would be very wrong to mope you up with an old woman, Molly. My faithful servant, Pearson, attends to all my wants; my doctor visits me daily. I have a full measure of that peace and calm, that quiet and rest, which are now my sole ideas of earthly happiness. You must not, therefore, fret about me, dear, for I am as well as an old woman of over eighty can be. This letter is to tell you, dear Molly, that you are not to spend Christmas with me. Have you any idea what you would like to do with yourself? Your letters from St. Dorothy's interest me very much. I delight in reading about your life, dear, for I can do so without in the least exciting myself. I always thought highly of Cecil Ross, and what you say about the Irish girl, Kate O'Connor gives me much pleasure. I told you all about my little scheme, Molly, for endowing girls who are ladies, and really want a good start in life. From certain things you tell me, it is possible that I may be able to assist Kate materially in the future. I can say nothing about that at present, but I wish you clearly to understand that I take an interest in her. I hope she will quite recover from her serious accident. What an escape [236]

she had of her life, poor child! what an awful operation she must have gone through! My dear Molly, what do you think of the following idea? Suppose you and Kate arrange to spend your Christmas with Cecil. Cecil will, of course, want to join her brothers, and you might all keep house together for a month. You can talk this over with Cecil, and let me know. Please understand that, in any arrangement of this kind, I consider myself responsible for the expenses. Why not go to the seaside? Some people enjoy the sea at Christmas. A complete change of that sort will do you all good, and a lot of young things together can knock up a good deal of fun—at least, I used to find that the case in those days in the dim past when I was young. Let me know what you settle, my darling, and believe me,

Your affectionate grandmother,  
MARY LAVENDER.

Molly read this letter with a quickly beating heart and flushed cheeks; she plunged it into her pocket, and danced rather than walked down to breakfast. Kate O'Connor had no home to go to, and Miss Forester had asked her to remain on at Redgarth if no better offer turned up. Kate had not yet recovered her usual color, nor were her eyes so bright as of old, she was gentle and affectionate to everyone, but a good deal of her high spirit had deserted her. [237]

When Molly had an opportunity she spoke to Kate about the old trouble, but Kate's illness had made all that time seem rather dim to her, and although she was now very fond of Molly, something of the old *verve* had left her friendship.

"But it will be all right, more than right, when I get her away to the seaside," thought Molly to herself. "Oh, what a splendid idea it is!"

"Molly, what are you thinking about?" asked Cecil, as Molly ate her bread and butter and smiled to herself.

"You might as well give us a share of your happy thoughts," said Hester. "You can't possibly know how comical you look, eating and smiling and nodding, and never letting out a word."

"I have had such a jolly letter," answered Molly.

"From whom? Do tell us!"

"From grannie, of course."

"Oh, you are going to her for Christmas, are you not?"

"Well, no; I am not," answered Molly. "I can't talk about my letter now. Cecil and Kate, shall we meet and have a little consultation after dinner to-day?"

"It is a half-holiday, so of course we can," replied Cecil.

"And am I not to be in the conference?" interrupted Hester. [238]

"No, I'm afraid you are not, but we'll tell you all about it afterward," said Molly.

She did not add another word, but, having finished her breakfast, left the room abruptly.

"Where are you going to spend your Christmas, Kate?" asked Hester.

"Here, I suppose," said Kate.

"You will have a dull time, you poor thing!"

"Oh, no! I shall like it. It is so kind of Miss Forester."

But Kate sighed somewhat heavily as she spoke.

"Well, I do pity you," said Amy. "Fancy staying on here with all the girls away. Even if you could study—but you are not allowed to do that yet."

"I shall be all right," said Kate. "I must have patience."

She did not add any more, but went out of the room.

Cecil and Hester found themselves alone.

"I wish I could do something for her," said Cecil; "but I can't. I'd give anything to invite her to stay with the boys and myself; but the only lodgings we can secure at Hazlewick are so small and poor that I could not possibly ask her to share them. Poor dear Kate! when I look at her I do long for money."

"Well, you will have plenty of money some day, Cecil," said Hester. "You have but to cultivate those wonderful brains of yours, and you will be able to do anything. You don't know what Miss Forester and Miss Leicester think of you, and for that matter, all the professors; they say you will pass your B.A. brilliantly by and by, and after that, of course, you can take up anything." [239]

"I have a great deal to work for," said Cecil. "How quickly this term has gone! Of course I shall love to be back with the boys; but I shall be glad, too, when we can return to our life here. But for the anxiety about Kate, I could have done better than I have done. During the worst part of her



illness, I could scarcely think of my studies at all."

"You ought to be a nurse or a doctor or something," said Hester. "Miss Leicester says you would make a splendid lady doctor; she said she never saw anyone so young with such self-control."

"By the way," said Cecil, "I wonder if that report is really true about Kate."

"What report?"

"Perhaps I ought not to speak of it, but I know you are her friend, Hester."

"Rather; I'd do anything for her," said Hester Temple.

"Well, it was Alice Wright, who lives at Dacre House, who told me, and Alice is a very careful sort of girl. She knows a cousin of Kate's, a Mr. Dixon; he is a solicitor in London, and Alice's mother wrote to tell her that Mr. Dixon has gone bankrupt, and that poor Kate's little money has been all swallowed up in the smash. I don't think Kate knows herself, but Alice says it is perfectly true, and that Miss Forester is carefully considering the case. She is so fond of Kate that nothing would induce her to cast her off, and, besides, Kate is still too weak to bear any shock. At the same time, Miss Forester can't keep her here if she has no money to pay her fees. If Kate were in her usual health, she is so full of pluck that she could stand anything, even a reverse of this sort. I wonder what Miss Forester will do; it would be perfectly horrid for Kate to feel that she was here on charity."

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"Well, don't say anything about it," said Hester. "I expect something will be arranged during the vacation, and we shall know when we meet next term."

Cecil left the breakfast room feeling rather depressed. She went shortly afterward to school, and in the course of the morning, between two lectures, came suddenly face to face with the principal.

"My dear," said Miss Forester, in her genial way, "are you well? You don't look quite as bright as I should like to see you. I hope you are not studying too hard; there is no use in overdoing anything, even study, Cecil."

"No, I am not working too hard," said Cecil, "but oh, if I might talk to you!" she added, throwing emphasis and almost passion into her words.

Miss Forester laid her hand on her shoulder.

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"You certainly may, my dear girl," she replied. "Let me see. Molly Lavender is coming to see me this evening. I have arranged to give her half an hour at five o'clock, but if you come to me at six, I shall be delighted to have a chat with you. I am interested in you, Cecil. If you go on as well as you have begun, you are likely to do the school credit. Can you come at six to-night?"

"I certainly can," replied Cecil. "I am anxious to see you, but not about myself; I want to say something about Kate O'Connor."

Miss Forester laughed.

"I am hearing about Kate O'Connor, morning, noon, and night," she said. "All you St. Dorothy girls seem to have gone wild about her. Well, my dear, don't look so puzzled; I am very fond of Kate; I will listen to anything you have to say about her with great pleasure. I will expect you at six this evening, Cecil."

Cecil ran off with a beaming face.

"Molly," she said, as they were going home together, "I am in luck! I met Miss Forester twenty minutes ago, and she invited me to go and see her this evening. I told her that I wanted to talk to her about Kate; I mean to have everything out, if I can."

"Are you going to-night?" said Molly. "She invited me to tea with her."

"Yes; I am to go afterward."

"And you mean to talk to her about Kate?"

"Yes."

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"What about her?"

"Well, her vacation for one thing, poor darling! How is she to get better, living on all alone here?"

"She needn't," said Molly, beginning to skip as she walked; "it is all arranged in the most beautiful, perfect way. I will just tell you now, Cecil, for you can think it over during dinner, and then we can discuss the thing in all its bearings later on. Grannie—you know what a brick she is?"

"I should rather think I do," said Cecil warmly.

"Well," continued Molly, "she can't have me this Christmas. That love for silence seems to grow and grow upon her. The poor darling will soon bring herself to such a pass that she won't even be

able to stand the creaking of a chair; but what heavenly plan do you think she has suggested? I am not to go to her, but I am to have a jolly, jolly, merry, merry Christmas, for all that. Oh, Cecil, and it will help you too, and those boys of yours, and Kate! Oh, I think it is just too perfect! I do think grannie has the sweetest thoughts in all the world. Aren't you quite delighted?"

"But you forget, you have not told me yet," said Cecil.

"Of course, no more I have. Well, listen: we're all to be grannie's guests this Christmas, not at her house in London, but somewhere at the seaside. Grannie will take lodgings for us, and we are to be as jolly and merry as ever we please. She has invited me, of course, and you too, Cecil, and the four boys, and Kate, and she thinks the seaside will do us good, even if it is cold weather; and now all we have to decide on is what part of the coast we will visit, and how many rooms we will require, for grannie, who is very rich, will pay everything, so that the horrid money part needn't trouble any of us. Now, Cecil, aren't you glad—aren't you delighted?"

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"But it seems too much to take," said Cecil.

"Too much! Oh, if you're going to begin that nonsense, I'll never speak to you again! Don't waste words over it, Cecil, for you will have to yield in the end, and you may as well do it with a good grace."

"It will certainly be a good relief to Mr. Danvers," said Cecil.

"Yes, of course; and, poor man, his feelings ought to be a little considered. Of course you will accept, Cecil; say 'yes,' this minute."

"I don't see how I am to refuse, Molly. It is quite the most perfect idea I ever heard of in all my life."

"Yes, isn't it? Won't grannie have a jolly Christmas, even though she is all by herself. Why, her heart will be just bubbling over with contentment."

"But she would not like it to bubble," said Cecil. "Oh, she is the dearest old lady in the world! But Molly, darling, I very nearly lost my reason trying to stay quiet enough that day, when she told me that she had left me five hundreds pounds in her will."

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"Well," said Molly, "I am too happy for anything. We'll tell Kate after dinner, and then you and I, Cecil, must arrange all about the lodgings. We need deny ourselves nothing, for grannie will want us to have a real good time."

The girls had a consultation after dinner, or rather, Molly harangued and arranged, and Kate and Cecil sat by and listened, with sparkling eyes and flushed cheeks. Much of Kate's old high spirits returned to her for this auspicious occasion. It turned out that she knew a great deal more about the seaside than either of the other girls, her home in Ireland being within a mile of the coast. She suggested an unfashionable seaside resort; she further added that the sea was grandest in winter, when the great storms came, and the waves were sometimes, figuratively speaking, mountains high. She described with great vividness a storm which she and her grandfather had witnessed on the broad Atlantic, how the great rollers came dashing and breaking in, and the clouds of spray wetted your face, even though you stood many yards back from the raging sea. Then she described a vessel on the rocks, and the lowering of the lifeboat, and the rescuing of the drowning people, and the man and the little girl whom she and her grandfather took home that night; the terrible grief of the man, whose wife had been drowned in the shipwreck, and the feel of the little child's arms round Kate's neck as she lay huddled up in her bed.

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"But all that sounds perfectly awful," said Molly, when Kate paused for breath.

"Yes, the shipwrecks are awful, but the sea itself is magnificent," said Kate, "you can't be near it without loving it. Oh, it will give me a fresh lease of life to breathe the dear salt air again!"

"Then the seaside is decided on," said Molly, with emphasis; "and all we have to do is to find a suitable place, not too fashionable. I wish we could go as far away as Penzance or Falmouth, but it seems scarcely worth while for such a large party to take so long a journey; I must think it all over very carefully. There is one thing now I want to decide."

"What is that?" asked Cecil.

"Why, that we should leave all our books behind, and just take a few good novels; one or two of Sir Walter Scott's, a Dickens and a Thackeray, and perhaps Miss Austen. Just let us live for pleasure for a whole month. Oh, I know it seems a wrong thing to say, but, for my part, I think I shall study all the better when the month is over, if I do not work during that time."

"Agreed," said Cecil, looking up wistfully.

"Ceci, I know you are pining to work that brain of yours," said Molly, "but I am certain a month's rest will be best."

She looked full at Kate as she spoke.

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Kate's eyes had suddenly assumed a wistful look; she gave Molly a direct glance, and the delicate rose color flooded her pale cheeks.

"I don't think it is fair to Cecil," she said suddenly.

"If we all agree, what matter does it make to Cecil?"

"But it does; it makes a great deal," continued Kate. "I know perfectly well, Molly, why you are proposing it, and I think it is very, very good of you. You don't want me to feel out of it; but I shan't, dear Molly; I shall try and have patience. I know it is impossible for me to compete in any way with you and Cecil now."

"I see," interrupted Cecil suddenly. "I did not know what Molly meant at the time. Yes, it is a good thought; we'll all rest our brains. Kate shall not even read, but we'll read aloud to her, and so badly that she's certain to drop off to sleep in a quarter of an hour; and you know, Kate, the doctor said that sleep was better for you than any medicine."

"I know," said Kate, with a sigh.

Her high spirits had vanished; she looked paler than usual.

"I wish I did not feel so weary," she said. "I wish this horrible depression, and good-for-nothingness would leave me."

"It will when you are at the seaside," said Molly.

"And I defy you to be very depressed in the company of Maurice and Jimmy," continued Cecil. "Oh, you have never met the boys; you don't know what rascals they are, not Maurice—he is a prince of boys—but the others."

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"Yes, I can vouch for their all being the most extraordinary and delightful quartet in the world," said Molly, with a laugh. "Well, I must go now: it is nearly five o'clock, and Miss Forester has invited me to tea with her."

"Don't stay too long," called out Cecil. "Remember, I am due at school at six."

"I shall give myself exactly half an hour by the clock," replied Molly, with a smile.

She left the room, and, five minutes later, was knocking at the door of Miss Forester's charming sitting room.

"Come in!" called the principal.

Molly entered. Tea was on the table; Miss Forester was seated by a desk, examining some exercise books, she glanced round quickly when Molly entered the room.

"Pour me out some tea, like a good girl," she said; "then help yourself, and don't say a word to me for a minute or two."

She turned once more to the work over which she was busy. Molly poured out tea, helped herself to a cup, and then gave many shy glances at the principal's beautiful, tall, and slender figure, her strong face, with its deep, dark eyes and lovely expression.

"How good she looks!" thought the child, "how brave! she has the sort of expression which a conqueror ought to wear, even to look at her helps me. Oh, yes! I am sure she has had many a fight, and I am also certain that she has always come off victorious. I wish I could tell her about that vow I made, and how very hard I find it to keep it, and how frightened I am now and then, when I wake in the night and think about it. Perhaps if I don't faithfully keep it, God will send some fresh punishment to poor Kate; perhaps I did wrong to vow at all."

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"Molly, child, what are you thinking about?" said Miss Forester suddenly.

She rose as she spoke, came up to the fire, and drew a little table luxuriously toward her; as she did so, she gave Molly a penetrating glance.

"Bring your chair nearer, my dear," she said; "you look, not exactly troubled, but anxious. Now, I don't want my girls to be anxious. What is the matter, Molly? have you anything on your mind?"

"Yes," said Molly; "I have."

Miss Forester was silent for a minute.

"I never force anyone's confidence," she then said slowly, "but I am a middle-aged woman, and you are a young girl. It is just possible that my experience may be of value to you."

"I'd rather tell you than anyone else in the world," replied Molly, with a sudden burst of enthusiasm.

"Then why not, my dear child? you have surely come here for the purpose, have you not? What is worrying you, my dear Molly Lavender?"

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"I'll tell you as quickly as I can," said Molly "You remember about Kate, don't you?"

"Kate O'Connor!" said Miss Forester, with a laugh. "I am not likely to forget her, I find her name in everybody's mouth."

"It was the time when Kate was ill," said Molly; "that fearful day when Dr. Groves thought she might never get better. Don't you remember finding Cecil and me by her bedside?"

"I do, and I thought you had no business to be there."

"Perhaps not," said Molly, coloring; "but I was so restless and wretched that I could not keep away. Miss Leicester called me out of the room a moment or two after you went, and told me that a London doctor was coming, and that there was to be an operation, and that Kate's life hung in the balance. I felt nearly wild; I thought that I could not live if Kate died—there had been a horrid cloud between us two, and I had not been able to set matters right with Kate, and I did feel that life would be unendurable if Kate were taken away. I went into the cathedral, and I knelt there and prayed to God. I was in desperation, and I spoke in a desperate way. I asked God to make Kate better, just as if I were demanding something from him, and I said, 'If you will do it, I will do something for you; I will give up my life to you, if you will only do it.' Miss Forester, I spoke in a sort of passion, I felt so fierce and wretched and desperate, then I came away, and in the morning Kate was better, and now she has recovered. But there is my vow to God, I daren't break it, and yet I don't know how to keep it. I promised to give myself to him altogether. I did it, not because I love him, but because I wanted something from him; but now, at any cost, I must keep my bargain. Oh, what am I to do? what am I to do?"

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"To live the consecrated life," said Miss Forester slowly.

Molly's head had been lowered, tears were running down her cheeks; she looked up at these words.

"I don't pretend that you did right, Molly," said the principal; "but you did as many another poor tempest-tossed soul has done before you—you struggled to make a bargain with your Maker. Well, child, he was gracious enough to answer your request; now keep your part."

"That is what I want to do," said Molly; "but can I, can I do it without love?"

"Don't you love your Heavenly Father, my dear?"

Molly blushed.

"Not as I love Kate," she said; "nor Cecil; not as I love you."

"Come here, my love, and hold my hand."

Molly went up to Miss Forester's side. Her soft little hand was clasped in the kindly grasp of the older woman.

"I have lived through a great many of these tempests," she said, bending down and looking into Molly's flushed face. "When I was your age, I did not love God best; but now there is no one like him. We were made for God, Molly, as St. Augustine said; we can't be happy apart from him. We don't know that when we are young, but if we use life aright, it teaches us this great lesson. You have made a vow, dear, and you must keep it."

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"But ought I to go as a missionary or anything of that sort?" asked Molly.

Miss Forester could scarcely help smiling.

"Missionaries are not the only people who keep a vow of consecration," she said.

"But doesn't it mean that I ought to do something very special?"

"It means," said Miss Forester suddenly, "that you ought to do your school work, and your home work when it comes, from quite a different standpoint from that which influences the girl whose life is not consecrated. You must set God in the middle of your life, and do everything from his point of view. You say you don't love him much now, but love will come very quickly. It is surprising how soon the vain and silly things of life will assume their true proportions, how interesting all your fellow-creatures will be, because you will try to look at them from the point of view from which God regards them. You must make a friend of your Father in heaven; where Christ would have denied himself, you must do the same. My love, it is not an easy life, but it is a very grand one. It need not, in any sense of the word, prevent your enjoying the innocent pleasures of the world; you may be the kindest of friends, the most loving of daughters, the most diligent of pupils, all the more, not the less, because you lead a consecrated life."

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"Thank you," said Molly, in a low tone. She soon afterward took her leave.

As she walked back to St. Dorothy's she thought with a feeling of almost rapture of all that Miss Forester had said to her; her spirit was so uplifted that she thought no temptation too strong not to be easily overcome.

"And I can be happy as well as good," thought the young girl, as she skipped lightly over the ground. "What a delightful Christmas we are all going to have! how beautiful the world is! Oh, yes! God is very good, and I ought to love him; I do love him. I wonder if ever a time will come when I shall feel that I love him best of all."

"Hullo! I say, Molly Lavender, won't you stop for a minute?"

The voice was Matilda's, who came hurrying and panting across the quadrangle.

"I saw you ahead of me, and I rushed on," she said. "I want to speak to you very badly; I wonder if you will do something for me. You have professed to be friendly to me since I came to St. Dorothy's; well, now is the time for you to prove your own words."

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"I will do what I can for you, of course, Matty," said Molly, in her pleasantest voice. "Now, what is the matter?"

"Matter enough," pouted Matilda; "you don't know what a day I've had! All my Christmas is completely ruined! You can just make it bearable for me, if you like."

"What can I do?" said Molly, but somehow or other the pleasure had gone out of her voice; she had a certain premonition of what was coming.

"I will tell you," said Matilda, slipping her hand through Molly's arm, and swinging along, in her usual ungainly gait, by her slight, young companion's side. "I have just had a letter from mother, and my cousin Bob, who lives with us—bother him!—has gone and taken scarlet fever, and of course he is at home, and of course I can't go back for Christmas, and of course mother wants me to stay at Redgarth, but I won't; so there!"

"Oh, I am really sorry for you!" said Molly. "But what is to be done?"

"Why, this," said Matilda eagerly; "I heard Cecil and Kate talking over that delightful scheme of yours for the seaside, and I want to join you. I know perfectly well that neither Kate nor Cecil can bear me, but you profess to be my friend, and you can manage it for me, Molly. Now, will you say 'yes,' Molly? Say you will be my friend; say you will manage it for me."

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"I really can't!" said Molly, in a cross voice. "It is quite impossible."

"There, I knew you were a humbug like the rest of them," said Matilda, removing her hand with such violence from Molly's arm that she almost pushed her down. "I know you got up early last Sunday to go to the communion, but you are like the rest of those stupid folks who profess so much; when it comes to the point you'll do nothing."

"But, but," said Molly, "it is grandmother's party, and she said nothing about you. I can't do it, Matilda—I really can't!"

"You know perfectly well it is your party, and that the old lady will do as you please. Anyhow, you can write and ask her if I may come; you can say I am a plain, good sort of girl—I shan't mind if you run down my appearance a bit. If you just add I am a chum of yours, she'll agree fast enough, and of course mother will manage my expenses. If you don't do it, Molly, I shall go to the Kings' at Brighton, I vow and declare I will! I won't stay here. Mother was in a way when she wrote, and she never thought of the Kings, but I'll remind her of them. You wouldn't much like to be in *that* house if you knew what it was like—card parties on Sunday, and no end of fun; and as to the flirtations, why, Arabella has had six proposals already, and she's not nineteen! I don't really care for the Kings, they are such a fast lot; but I'll go to them rather than stay here. If I were with you, Molly, perhaps I might be even a little bit *good*, or perhaps I might try to be good. Well, it is for you to decide."

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The girls were passing the cathedral at that moment; the voices of the choir came out on the evening air.

Molly thought, with a sort of shock, of her vow. She was just having a pretty sharp encounter with the enemy. Was she to fall so quickly and so soon? She turned abruptly, and looked full at her companion.

"To tell you the truth, Matilda," she said, "I'd rather not have you."

"Well, that's pretty frank, upon my word!" said Matilda; "and why?"

"Because," said Molly, "you don't care for Cecil and Kate, and because I do; because Cecil, Kate, and I are harmonious in every sense of the word. You have not our tastes, you have not our ideas, your plans for yourself in life are not a bit the same as ours; but rather than—rather than you should be wretched and perhaps do yourself harm, Matty, I—I will talk to the girls about it. There, don't say anything more. I will let you know to-morrow."

Molly dashed away as she spoke, rushed into the cool hall at St. Dorothy's, ran upstairs, and locked herself into her own little room; there she fell on her knees and wept bitterly.

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## CHAPTER XIX.

### CECIL.

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AT six o'clock Cecil found herself shown into Miss Forester's presence. Miss Forester was sitting just as Molly had left her: she had been thinking of Molly a good deal, and with considerable pleasure.

"Molly Lavender is just the sort of girl who will make a splendid woman by and by," thought the principal. "She is not especially clever, but she is capable and lovable; she is just the sort of womanly girl who will help on the cause of the new woman in the most effective way; she will take up all the best of the movement, and leave the bad alone. Dear child, I hope she will have courage to keep her vow; it was like her to make it in that moment of passion and despair. What a queer, fascinating creature Kate O'Connor is! What a strong influence she has on the other girls!"

She is evidently meant to be a leader. Ah, here comes my genius: now then for a serious talk with her; whoever loses her chances here, she must not."

"Sit down by me, Cecil; I am very pleased to see you," said Miss Forester. "Have you had tea?"

"Yes, thank you, Miss Forester."

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"Well, my dear, I want to talk to you about a great many matters, and first of all, with regard to your studies. You have not been with us a whole term yet, and it is early days to predict anything for you, Cecil; still, the reports from your different mistresses are highly satisfactory I trust you will work very hard next term. You are advanced in every way, and there is nothing whatever to prevent your trying for the governor's scholarship next June."

"It is a very stiff examination, is it not?" asked Cecil.

"Yes; but not for a girl of your abilities. I have heard a little of your story. It is very important for you to get on, and quickly, is it not?"

"Yes, Miss Forester. I have four brothers, all younger than myself. My eldest brother, Maurice, is very clever, very brilliant—a splendid fellow. Whatever happens, he must go to one of the universities."

"I should recommend you to try and get him into a good school, where he can work for a valuable scholarship," said Miss Forester.

"There are several scholarships connected with Hazlewick Grammar School," said Cecil. "Maurice intends to try for one when he is a little older; he could not do it before."

"But, my dear, four brothers to support and start in life means a very heavy burden for such slight shoulders as yours to carry."

"We are not quite without money," said Cecil, blushing as she spoke. "We have a hundred and fifty pounds a year between us, and perhaps you know, Miss Forester, that dear old Mrs. Lavender, Molly's grandmother, is giving me my education here free."

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"That is a very sensible way for such a rich woman to spend her money," said Miss Forester. "Well, Cecil, a hundred and fifty yearly is not a large income on which to feed, educate, and start in the world four stalwart young sons of Britain."

"No; and that is the reason why I want to earn money before Maurice is eighteen."

"How old is he now?"

"Just fourteen."

"Then you have four years before you," said Miss Forester. "By the time Maurice is eighteen you ought to be earning something. But have you any special wish with regard to yourself?"

"I should like best to be what I am afraid I cannot—a doctor."

"You will not earn money in that profession for some time, Cecil."

"No; I quite understand that it cannot be," said Cecil, with a sigh.

"And you love it better than anything else?"

"Yes; I have always wished for it, since I was quite a small child. When mother died, however, I tried to put the thought away from me. I should like to try to get a post in a high school where I was offered a good salary—at any rate until the boys are started in life."

"You ought to do well as a classical mistress; I know at first-class high schools the classical mistress is given a very high salary. Your knowledge of Greek and Latin is quite surprising for so young a girl. My dear, I truly sympathize with you in the burden you have got to carry, and in the sacrifice you make when you resign what you feel yourself most fitted for. At present I do not know how you could become a doctor and also help your brothers, but you may be quite certain I will bear your wishes in mind. Work with all your heart and soul next term, Cecil; try for the scholarship, and there is no saying what there may be before you. And now to revert to another matter!"

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"Oh, yes! to Kate," said Cecil suddenly.

"Kate has had a very narrow escape," said Miss Forester. "When Sir John Williamson came down to see her six weeks ago, he only performed that critical operation as a *dernier ressort*. It turned out successful, but she will not be strong enough for real hard work for some time; she is a very brilliant and gifted creature, but she has not got your stamina and working powers; her brain is of the imaginative and creative order. Such brains are delicate, and the nervous systems of persons so endowed are very easily put out of order. Kate ought to take a year's rest, and then come back to us. I don't know well how to propose that, however, because——"

"Because of what?" asked Cecil.

"Because something has happened. Poor Kate's little money has all been swallowed up by one of those rascally lawyers."

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Miss Forester said the last words with such sudden vehemence that Cecil could not help laughing.

"The man went bankrupt," she said abruptly. "He had invested poor Kate's money in some scheme of his own, and at the present moment the poor child has not got sixpence."

"Does she know it?" asked Cecil.

"No; and I don't mean her to know it until after the holidays. Have you heard anything about it, Cecil?"

"Yes, from Alice Wright; the lawyer who went bankrupt is a cousin of Kate's. She told me a week ago, but she said she would not breathe it to anyone else."

"I hope she will not; I should be sorry if it got to Kate's ears until she is stronger. She is going to stay here during Christmas. I fear, poor child! she will have a dull time, as I shall be away, and most of the other teachers."

"Oh, I think I may tell you," said Cecil, "that Kate will not have a dull time. Dear Mrs. Lavender has proposed a lovely scheme."

Here Cecil explained in a few words Molly's plan for taking her schoolfellows and Cecil's brothers with her to the seaside.

"Nothing could be more delightful," said Miss Forester, her eyes sparkling; "such a change may set Kate up completely. When the holidays are over I must speak to her. I can partly help her expenses here by means of a fund which enables me to help girls who can't get through the school without such assistance, but I cannot meet all her expenses, and what is to be done at the present moment I am unable to say. I beg of you, Cecil, to ask Molly to be very careful to keep all knowledge of this calamity from Kate's ears for the present. It was arranged, when she came here, that all moneys was to be paid direct to me, and when she goes away with you, I will give her a little sum to put in her pocket. The truth, therefore, need not leak out until she is stronger. She is a proud girl, with a good deal of spirit. I don't think anything would induce her to accept what she would call charity."

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"I wish, Miss Forester, you had heard her when she spoke of her old life," said Cecil. "Oh, she is not proud in the wrong way! It was splendid the way she owned up to having been born to poverty and a humble life, and how beautiful she made the thing seem—like a poem."

"Miss Leicester told me about it," said Miss Forester. "Poor Kate herself has just the nature that may be called upon to suffer much in life; but she is full of gifts, and the mere fact of her not having money need not discourage one so beautiful, lovable, and talented."

"Of course it need not," said Cecil, rising as she spoke. "Surely Kate has enough given her to enable her to conquer fate."

"She has, my love, she has. But just at present, she is weak, and might not rise above a blow of this sort. Keep the knowledge from her, Cecil, until she returns; then we will have a grand conference. If only I can conquer that obstinate pride of hers, I know one or two wealthy women here who would, I am sure, subscribe enough money to finish her education; but I should not wish to do that without her knowledge. Now, Cecil, I see you wish to go. We break up on Monday; I shall not see you alone again. God bless you, my love! Remember, I look to girls like you and Molly Lavender and Kate to uphold the honor of this great house of learning, and to show the nation what English girls can achieve."

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## CHAPTER XX. A HARD FIGHT.

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**W**HEN Molly told Cecil and Kate of Matilda's wish to accompany them to their seaside retreat, she had to encounter a storm, the intensity and bitterness of which rather surprised her. Kate, who had been somewhat apathetic, roused herself for this occasion, and showed much of her former spirit.

"Of course, we cannot say a word," she said; "we are your guests, Molly, and you must ask whom you please; but I can only regard this suggestion as an awful blow."

"It cannot be done," said Cecil, in her decided voice; "it cannot be thought of, even for a moment. Why, Molly, surely you don't wish it; your tastes are not so completely demoralized that you care for the society of a girl like Matilda?"

"I don't care for her society," said Molly, speaking with unexpected passion; "you don't know how I hate and detest her, but oh, Cecil and Kate, if you would only help me instead of hindering me! I want to do right."

"Hear her!" said Kate, with a little laugh. "Why, Molly, you always do right; what in the world are you turning so goody-goody for?"

"Once you thought I did not do right," said Molly, looking steadily at Kate.

Kate's splendid dark eyes were lowered under Molly's direct gaze.

"Now, I want to do right, because— Oh, I can't tell you the reason, but I think Miss Forester understands. You don't suppose I wish to have Matilda with us, but it seems wrong—"

"Yes, it seems wrong," suddenly interrupted Cecil; "it seems extremely wrong to make four boys and two girls utterly and completely miserable for the sake of a low sort of girl like Matilda."

"But you needn't be!" said Molly. "If nice people shun Matilda, how is she to get nice?"

"She never will, my dear; rest assured of that," said Kate. "Oh, give it up, Molly! tell Matilda that you did your best for her, but that we simply would not consent."

"But I want you to consent," said Molly.

"What a persistent child you are! now you most explain yourself fully. Why should we be sacrificed to Matilda?"

"You won't be sacrificed if you make her better; you don't suppose she is going to influence any of us to do wrong?"

"Oh, that is too silly an idea!"

"If we don't take her with us, and if afterward we hear that she has been with people who have helped her to get a little lower, and a little meaner, a little more despicable than she is now—well, we'll be sorry."

"I declare I don't think I shall!" said Kate. "I have such a contempt for that young person that I don't believe anything will reform her. She is made like that, you see; she is made small both in mind and body. You know that new theory about men's and women's brains: they say that the average woman's brain weighs forty-two ounces, and the average man's forty-eight, but, of course, there are exceptions on both sides of the scale. I should say that Matilda's brain weighed about half that of the ordinary intelligent woman."

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"You are begging the question when you talk like that," said Molly. "I hate her coming, but I want her to come. I won't have her if you and Cecil steadily set your faces against it; but if you would let her come, I am sure it would be happiest for us in the end."

"If you speak like that," said Cecil, "of course she must come. It is your party, and we are your guests, and what you wish must be done. It seemed all too perfect yesterday, so I suppose Matilda is to be the little fret and the little cloud—the thorn in the rose, and the rumple under the sheet. But there, don't look so miserable, Molly; we'd put up with more than this for your sake. Wouldn't we, Kate?"

"Yes; that we would," said Kate. "But now, do listen to me, girls. I believe that I have known Matilda Matthews longer than either of you. I have been longer at St. Dorothy's. I have heard all about her; I wouldn't mind a bit if Matilda were rough and quarrelsome and coarse; but what I do loathe are her underhand ways. She's not square; she's not straight; you can never manage a person of that sort. Now, if she's to come, do let us make a bargain with her beforehand."

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"Oh, I'm sure she'll consent to anything!" said Molly. "Shall I run and fetch her now?"

"Yes, do; we may as well get the thing settled out of hand."

Molly ran quickly out of the room, returning in a few minutes with Matilda in her train.

"They consent," she said, as she hurried her companion down the corridor; "but you will have to do what we wish, and you've got to hear about it now."

"I'll do anything," said Matilda, in a humble tone. "I'm heartily glad; I'm awfully obliged. When the alternative is staying in this house with the cook and housemaid, you can imagine that I shall be easily molded, even into the goody-goody shape. Fancy me turned goody-goody! Fancy me cultivating all the virtues! But I'll do it while I'm at the seaside. You won't know me; I'll be such a model that you'll all begin to copy me."

"Oh, do stop chattering!" said Molly. "Here we are. Now, girls," she continued, as she ushered her companion into the room, "here's Matilda, and I think she'll do what you wish."

"It is very inconsiderate of you to force yourself upon us," said Kate; "but as you are determined to come, and as Molly is more of an angel than a human being, Cecil and I see nothing for it but to submit; but we only do it on certain conditions."

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"It is very kind of you to have me," said Matilda. "I am quite willing to agree to conditions. What are they?"

"The principal one is this," said Kate, giving a quick glance at Cecil as she spoke, "that you don't *eavesdrop*."

Matilda's ugly face glowed under these words to a dull crimson, her little eyes flashed an angry fire, her lips twitched. She tried to return Kate's glance with a look of equal scorn, but, failing utterly, looked down, and twirled the frill of a pretty silk apron which she was wearing.



"I don't think you will eavesdrop," continued Kate, "for the simple reason that we shan't allow it."

"Besides, we have a detective in the service," continued Cecil, in a calm voice. "My brother Jimmy is a detective. You can never get over Jimmy; so don't you begin to try."

"Perhaps, under the circumstances, you'd rather not come," resumed Kate, in her mocking tone. "You see, you have forced yourself into the company of by no means congenial spirits: it is not too late to back out of it. You've only to say the word, and we shall be—I'm sure I speak for us all—so grateful to you."

"I think you are rather hard," said Molly, who quite pitied Matilda's look of confusion.

"Well, what will you do?" continued Kate.

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Matilda looked up at these words. If ever there was a look of concentrated hate on any face, it shone now on hers, as she returned Kate's glance.

"I will come," she said, in a low voice; under her breath she added, "If for no other reason than to spite you."

"Very well," said Cecil; "you promise to conform to the first condition?"

"Yes, yes."

"Oh, please say no more about that," interrupted Molly.

"The second condition," said Cecil, "is also essential to the happiness of the larger number of our party. Independent of you, Matilda, the party will consist of three girls and four boys; these seven individuals having, to a certain extent, the same tastes, the same aims in life, the same aspirations. Now, while with us, you, who are in the minority, are on all occasions to submit to the vote of the majority. During this holiday, which but for you would be perfectly delightful, our wishes are to be carried out, *not* yours. Do you agree to this?"

"Yes, yes—I must!"

"I think that is all," said Cecil. "Isn't it, Kate?"

"Yes, that is all," answered Kate; "only if Matilda still wishes to stay at St. Dorothy's during Christmas vacation, she can do so."

"No; I will go with you," said Matilda. She turned toward the door, opened it, and went quickly out. In the passage outside her face changed, she clenched her hands and stamped her feet.

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"If I don't make Kate O'Connor eat humble pie, if I don't punish Cecil Ross for speaking to me as she has done, my name is not Matilda Matthews!" she muttered. "Yes, I will go, if only to spite them both. I will find out a way of revenge. How dared they speak to me as they did? Molly Lavender is well enough; she is a weak, goody-goody little thing of no character; I've nothing to say against her—at least not now. But oh, Cecil, you owe me a fine arrear of debts! And as to you, Kate, you will be sorry some day that you pitted your strength and will against mine. When first I thought of this plan I meant to be pretty good, if you would let me go; but now I won't be good; I'll only pretend to be good. Not eavesdrop, indeed! Oh, won't I, though, if necessary!"

Matilda hurried back to her room to write to her mother. Cecil and Kate looked at Molly.

"Well, are you happy now, Molly Lavender?" asked Kate.

"I think I am," replied Molly. "I think Matilda will try not to make herself too obnoxious."

"She'll be the snake in the grass, but we're in for her now," said Kate. "Don't let us waste any more time over her at present. Where shall we go? That is the next point to be considered."

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The girls then drew their chairs to the little table in Molly's room, and, with a map of England and a gazetteer before them, began to plan out their holiday.

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## CHAPTER XXI. GIRLS AND BOYS.

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**B**REAKING-UP day came quickly round, and a merry party assembled at the railway station to go off to a small watering-place which went by the name of St. Jude's, and was within three miles of Whitby. Even Matilda was on her best behavior. To her relief, she discovered that Kate and Cecil meant to treat her with an easy sort of good-nature until, as they expressed it, she broke her compact.

"When you do that, we will boycott you," said Kate, in her frank way; "as long as you keep it, we will do nothing to make you miserable. Now, come along and take your seat in the carriage."

"But surely we are not going to travel third class?" began Matilda.

"Yes, we are," answered Kate; "because the majority of us prefer to save our money. Now, hop in. No, you are not to take the corner, that is Molly's seat; don't you see her umbrella there?"

Molly would have given up her coveted corner to Matilda, but a glance from Kate prevented this. The four girls found themselves rather crowded, and Matilda, under different circumstances, would have shown a good deal of selfishness and ill-nature; but the infection of three perfectly happy people was too much for her, and she found herself joining in the mirth, and even adding her quota to the jokes, before the journey had come to an end. Late in the evening the girls arrived at Whitby, where they were met not only by the boys, but by a large, roomy wagonette, into which they all tumbled helter-skelter. The luggage was crowded up on the driver's seat, and squeezed into every imaginable corner, and soon the happy party started on their way. It wanted but three days to Christmas; the moon was at the full, the stars shone brightly, there was a keen frosty feel in the air. It was impossible on such an occasion to be anything but merry and cheerful; the boys cracked jokes; Maurice sat close to Cecil with his arm round her waist; Jimmy made himself comfortable by leaning against Molly, and finally dropping his curly head on her shoulder; and Charlie and Teddy, after a little demur, began to devote themselves to Matilda. They did not much care for her look, but they thought it would be fun to draw her out. Accordingly, they sat at each side of her, and regaled her with false information with regard to the scenery and the country generally. The boys were keen naturalists; Matilda had lived all her life, except when at school, in London.

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"Isn't the air delicious?" said Teddy. "Rather too warm, if anything."

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"Why, I am perfectly shivering," answered Matilda. "I wish you could feel my hands. Oh, this is much worse than London!" she continued. "Fancy driving in an open conveyance in the month of December; my chilblains will get much worse from this biting, frosty air."

"Do you suffer from chilblains?" asked Charlie, in a sympathetic voice. "Did you ever have one on your nose?"

"No," said Matilda, with a little cry. "Oh, horrors! do people get them on their noses in the country?"

"Well, I don't, because I'm acclimatized," said Charlie; "but one of the fellows in my form generally gets one in the beginning of the winter; it worries him a good bit. He used to live in London, and he never suffered there—he says it is the change to the country. Is your nose cold now? If it is, I'll get out and bring in a little snow. If you rub it hard with snow, you may not suffer; if you don't—"

"Oh, what will happen?" asked Matilda.

"It may be frost-bitten; that's much more serious than chilblains. Perhaps I'd better get the snow."

"Charlie, what are you talking about?" interrupted Maurice. "Please don't mind a word he says, Miss Matthews; it isn't a bit colder here than in London, and people don't get chilblains on their noses, if they take exercise enough. Come along, Teddy and Charlie, you both change places with me and talk to Cecil for a bit; she has no end of things to tell you. I will sit near you, Miss Matthews, and point out some of the beauties of the country."

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The transfer was quickly made, and Matilda found her fears soothed and her vanity agreeably tickled by Maurice's courteous attentions. The short drive came quickly to an end; the lodgings were found to be perfection; a boisterous supper ensued, after which Cecil, Kate, Molly, and the boys ran down to the shore. Matilda, who was very nervous on the subject of chilblains, elected to stay at home, and Maurice, with a wistful glance at his sister and her friends, offered to remain with her, but Molly put a stop to that.

"You are the grown-up one of the party," she said, with a smile at the handsome lad; "we want you to protect us. I think, Matty, you will find a book in my bag, if you like to open it."

"Thanks," said Matilda, "but I am so sleepy I shall go straight to bed; I hope the servant has put a hot bottle in my bed. I suppose there is no objection to my ordering a fire in my room, is there, Molly?"

"Oh, none whatever," replied Molly; "if Miss Pantry does not object to the trouble."

"I can pay for what I require," said Matilda, in a gruff tone.

She walked deliberately to the bell and rang it. The servant, a good-natured, round-cheeked girl, soon answered the summons.

"Will you light a fire in my bedroom directly?" said Matilda, "and have the goodness to let me know when it has blazed up bright and cheerful."

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"Well, girls, come on if you are coming," said Maurice.

The others left the house, and Matilda was alone.

"What in the world did you bring her for?" said Jimmy, the moment they got outside.

"Now, look here, Jimmy," said Cecil, "we are not going to begin that sort of conversation at the very commencement of our holidays. Matilda is here, and we must make the best of her. But for

Molly, we should none of us be having this delightful treat; Matilda is Molly's guest, and I expect her to be treated civilly."

"I wouldn't be rude to a lady for the world," said Teddy, drawing himself up.

"Nor I," burst from Charlie's lips; "only she doesn't seem to be your sort, Molly, nor yours, Cecil, nor yours, Miss O'Connor."

"Race me to the shore, Jimmy," said Kate suddenly.

The moonlight covered the wide white road, the smell of the sea came to Kate's nostrils, the grand sound of the sea to her ears.

"Oh, I can almost believe myself back in Ireland again," she said, with a sort of panting sigh. "I must run, or the delight of it all will be too much for me. Come along, Jimmy, I see by the shape of your legs you are a good runner. Now, one, two, and away."

Kate's running was almost as swift as the wind. Jimmy, Teddy, and Charlie eagerly joined in the race; Molly, Cecil, and Maurice walked behind. [276]

"Oh," said Molly, "what good this will do Kate! she is a different creature already. I do hope Matilda will go to bed early every night. Perhaps she will if we make her room thoroughly comfortable."

"If I thought that——" said Maurice, with a smile.

"Why, what would you do, dear?" asked his sister.

"I'd see to the lighting of that fire myself; but look here, Ceci, the boys must not tease her too much. You know Charlie and Teddy are little imps of mischief, and Jimmy is so clever, there's no being up to him when he is bent on sport, as he calls it. The best and the worst of it is, that Matilda will never see when they are poking fun at her. Did you hear them to-night about chilblains? I know perfectly well what they'll do. They'll be as polite as little angels until they find out all her weak points, and then, woe betide her, more especially if she has a secret fear."

"You must talk to them," said Cecil. "Matilda is Molly Lavender's guest, and it will be very shabby of us to give her a bad time."

"But you don't really like her, do you, Molly?" asked Maurice.

"Not really," answered Molly.

"She is the thorn in the rose," said Cecil, with a sigh. "You know we can never expect perfection here, Maurice, old boy, and our holiday would be too good were it not for Matilda. Well, now, let us talk of something else; you must have a lot to tell me. How have you got on with Mr. Danvers? Is the poor, good-natured man still in the land of the living?" [277]

"I should rather think he is! He's the best fellow going," said Maurice, with enthusiasm. "I wish I could tell you half what he has done for me, Cecil. He coaches me in Greek and Latin every evening before he goes to bed, and I have got on like a house on fire. I shall be in the sixth next term. In short, I am nearly safe to win that scholarship."

"You must have worked very hard, Maurice," said Cecil.

"Well, I did put on the screw a good bit, but how could I help it when I thought of you pegging away?"

"And how are the other boys doing?" asked Cecil.

"Jimmy and Charlie are doing famously; Teddy's idle. Mr. Danvers says there's no real work in him; but then he is young yet, and you can't expect us all to have old heads on young shoulders, can you, Cecil?"

"No, no; I'm perfectly content with you as you are," answered Cecil. "I wish I could thank Mr. Danvers for what he has done for you."

"Well, you will have an opportunity, for he has actually promised to come to St. Jude's before the new year—that is, provided you will promise me beforehand never to invite him either to dinner or tea. He's awfully shy of women, and we'll have to humor him with regard to all his little pet weaknesses." [278]

"But I want really to get to know him," said Cecil.

"Well, perhaps you will if you are careful. You must just make his acquaintance without seeming to make it. If once he caught sight of a girl like Matilda, he would fly the place—I know he would. Now, that Irish girl, Kate—what do you call her?"

"Kate O'Connor."

"Kate O'Connor, well, she'd be just his sort; he'd compare her to one of his Greek heroines, Iphigenia or Persephone. He doesn't mind thinking of women, and even talking of them, if he can compare them to Greeks, but the modern English sort! oh, we will try to keep him from talking about them. He once saw you, Cecil; he said you had the patient sort of look which Penelope used to wear—that was his sole remark about you; he shut up his lips then, and rumbled his hair, and

went to the stove to cook some bacon. By the way, he's the best cook I ever came across in all my life. I wish you could taste his toffee."

"Toffee!" cried Cecil. "Can Mr. Danvers stoop to toffee?"

"Oh, can't he? We were doing it up in the back bedroom. He caught us over it one night with a saucepan with a hole in the bottom—the smell was awful; the stuff was going through on to the fire. His whole face got scarlet; he rushed downstairs, and brought up a china-lined saucepan of his own. Teddy had to fly for half a pound of butter, a pound of moist sugar, and a quarter of a pound of almonds. He stood over that toffee until it was cooked to perfection, and then he poured it out on to a large tin, and the next day, when it was cold, he cut it up and gave it to us. He was more excited than any of us over it."

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"I tell you what it is," said Molly; "Mr. Danvers shall make toffee for us—yes, for us—when he comes to St. Jude's; we'll manage it somehow."

"You must look like a Greek goddess, or he won't," said Maurice; "and I am not sure that you are quite the style."

"Oh, yes, she is," said Cecil, with a laugh; "she'd make a lovely little Alcestis."

"No, I shouldn't," answered Molly, with a laugh. "I am much—much too modern; I'll allow you, Cecil, and Kate, to do the Greek heroines to perfection, but I shall stick to just being a modern English girl. Who knows but that I may conquer Mr. Danvers' prejudices, and get him to drop his dislike to the English girl of the latter half of the century."

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## CHAPTER XXII.

### MATILDA'S OPPORTUNITY.

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HE first week in the country passed off without flaw or disturbance of any kind. Matilda was true to her promise; no one could catch her even attempting to eavesdrop; she interfered with none of the arrangements of the others, but plodded along, not adding her quota of merriment or joy, but still behaving much better than anyone expected.

"It is too good to last," thought Kate, who knew her well.

But Cecil and Molly began to believe that they had been overhard on Matilda. As the days wore on they tried to draw her out. They were intensely happy themselves, and they wanted all their companions to share their pleasure. Christmas had passed delightfully, and New Year's day drew on, arrived, and sank into the annals of the past. A day or two after the new year, Maurice was much delighted to receive a letter from Mr. Danvers, to tell him that he had taken rooms in the next terrace to theirs, and might be expected to arrive that evening.

"I do not wish you to pay any attention to this letter," said the schoolmaster. "I am simply coming to St. Jude's because I have heard of the famous air of the place, and I really want to get braced up a little. Do not on any account acquaint the ladies of your party of my intended arrival. You can drop in to see me if you like some evening, and if we should happen to meet in any of our walks, I shall, of course, be pleased to see you. I hope the other lads are well. By the way, you might coach Teddy up a little in his Latin; we ought to get him into Cæsar next term; do your best, Maurice."

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"Your sincere friend,  
"JOHN DANVERS."

"Who is your letter from, Maurice?" asked Molly.

"He said I wasn't to tell you anything about it," said Maurice, looking up with sparkling eyes.

"Oh, we know what that means," said Cecil. "Mr. Danvers is coming at last—how glad I am!"

"You really must not force yourself on him," said Maurice, a pucker coming between his brows; "he honestly hates all women, and poor old chap, his prejudices must be humored. He didn't wish me to let you know that he was coming. I may drop in on him some day, if I fancy."

"I say!" exclaimed Teddy; "much chance he has of getting rid of us in that style."

"He wants you to attack your Cæsar," said Maurice, fixing his eyes on his brother.

"Oh, perhaps, after all, we'd better not bother him too much," was the quick reply. "I say, Charlie and Jimmy, let's run off for a scamper; it's a splendid day. How the wind does blow!"

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"It's snowing as fast as ever it can," said Matilda, shivering as she spoke. "If you call this a splendid day, I must say I don't admire your taste; for my part, I am going to sit over the fire. Mother sent me down a copy of 'The Golden Butterfly' this morning; it looks interesting, and I shall spend my time reading it."

"It is not a bit too cold for a walk," said Cecil. "Who will come with me?"

"I, for one," cried Molly. "Are you coming, Kate?"

"No," answered Kate; "my head aches."

When she said this, Matilda raised her eyes and gave her a quick and furtive glance, which nobody noticed. Molly and Cecil ran off to put on their warmest wraps, and were presently seen battling with the wind, and going off in the direction of the sea. The four boys had all disappeared, and Kate and Matilda found themselves alone in the snug little parlor. Matilda piled coal on the fire until it blazed and crackled merrily; she then drew forward the only really comfortable chair, seated herself in it, put her feet on the fender, rested her head against the cushions, opened her novel, and prepared to read. Kate collected some books, sat down by the center table, leaned her elbows upon it, pressed one of her hands against her cheek, and tried, with the help of a lexicon, to translate, as best she could, a somewhat difficult passage of Homer. She soon became absorbed in her task; her brow cleared, her eyes grew full of light, her lips moved softly as the beautiful meaning of the grand old text began to unfold itself before her. Matilda, who was no reader, who was incapable of even thoroughly enjoying a novel, uttered a profound yawn, slightly turned her head, and looked at Kate.

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"What in the world are you doing?" she said, in an abrupt voice.

"Don't speak to me for a minute," said Kate.

"I do believe you are studying, and that is forbidden!" cried Matilda.

"I wish you would stop talking," cried Kate. She turned the pages of her lexicon quickly, found the word she required, shut up her Homer, and looked at Matilda with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes.

"Now you'll have a headache. How awfully silly you are!" said Matilda. "And you are breaking the rules, too; it was arranged that none of us were to study."

"I am doing nothing underhand," said Kate. "I have been feeling much better, and we agreed that a very little study in the morning could not hurt me."

"For my part," said Matilda, "I wonder you do not grasp the opportunity of having a real rest. If you knew how *I* detest work?"

"You see, I love it," said Kate. "Perhaps you will allow me to go on with it now. Is not your book interesting?"

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"Pretty well; it's about a girl who didn't know anything at all; but all the same she seemed to have an uncommonly jolly time of it. I can't make out what is the use of grinding: it spoils your eyes, and your figure, and your temper, and men don't think a bit the more of you for it. After all, women are sent into the world just to please the men."

"I should like to ask you a question," said Kate. "Why, with your views, did you trouble to come to Redgarth?"

"Simply and entirely," replied Matilda, "because it is the fashion just at present for girls to be educated. Mother took it into her head that I must be in the fashion. I am just going to scrape through somehow, just to please mother. I do hope she will let me leave at the end of the summer term."

"I sincerely hope so, too," answered Kate.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because girls like you are a disgrace to a place like Redgarth."

"Don't you think you are very rude?" said Matilda, flushing deeply.

"I am sorry if I am, but you force me to speak plainly, now and then. Will you stop talking now and let me return to my Homer."

"Yes, I will, after I have said something. I am truly sorry for you, although you are spiteful and unkind to me."

"I don't need your sympathy, thanks," answered Kate.

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"All the same, you can't help my giving it to you. I am sorry for you, because it is important for you to work, and I fear, after that bad accident, you won't be fit for much for some time. I had a cousin who fell on her head when she was a girl; she was never any good afterward—she developed epileptic fits. Her brain was badly injured, but not so badly as yours. Now, I won't say any more, but if I were you, I wouldn't work at that dull old Homer longer than I could help. I am giving you a piece of sensible advice; you can take it or not, as you please."

Kate did not utter a word. Matilda sighed, fidgeted, and resumed her novel. She was feeling deeply annoyed. If Kate had flown into a passion, or show any disturbance at her taunting words, she would have felt that she had had her revenge; but Kate was calmness itself; she was once more deep in her books; the poetry of the king of poets was enchanting her: her noble brow looked full of intellect, her lovely eyes were sparkling, her lips were like roses.

"Yes, she's clever," thought Matilda as she watched her. "I don't suppose her brain is much

injured—I doubt if it is injured at all. And she's beautiful, too; there's no sort of sense in denying it. How I wish she were ugly, and—yes, and stupid! but she's not—she's graceful, too; she never does an ungraceful thing. How I detest her! how I hate her! What right has a girl of that sort to be at St. Dorothy's? Why, she's nothing whatever but a peasant girl—an Irish peasant girl; but, of course, no one cares for that, just because she happens to have a good-looking face. Oh, dear! I can't stand any more of this stupid novel. I wonder if it is too cold to go out; it isn't snowing at present, the sun is shining. I think I'll go for a run."

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Matilda rose to her feet; she yawned and stretched herself as she did so.

"Hadn't you better come out?" she said, fixing her eyes on the student.

"No, thanks!"

"I am going."

"Very well."

"You are sure you would not like to come with me?"

"Yes, quite sure; do you mind shutting the door when you leave the room?"

Matilda had just approached the door, when it was suddenly opened by the rosy-cheeked maid-servant, and a little man with red hair, and spectacles pushed up on his forehead, was ushered into the room.

"I think Mr. Maurice is out, sir, but I will go and look for him," said the maid.

Mr. Danvers—for of course it was he—found himself almost in the arms of Matilda. Matilda backed: she did not admire the little man with his red head and somewhat startled eyes.

"Oh, horrors!" she said, under her breath.

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Danvers. "I called to see Maurice Ross; I traveled last night instead of waiting until this morning. I wanted to leave Maurice my address. Will you have the goodness to give it to him? I"—he backed rapidly until he nearly reached the door—"I—I will call another time."

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"No, indeed, you must not do anything of the kind," said Kate, rising suddenly.

She came a step or two forward as she spoke; she held her copy of Homer in one hand. The book was somewhat heavy; as Kate pushed a chair forward it slipped and fell.

"Excuse me," said Mr. Danvers, "but that is not the way to treat a valuable book."

He stooped, placed it on the table, then looked full at Kate.

"You don't mean to say you are reading Greek?" he said.

"Yes, indeed I am," answered Kate; "and I have just come to a most difficult passage; I am making an awful mess of it. Maurice tells me that you are devoted to the classics; perhaps, while you are waiting, you will construe this passage for me."

"With pleasure; show me your translation."

"Oh, it is too poor for you to look at!"

"Show it to me; I can soon tell you if you have gone wrong."

Kate held up her exercise book.

"Take a chair, won't you?" she said.

Without a word Mr. Danvers dropped into the one she had been using. He absolutely forgot that she was a girl; he began to read her translation, pursing up his lips as he did so.

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"Good, so far," he said. "Oh, here is a wrong quantity; disgraceful, careless! Aren't you ashamed of yourself to do work of this sort? What will the boys of England come to?"

"But you are scolding a girl of Ireland," said Kate, in a gentle tone.

Mr. Danvers glanced up at her.

"I beg your pardon, miss," he said; "really, women ought not to meddle in matters too deep for them."

"But you will be good-natured and help me, won't you? You may as well do that as nothing, while you are waiting for Maurice; I felt sure I had gone wrong in that line. Will you show me? I shall be so grateful."

"Well, I can't see Homer murdered," exclaimed Mr. Danvers; "so here goes."

"Matilda," said Kate, facing round and looking at Matilda, who was standing in some perplexity near the door, "you are going out, are you not?"

"Yes," said Matilda.

"If you see Maurice, will you kindly tell him that Mr. Danvers has come?"

"Yes," replied Matilda again. She left the room, shutting the door behind her.

"What an awkward, hideous little oddity!" she said to herself. "If people grow like that from the study of Greek, preserve me from wearing myself out with it. What a flirt Kate O'Connor is! pretending she wants to be helped with her stupid, musty old Homer! she just dropped the book on purpose. Well, I wish her joy of her prize in that old scarecrow. Yes, I may as well go out. I could not read 'The Golden Butterfly' in the same room with that parchment creature. To see Kate pretending to be so eager, and that old man falling into the trap so easily, is too much for my nerves. Perhaps he would not if he knew that she was only a peasant girl; perhaps he will know it some day. Now then, to find Maurice, and put a stop to this flirtation."

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Matilda hastily donned a handsome sealskin jacket, and, wrapped from head to foot in the warmest furs, sallied forth into the cold January atmosphere. She walked as far as the shore, but, look to right and look to left as she would, she could not see a sign of any of her companions. The short gleam of sunshine had long ago disappeared; fresh banks of heavy clouds had come up from the north, and were covering the entire sky. Presently the snow began to fall; it fell faster and faster, thicker and thicker; it covered Matilda's sealskin jacket; it beat pitilessly against her cheeks, and even got into her eyes. She had forgotten to bring out an umbrella, and was therefore exposed to the full fury of the weather; she was quite a mile from home, too. What was to be done?

She by no means liked her present predicament; physical hardship of any sort was repellent to her. She walked on, buffeted by the weather, and feeling herself a truly wretched girl, when, to her relief, she saw a little shelter which had been put up along the shore, and which she had forgotten all about. She ran to it, sat down inside the glass-covered inclosure, and drew a long breath of relief. Part of this shelter was under repair, and was covered with scaffolding, canvas, and heavy boards. Matilda had scarcely seated herself in the glass part of the shelter before she heard footsteps approaching. She also heard voices which she immediately recognized; they were those of Maurice, Jimmy, and the other boys.

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Now, Matilda had not made friends with the Ross boys. Maurice she would have tolerated had he shown her any special attention; the other three she cordially detested. She did not at all wish them to find her now, covered with snow, and looking blue, and miserable. She knew that Jimmy would immediately speak about her nose. Matilda's nose was a source of anxiety to herself, for the slightest thing made it red and swollen; the horror of a chilblain on this prominent portion of her face had been one of her terrors since her early childhood. Jimmy would be sure to tell her that the first signs of a chilblain were approaching. Scarcely considering what she was doing, she rushed into the dark part of the shelter, pulled forward some tarpaulin and matting, and, crouching down behind some boards, was completely lost to view. She resolved to stay in this hiding-place until the boys had left the shelter. She had scarcely made herself secure before they all entered. They stood by the entrance watching the storm and chattering hard to one another.

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"How jolly!" said Jimmy; "we'll be able to snowball if this snow goes on much longer. I'm glad we are in for a downright good fall of snow. Isn't it fine to see it scudding as it does right across the sea? I should not be a bit surprised if we had a wreck to-night!"

"Oh, I say!" exclaimed Charlie, "if that isn't Molly and Cecil just turning the promontory; what a long walk they have taken! Do look at Cecil; see how her dress is blown by the wind—oh, and Molly's umbrella is inside out. What a mess they'll be in; why, this snow will wet them through. What is it, Maurice? Did you say anything?"

"I am going to meet them," said Maurice; "you stay quiet, if you can, you three, and don't be up to any larks. I'll bring the girls in here; they'll be sure to miss this little shelter if I don't point it out."

"Let me go with you," said Charlie.

"No, no! stay where you are; you are wet through as it is."

Thrusting his hands deep into his pockets, Maurice ran as fast as he could in the direction from where his sister and her friend were approaching him.

Meanwhile, the three younger boys were alone in the shelter—that is, they supposed themselves to be alone but they little knew that Matilda, breathing hard and feeling terrified, was within earshot. She had scarcely concealed herself in her little shelter before she repented of her own rash act. Suppose by any chance she was discovered! Those awful boys would think as little of reconnoitering the dark part of the shed as they would of breathing or whistling. The three younger boys were about the most mischievous, most restless creatures Matilda had ever come across—they were never still for an instant. Oh, suppose they discovered her! Cruelly as Matilda hated both Cecil and Kate, she also feared them. She knew that no words of hers would prevent the rest of her companions believing that she had hidden herself for the purpose of eavesdropping. They would certainly keep their word if she were discovered, and boycott her on the spot.

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Matilda would not have minded being boycotted by such girls as Kate and Cecil were she at school. But here at St. Jude's this state of things would make her a very miserable girl indeed; she reflected that, under such circumstances, she might have had a better time with the cook and

housemaid at St. Dorothy's. Well, there was no help for it now: she must stay as mute as a mouse, and take her chance of not being discovered.



**A LITTLE MAN WITH RED HAIR, AND SPECTACLES PUSHED UP ON HIS FOREHEAD, WAS USHERED INTO THE ROOM.**

Luckily for her, Jimmy, with a shout, suddenly discovered a large crab, which had found its way into the shelter. He dropped on his knees and began eagerly to examine his captive. Soon the three boys began to wrangle over their prey, and Matilda breathed a gentle sigh of relief. The noise of approaching footsteps was again heard above the gale, and Maurice and the two girls entered the little shelter. The entire party now stood by the entrance watching the snow and commenting about it. By Cecil's request, Jimmy ran out with the poor crab, and deposited it in the nearest pool of water; he then returned to the shelter. They all remained there until the heavy snow-shower had slightly abated; then the boys decided to go to the house to fetch Cecil's and Molly's waterproofs. They ran off quickly, and the girls seated themselves on the bench at the back of the shelter.

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"You might as well read me that letter now, Cecil," said Molly.

"Very well," answered Cecil; "there are sure to be no eavesdroppers about to-day, are there?"

"Scarcely, seeing that we left Matilda snugly ensconced at home with her book."

"Oh, did you?" muttered that young lady, from her hiding-place.

"I think it is awfully kind of Miss Forester to write to me. Don't you, Molly?" said Cecil.

"Yes; but, after all, it is just the thing she would do. She takes an immense interest in you; she is very proud of you."

"I intend to make her proud of me," said Cecil, drawing herself up and looking straight ahead of her. "If ever a girl has made up her mind simply to grind, to find no obstacle too difficult to overcome, I am that girl. Miss Forester suggests that I should try for the great scholarship in June. I mean to try."

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"Well, I wish you success," said Molly; "you are clever enough for anything. Now, then, do read the letter; those boys will be back in no time."

Cecil took it out of her pocket; she opened it, drew a little closer to Molly, and began to read aloud:

"MY DEAR CECIL:

"I wish to consult you and Molly about your friend Kate. I know, in doing so, that you will regard every word I say as absolutely sacred, and not breathe the contents of this letter to any of your companions. You know that poor dear Kate O'Connor has lost her little money; you also know that at the present moment she is quite unaware of the sad fact that she is practically penniless. Having regard to her peculiar temperament, to a certain pride which in many ways is scarcely wrong, and which she inherits, doubtless, from her Irish ancestors, I am inclined to believe that the wisest course to pursue would be to keep her in ignorance of the calamity which has fallen upon her. The other day I had the pleasure of a long interview with a great friend of mine, a Mrs. Percival. She is very rich, and has often given large donations toward the expenses here. I told her Kate's story, and she suggested the scheme which I now write to you about. It is simply this, that Kate is not to be told that her money is gone, and that Mrs. Percival will pay her fees here, and allow her sufficient money to dress properly, and also for minor expenses. Fortunately, Kate's little money in London has always been paid into my bank, and I can still provide her with funds without arousing her suspicion in any way. Hers is a very peculiar temperament; she has many of the attributes of genius, but

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I doubt if she has the capacity, or even mental power, for a sustained strain of hard work.

"I regard you, Cecil, and Kate O'Connor, as quite the cleverest girls at present at St. Dorothy's; but, although you are both undoubtedly brilliant, you are essentially different; you have got the capacity for work. If you avail yourself of the privileges which are now accorded to you, you can acquire knowledge to a great extent, and use that knowledge very brilliantly in the future. Kate, on the other hand, has a more delicate organism; hers are more the gifts of fancy. She is endowed with imagination of a high order; she is intellectual without being logical. In the future, it is possible that she may earn her bread by writing; she may either take up fiction or some other branch of literature. If she avails herself of the advantages of this school, she will do her work in the future, whatever it is, well—even brilliantly; but I do not think she will ever be profound in argument or very deep in thought. Be that as it may, she is sufficiently above the common to have an assured future, if nothing happens to wreck her prospects at the present juncture. Her accident has weakened her, and her working-powers will not return to their old strength for a year, or even two years. To shock her pride and hurt her now might injure her fatally. I am inclined, therefore, although it is contrary to my usual rule, to act on Mrs. Percival's advice, to allow her to assist Kate without telling Kate anything about it. When that part of her education which can be conducted at Redgarth is over, she will be strong enough and brave enough to learn the truth. I will then propose to her a scheme by which she can pay Mrs. Percival back the debt which she will owe her. You two girls are Kate's greatest friends, and I honor your friendship for her and one another sufficiently to consult you on this point. I shall be glad to get your unreserved opinions. Write to me to my London address, which heads this paper.

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"Yours, with affection,  
"JANET FORESTER."

"What do you think of it?" said Cecil, when she had finished reading.

"There is only one thing to think," answered Molly. "Miss Forester's scheme must be carried out. There can be no second opinion, surely, on that point. All through these happy days, when I have looked at Kate, and listened to her merry laugh, and seen the health coming back to her cheeks and brightness to her eyes, I could never forget the shock which was awaiting her. Now, that shock need never come. Oh, what a good, splendid woman Miss Forester is!"

"Nearly as good as your grandmother, Molly," replied Cecil.

"I meant to apply to grannie as a *dernier ressort*," said Molly; "but this is much better. Of course, Cecil, you and I have only one thing to say—we think the scheme first-rate. Let us write to Miss Forester in time to catch the mail for London."

"The snow is nearly over; we may as well go back now," said Cecil. "We need not wait for Maurice. But oh, there he is—and how fast he is running! What can be the matter?"

"I say, girls, what do you think?" exclaimed Maurice, rushing up to the two as he spoke, and laughing heartily. "I found that charming Irish Kitty *tête-à-tête* with Mr. Danvers. There was the old boy, with his hair redder than I have ever seen it, pushed up like a brush from his forehead, his eyes sparkling, his glasses stuck awry on his nose, gesticulating and arguing and scolding Kate O'Connor at the top of his voice. He said that she was a disgrace to any English school; that no boy of ordinary capacities would construe so shamefully; that her quantities were false, her accent vile; that, in short, as a lad of spirit, she ought to give up murdering poor Homer in the future. And there stood Kate in front of him, arguing also, and defending herself. You never heard such a noise as the two were making in all your life. We four lads burst in on the scene, and the fact of our presence woke Mr. Danvers up. He got out of the room somehow, without so much as looking at Kate. When he reached the street, he mopped his forehead and said to me: 'Tell me, Maurice,—for really, in the confusion of the moment, and the cruelty of seeing one of the finest passages in Homer absolutely riddled through with errors, I can't be certain of what I said,—but did I speak to that young person as if she were a boy?'"

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"You certainly did, sir," I replied.

"Merciful Heavens!" he answered; "I have a respect for ladies. I respect them *in the distance*. It is unworthy and ungentlemanly of any man to be rude to a lady; but when a woman puts herself out of her place, when she wounds a scholar, even a humble scholar, in his tenderest sensibilities — Maurice; my lad, the air of this place is not what it was. I doubt that St. Jude's will agree with me. Can you get me a time-table?"

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"Nothing of the kind," I answered. "You've come here now, and you shall stay. There's another girl of our party,—Iphigenia, you'll compare her to,—she shall read a passage of Homer translated into better and purer English than any fellow at Hazlewick could attempt. Now, look here, sir; you've come and you must stay! Jimmy and Charlie and Teddy, come along here this minute!"

"I got them to surround him, Cecil," continued Maurice; "so there is no fear of his escaping; and now do hurry home."

They all set off at a quick pace, and Matilda, icy cold, was able to creep out of her hiding-place. She was very white when she did so, and was trembling a good bit. She had had a narrow escape of a very unpleasant adventure, and at first all her feelings were simply those of congratulation. After a time, however, as her frozen blood began to circulate once more in her veins, other thoughts came to visit her.

"So Kate is not to know," she said to herself. "Kate is to be educated on charity. The peasant girl, who is truly now a pauper, and whom I cordially hate, is to receive the bounty of a complete stranger, and to know nothing about it. Perhaps I can put a spoke into that delightful little arrangement. I must work cautiously. I hate Kate, I hate Cecil! I have no special love for Molly; my turn has come, I fancy, to pay off some old scores."

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Matilda hurried back to the house. She crept softly upstairs, reached her bedroom without anyone seeing her, and came down to early dinner looking subdued and dull.

"Did you enjoy your walk?" asked Kate, as she helped her to some soup.

"It was so cold that I did not care to go out," said Matilda, without a moment's hesitation.

"And did you really spend the last couple of hours in your room! You must be simply frozen."

"I did not wish to disturb you and Mr. Danvers," said Matilda, with one of her sly looks.

Kate burst into a fit of laughter.

"Oh, my dears," she said, turning to the rest of the party, "I never had such a completely jolly time in the whole course of my life; the awful way that little man did rate me! 'You are a young scoundrel, sir!' he said. 'How dare you profane your lips with the words of the greatest scholar, the most magnificent intellect of all time, when your gross ignorance——' Oh, but I need not go on, I was annihilated, simply annihilated, and I could not stop him. He kept on glaring at me, and assuring me that I was worthy of being expelled from any boys' school in the kingdom. It was a relief when Maurice came in. But oh, how funny he was, and how thoroughly I like him, notwithstanding the fact that I never was so scolded before in the whole course of my life!"

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## CHAPTER XXIII.

### A LOST LETTER.

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**I**T is a trite saying that the powers of evil help those who are on their side. That night, by a misadventure, Cecil dropped the letter which Miss Forester had written to her. By a more cruel misadventure Matilda picked it up. Cecil and Molly had both written to Miss Forester; their letters had reached the post in time to catch the London mail. Their minds were quite light and happy on the subject. To make all safe, Cecil intended to destroy Miss Forester's letter before she went to bed that night. Kate's bedroom was on the drawing-room floor, but Matilda, Molly, and Cecil slept on the floor above. Cecil carried her portfolio under her arm; it was packed with letters, slips of paper, and small documents of all kind. Miss Forester's letter, among others, had been crowded into this overfull receptacle; it slipped out, no one knew how. Quick as thought, Matilda put her foot on it. Cecil did not notice the circumstance. Matilda slipped the letter into her pocket, reached her bedroom, and danced about.

"Now I have it," she said to herself; "now I am safe; no one can accuse me now of having eavesdropped. I am safe; I know exactly what to do in the future."

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She went to bed, hugging the precious letter in her hand; she slept with it under her pillow, put it away in a locked drawer early the next morning, and came down to breakfast in high spirits. When she entered the room, she heard Cecil mentioning the fact that she missed a letter.

"I must have dropped it last night," she said. "I have searched everywhere for it."

"Whose letter is it?" asked Molly, looking up innocently.

"It is one Miss Forester wrote to me."

"Oh, have you heard from Miss Forester?" inquired Kate. "Is there any news? Did she say anything about me?"

"She hopes you are getting better," said Cecil calmly. "She is very anxious that we should work specially hard next term."

"I hope she will allow me to work," said Kate. "I am sure I long for it with all my heart and soul. After what Mr. Danvers said yesterday, I suppose I ought to give up classics."

"Nothing of the kind," interrupted Maurice. "Cecil, will you give me a cup of coffee? Old Danvers scolds everyone about their classics," he continued. "He is the best loved and most feared master in the whole of our school. He is a splendid chap; but Homer is his red rag; he worships Homer to such an extent that it is like touching a raw spot if, in translating the old Greek hero, you make the slightest mistake. Danvers is a wonderful linguist. By the way, do you know Irish, Kate?"

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"A little," replied Kate.

"Well, you talk to him about the Celts, if ever you have an opportunity; just open out to him on the subjects you do know a lot about. He'll forget that you are a girl in less than three minutes, and then he'll become perfectly delightful. Cecil, what in the world are you frowning about?"

"I am fretting about my letter," said Cecil. "I can't imagine where it has got to. Did you happen to see it, Matilda?"

"I saw you carrying up a lot of letters last night," said Matilda.

"Oh, yes, to be sure, and you were just behind me. I didn't drop a letter by any chance, did I?"

"Not that I know of," replied Matilda calmly.

"Well, you certainly would have seen it if I had."

"I probably should. Will you pass me the toast, Molly; and the marmalade, Jimmy? You might have dropped it without my seeing it, of course, Cecil. If I had seen it, I'd have naturally given it back to you."

"Yes, of course you would. Well, I must have a good search for it."

"You know you tore up a lot of letters, and put them in the waste-paper basket," said Molly.

"Yes, but not Miss Forester's. I thought I'd read that once again before I consigned it to the flames." [304]

"We'll have a good search for it after breakfast," said Molly.

They did; they all joined in the search; even Kate, who was never to know the contents of that important letter; even Matilda, who knew exactly where she could put her hand on it. But, search high and low, inquire as they would, they could not find it, and finally Cecil had to yield to Molly's oft-repeated idea that she had, without knowing it, burnt it, with a lot of other waste paper, the night before.

"I suppose I did," said Cecil, with a sigh. "It seems the only solution of the mystery, but I never knew that I was subject to such a complete lapse of memory."

"Well, come out now, and let us forget all about it," said Maurice. "The day is sunshine itself, and we can go for a real good long walk, and I'll get Danvers to follow us. We'll make for those caves where the skeletons are. Danvers is mad on the subject of skeletons. We'll all meet there, and I'll undertake that, after five minutes' time, he'll absolutely forget that there are any girls in the party."

"Kitty you must come out to-day," said Cecil. "You are not even to look at that blessed Homer of yours; you must spend the entire day until dark in the open air."

"I am more than willing," replied Kate, with a laugh.

"Are you coming, Matty?" asked Molly. [305]

"I suppose I had better; can't we go into the town, though? I don't care a bit for caves nor skeletons. I shall probably dream of the skeletons to-night."

"Minority must yield to majority," said Kate, with a laughing glance at Matilda.

Matilda colored.

"You shall pay for this, my beauty," she said, under her breath. "All right," she remarked, in a gentle tone, aloud. "I had better go and get ready then."

She slipped out of the room as she spoke.

"How mild and good she is getting!" said Kate, with a laugh.

"Too good," interrupted Cecil. "When that sort of girl turns good, one has to look out for storms."

"You'd better set me on her," said Jimmy.

"For shame!" cried Molly. "I think it is mean to doubt anyone when they are trying to behave properly. Matilda has certainly not been nearly so troublesome as we expected; for my part, I don't mind her being here a bit."

"Do just see if Molly's wings are sprouting, Jimmy," cried Kate.

The whole party started off soon for their walk to the caves. They had gone about a mile when Matilda declared that her feet hurt her, that her chilblains were worse than ever, and that she wished to go home. As none of the others particularly valued her society, she was allowed to depart without any strenuous opposition. She soon reached her room, took out Miss Forester's letter, and read it, for the third or fourth time, with a feeling of keen satisfaction. Before she had read the letter she had been in possession of its most salient facts; now her one object was to convey the news which she had acquired to Kate. Her difficulty lay in the fact that if she breathed a syllable of what she knew, she would be immediately accused of having again stooped to the [306]

petty crime of eavesdropping. Kate must certainly learn the contents of the letter, but in such a way that Matilda should not appear at all in the matter.

"Kate must find the letter," thought Matilda, as she sat with it on her lap, and put her brains in soak, as she expressed it. "Kate must not only find the letter, but she must find it in such a way, and under such circumstances, that she will be tempted to read the contents. Now, if I know Kate O'Connor aright, she is one of those dreadfully scrupulous, honorable people who would not read another person's letter for the world. If she finds the letter lying snug and neat in its envelope she will never glance at it; she will return it to Cecil, and all my little endeavors for her enlightenment on a certain important subject will be thrown away. Kate must not only find the letter, but she must read it. Now, how shall I manage?"

Matilda thought and thought; the riddle she had to solve was a somewhat difficult one. How was she to put the letter in Kate's way? and how was she to induce Kate to read it when she found it? After careful thought, a scheme occurred to her on which she resolved to act. Molly Lavender was under the impression that the lost letter had really been destroyed the night before by Cecil. Matilda determined to follow up this idea. The letter, when found, should be torn and slightly burned; the inscription should be gone; but the most salient point, the words which specially alluded to Kate, should stand out in startling distinctness. Kate should find the charred letter, should pick it up; the hastily divided parts could easily be put together. Matilda should come into the room at the critical moment, see the letter, pounce upon it, and read aloud some of the most startling sentences before Kate could stop her. The wicked girl laid her plans with care; she took the envelope off Miss Forester's letter and burned it. She tore the letter then into three parts, slightly singed the edges with a lighted candle, and slipped them under the fender in the drawing room. Her intention was to push the fender aside and disclose the letter when only Kate was in the room. Having laid her little bombshell with extreme care, she became cheerful and happy. By the time the others had returned she was dressed in her most becoming frock, and danced out to meet them in high good-humor.

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"Well, I hope you have had a jolly day," she said. "Do let us have charades or something lively to-night. I have been as dull as ditch-water all the afternoon; but if we have a gay evening, I shall go to bed feeling well and jolly. Let us have charades after tea; they will help to pass the long evening."

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"A capital idea," said Maurice, "and Mr. Danvers acts splendidly. What do you say, Cecil? shall we get up something?"

"I am quite agreeable," said Cecil; "but who will act?"

"I will if you like," said Molly.

"And I won't," said Kate. "I have walked too much, and my head aches."

"We had better divide ourselves into two parties," said Matilda, "one to look on and the other to act; then each will have a turn at both sides of the game. Oh, come, Kate, you must act when it is your party's turn."

The young people all sat together, and arranged their plans for the evening, while Maurice ran off to beg Mr. Danvers not to fail them. As the little man had absolutely forgotten that he had not spent the entire day with a party of schoolboys, he willingly agreed, and came in just after the supper was cleared away.

"Kate's room must act as the greenroom," exclaimed Cecil; "it opens into the drawing room, and will do splendidly. We must do without curtains or anything of that sort."

The hastily got up charades were acted with much spirit. At last there came the moment which Matilda had anxiously planned and watched for, when she and Kate found themselves alone in the drawing room.

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"How dull the fire is!" said Matilda, going to the hearth. "Oh, I know! the bottom of the grate is choked up with ashes. I'll clear them out."

"No, don't!" said Kate; "it will make such a dust."

"I must clear the grate," exclaimed Matilda, "or we shall all perish with cold. Help me, Kate; just pull that fender aside. I want to make the hearth look tidy."

Kate did so, and the burned letter appeared in view. She knew Miss Forester's writing, and her color changed.

"Why, there's the letter which Cecil has missed!" she cried. "It was burned, but not wholly. Just let me throw it into the flames."

"Hurrah, Miss Forester's letter!" cried Matilda. "Oh, I say! it's all about you, Kate O'Connor. Here, see what she says:

"I, of course, trust you girls not to say a word about this scheme to Kate; she must on no account know that she is penniless. Mrs. Percival will pay all her school fees, and when she has passed creditably through Redgarth, I will then myself acquaint her with the truth. For all reasons I think it wisest to keep the knowledge from her at the present moment."

"Don't read any more," said Kate; her face was like a sheet.

Matilda glanced at her with wide open, innocent eyes.

"Throw that letter into the fire," said Kate; "you had no right to read it to me. Throw it in; be quick! Why don't you do what you are told?"

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"Yes, of course," said Matilda; "but *how* queer! So you are to be a charity girl, after all."

"Hush," said Kate; "hush!"

She snatched the letter from Matilda's hands, and flung it into the blaze; the flames licked it up quickly; the writing disappeared, and Kate turned round with a ready laugh and roses on her cheeks to greet the young actors who at that moment bustled into the room.

"Does she really mind, after all?" thought Matilda to herself, as she watched her.

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## CHAPTER XXIV. GOD'S WILL AND KATE'S WILL.

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THE next day the weather completely changed; the wind came from the southwest, the rain poured in torrents. The great cold had gone, but the fierce gale grew fiercer hour by hour. The girls and boys appeared in the breakfast room with blank, disappointed faces.

"What are we to do with ourselves all day?" said Molly.

"I am glad I have my novel," muttered Matilda.

"For my part, I wish the holidays had come to an end," said Cecil. "I am wild to get to work again. What do you say, Kate? Suppose we do a little work this morning. I can help you with your Homer, if you like."

"No, thanks," answered Kate; "I am not in the humor to work."

"Have you a headache?" asked Cecil, looking at her anxiously.

"No, I'm all right; but I don't care to work."

She went to the window and drummed her fingers against one of the panes of glass as she spoke.

"Aren't you coming, Kitty?" called Molly, in her pleasant voice.

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Kate turned slowly and seated herself at the breakfast-table. Her face was very white, and there were black shadows round her eyes.

"I say, Kitty, you don't look a bit like yourself," said Jimmy, giving her one of his particularly keen glances.

"I am really quite well," answered Kate; "I mean to go out for a long walk after breakfast."

"What, in this rain?" exclaimed all the others.

"You forget that an Irish girl never fears the rain."

"It does rain always in Ireland, doesn't it?" asked Charlie, in an impertinent voice.

"Always, except when it is fine," replied Kate calmly. "Pass me the toast, please, Jimmy. Yes, I am going out. I enjoy walking in the rain; I love, beyond all things, watching a great gale of wind."

"Well, I won't go with you," said Cecil.

"I will," said Maurice, "if I may."

"No, thanks, Maurice; don't think me disobliging, but I would really rather go alone," said Kate.

She ran into her room, and presently returned in her waterproof cloak and hat.

"If I am not in to dinner, don't wait for me," she said to the others.

As she was running downstairs, she met Matilda.

"I wouldn't fret if I were you," said Matilda, glancing at her.

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"What do you mean?" said Kate, pulling herself up short.

"Why," continued Matilda, "if you are a charity girl, you also are—— I have been thinking it over all night, and I have made up mind that I won't tell; that is, if you will make it worth my while."

"What do you mean?" asked Kate.

"Why, this," said Matilda; "I notice that you have great influence in the school. I can't

understand it; no one seems to mind your low origin a bit; they seem rather to like you for having been a peasant girl. Well, now, if you will chum with me, and appear as if you enjoyed my society, other people will perhaps think me worth cultivating. If you approach me in a friendly spirit next term, and talk of me as your friend, why, I'll keep your secret. There! is it a bargain!"

"You can tell every single person in the school what you know about me," said Kate. "That's my only answer. Now, let me go."

She pushed Matilda aside almost roughly, and ran downstairs. A moment later she was in the little street. The gale caught her waterproof cloak, and swept her dress round her legs; it played hide and seek with her hat, and dashed great drops of rain into her eyes; as to her umbrella, she could not hold it up for two minutes. Walking up the street, she had to encounter the full blast of the gale. She, struggled on bravely, glad of the physical exertion which made her forget a very real pain in her breast. [314]

"Now, where are you off to, you young scoundrel?" said a voice in her ear.

She looked up to encounter the keen blue eyes of Mr. Danvers.

"I forgot; I beg your pardon!" said the master, turning red. "I really thought for a moment that you were Jimmy. But what are you out for? this is no day for women to be abroad."

"I like being out in the rain and wet," said Kate.

"Well, don't go too near the shore; it positively isn't safe."

Kate laughed in reply.

"I am accustomed to watching the sea in a gale," she answered.

She hurried off.

"What is the matter with that girl?" thought the schoolmaster to himself; "she has a queer look in her eyes. She is a fine girl; yes, I'd consider her a fine specimen of young woman-hood if she didn't murder Homer in the way she does; but something has put her out. What is the matter with her?"

Kate, meanwhile, continued her stormy walk. By and by she reached the shore; the tide was out at present, but it was just beginning to turn. A wide expanse of wet sand and low-lying rocks lay to her left; to her right rose the high cliffs for which the place was famous. Kate hesitated for a moment which way to turn. At last she determined to go straight to the caves; the tide was well out, and there was not the slightest danger. She could go as far as one of the caves, take shelter there, watch the gale without being blown away herself, and think out the question which was tearing her proud heart to pieces. [315]

To reach the caves she had to walk with the wind full in her face; the temptation, therefore, to go the other way and be blown along by the fierce gale was overpowering for a moment or two; she determined to resist it, and made for the caves. To reach them she had to walk a good deal over a mile. These caves could only be reached quite at low water, and the way to them lay on the soft, yielding sand. Kate found, as she struggled along, that she was by no means so strong as she used to be when she had lived in the cottage at home. In those happy days she had never known fatigue. To fight with nature, as she was now doing, only brought out her splendid physical powers; she rejoiced in the old days in conquering wind and weather. Her dangerous illness had weakened her far more than she had any idea of, and her legs trembled as she hurried forward. She was so spent when she reached the first cave that she literally could not walk another yard; she entered it, and sat down to rest. Out of the gale she had suddenly entered into a perfect haven of calm. The cave was a deep one; it went back far into the rock. At its farthest extremity was a shelf, on which lay two skeletons in a fair state of preservation. These skeletons had been found in the clay some years ago, and were left undisturbed in their resting place; the angry sea often nearly touched them, but not quite. At high tide, the rest of the cave was generally under water, but the sea had never yet been known to reach the spot where the skeletons of a woman and child, who may have died thousands of years ago, were still in a state of preservation. People from far and near used to come to see these relics of the past, but Kate had never visited the caves before. She sat now in the entrance, drawing a big stone forward and making a temporary seat of it. From here she could watch the angry sea, and even take pleasure in the wild sight which met her eyes. She was too tired at first even to think, but after a time she became more rested. She took off her hat, arranged her storm-tossed hair, twisted it up afresh, and drew it out of her eyes. She held her hat in her lap—it was soaked through; the rain had even penetrated her waterproof cloak; her stockings and shoes were sopping. [316]

"I have got to fight a devil," she said suddenly aloud. "There is a demon here,"—pressing her hand to her breast,—"and he must be conquered, or he'll conquer me. I shall fight him here in this cave, and either he or I must die in the encounter. If he wins the victory, the noble part of me will have died, and I shall go straight to Redgarth and tell Miss Forester that I can't—I never will—accept her charity. If he dies, why, then, *then*, I shall return to the lodgings to-day, to the society of Molly and Cecil and the boys, a broken-hearted girl. Oh, I know beforehand that I shall not conquer in this fight. But here, alone with nature, the thing must be reasoned out. Now, then, to begin." [317]

Kate clasped her hands round her knees and looked straight out at the angry sea; the waves

were already mountains high; the spray was dashing straight into the cave and wetting her face; the tide had well turned now, and the sea was coming up in splendor. Kate never thought of this. It would take a very long time before the tide reached the cave, and meanwhile she had her battle to fight. There were few girls prouder than Kate O'Connor. Her pride had a great many noble elements in it; it scorned deceit and humbug of all kinds. She was not a scrap ashamed of those things which smaller-minded girls would have tried to conceal, would have smuggled out of sight, and buried deep in their own hearts.

The fact that her grandfather was poor, that her own early life had been spent in a small cottage by the sea, that she had not been waited on by servants, nor worn fine clothes, nor done the ordinary things of the ordinary young lady, never caused her a moment's regret. When she arrived at school she did not speak of her early life, not because she feared to do so, but because she did not consider one of her companions worthy to know the story of the beloved old grandfather, and the grand poem which he had lived. Kate's grandfather had been religious in the highest sense of the word; he had lived very simply, and according to the golden rule—he had done to others as he would wish others to do to him; he had thought well of his fellow-man; an unkind and uncharitable sentence had never been heard to pass his lips.

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Kate had tried to live up to his standards but whereas his religion had been tested in the fire of a long life and many cruel circumstances which his grandchild knew nothing about, hers was simply the result of training, and had never been tested at all. He had taught her a good deal, and although she had never learned according to modern ideas, she was in many respects a very well-informed girl. Her imagination was of the highest order; there was a strong dash of mysticism and idealism in her character. In this prosaic world, she herself was a living embodiment of old romance; she delighted in poetry, in nature; there was not a scrap of the worldly spirit about her, but for all that she was proud. To eat the bread of charity would be indeed gall and wormwood to her. She thought, as she sat now in the mouth of the cave and looked out on the splendid scene which lay before her eyes, that she would rather be the poorest servant in a farmhouse at home than stoop to this.

"I can't do it!" she murmured; "it isn't in me. Grandfather left me money, not much, but enough to have me properly educated. I can't stoop to this. Miss Forester means well, but she doesn't know me—or, yes, she does know me; she knows that I, Kate O'Connor, poor, proud, peasant girl that I am, would never consent to this scheme; therefore she tries to hide it from me. It is good of her, and yet it is not good. It was Providence who put that letter in my way. Oh, it was shown to me in an ugly manner! Fancy my reading a letter which was not meant for me! But I didn't read it; Matilda read it aloud to me. How I detest Matilda! But if I stoop to this thing—if I consent to become a charity girl—I shall think myself almost at her level. No, I shall refuse. I'll go back to Redgarth to-morrow; I will tell Miss Forester the simple truth. Perhaps I know enough now to try and get a situation as nursery-governess to little children. Anyhow, I can make an effort in that direction. Oh, my dreams, my aspirations! I thought to do so much, and perhaps some day to write something lovely, and to make a name for myself and for the dear old man who would have been proud of me, were he alive. No, I can't accept charity. I'm sure grandfather would say I was right."

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Kate paused here. In the midst of her wild thoughts she remembered a certain evening when she and the old man had been seated together, and she had read aloud out of the Book of Books to him.

"Better is he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city," she had read. She was a child at the time; she did not understand the words.

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"What does that mean, grandad?" she had said.

"It means that God loves the true conqueror, child," he answered. "It is the greatest thing in all the world for a man to rule his own spirit—so to rule it that God's will may be his will."

"I think I know," she had answered vaguely.

She ran away then to feed her chickens, and that ended the matter; but the verse returned to her to-day.

"If to rule my spirit is to be willing to eat the bread of charity—if that is God's will, then it can never be mine," she said to herself.

A volume of spray dashed on her face and half-blinded her. She rose, stretched herself, put on her hat, and prepared to return to the lodgings.

"I shall go to Redgarth to-morrow morning," she said to herself. "I suppose I am conquered, but I can't help myself. I never, never will eat the bread of charity!"

She left the cave, and turned her face homeward. She walked a dozen steps, then she stood still. How long had she been in the cave? What had happened? Surely the tide had come up very fast. That long stretch of beach with the headland at the farther end seemed, somehow, wonderfully shortened.

"Impossible"—said Kate, with a thrill of horror in her voice—"impossible that the water can already have reached the headland. Oh, no! I am deceived by the distance, but I see that I have no time to lose. I must run, or I shall be shut in by the tide."

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She ran fast, and the wind, which was now at her back, helped her. She was a very swift runner, and, notwithstanding the yielding nature of the sands, she made rapid progress. With panting breath and hair flying wildly under her hat, she soon came up to the promontory which she had to round in order to reach a place of safety. At ten yards distant she stood still, clasping her hands. She did not yet realize the danger of her own position. Her eyes sparkled, and she almost laughed at the majestic beauty of the scene. The angry waves had already reached the headland, and were dashing with bursts of magnificent spray over the sharp rocks.

"I never, even in Ireland, saw such waves," said Kate to herself. "How glorious! Oh, that I could write about them! They fill my heart; such beauty as this *quite* satisfies me."

Then a thought, cold and dreadful, stole over her delight.

"The way home is completely shut away!" she cried.

The thought first stole into her brain, then it crept down, down, until it reached her heart.

"Have I got to die here? Am I to be drowned?" she said to herself. "I am only seventeen, and I am full of life. Oh, is this the way out of my dilemma? And I don't want to die. I am not a coward, no; but I don't want to die, slowly and fearfully, and all alone, and with this awful noise in my ears. To die by drowning means suffocation. No, I don't want to die." [322]

There was not a creature in sight. The towering cliffs rose between her and safety. They were rugged and straight, and impossible to climb. The belt of sand on which she stood was each moment getting narrower and narrower. She made a careful calculation: at the present rate of the in-coming tide, she had probably about an hour and a half to live.

"I must go back to the cave," she said to herself. "Perhaps, if I climb up on that ledge where the skeletons are, I may find myself above high-water mark. But I know the signs; I have not lived close to the Atlantic all my life for nothing. There will be a specially high tide to-day."

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## CHAPTER XXV.

### THE HEART OF THE GALE.

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**W**HEN Matilda parted from Kate she went up to her own room and stood by the window. She saw Kate leave the house and walk down the High Street. She noticed how she battled with the gale; she observed her when she paused to speak for a moment to Mr. Danvers. Their conversation was short. Kate continued her walk, and Mr. Danvers came toward the house. Matilda went then and stood opposite to her looking-glass. She was a plain girl, but she was fond of looking at her reflection in the glass. She looked at it now with a sort of satisfaction.

"Yes, I am plain," she said aloud. "I must admit, in the solitude of my room, that I have not a good feature in my face. Kate is handsome; Kate has got all that beauty about her appearance which been denied to me. It will be an interesting problem to see who will make the best out of life—Kate, the pauper, the charity girl, or I, who have more money than I know what to do with, but who am not possessed of beauty, nor of any special talent. I believe I see my way now to having a good time at Redgarth. Of course Kate won't dare to be anything but my friend now, for if she does I shall hold this knowledge over her. Yes, I think I contrived cleverly. I did nothing wrong. Oh, of course not! I could not help overhearing what Cecil and Molly said, and when Cecil dropped the letter at my feet, I should have been more than human if I had not picked it up. After all, it would have been wicked to conceal this matter from Kate. Poor Kate! how wild she looked when she went out! Oh, yes, my beautiful Kate, *I* know how to sting you! For all your false humility you are about the proudest girl I know. You proud! what right have you to be proud? Oh, I shall love to humble you! You have got neither birth nor money. There are some tolerably poor people who are well born; I can respect them—they have ancestors. I'd give anything in all the world to have ancestors; but Kate has nothing—nothing but her face, and her slim figure, and something which people call talent, in the back of her head. All right, Kate! you shall eat humble pie now." [324]

Matilda ran downstairs to the sitting room. Cecil was bending over a book. Molly was darning some holes in Maurice's stockings; she delighted in helping Cecil with this work. Mr. Danvers was standing by the window looking out at the street, and the four boys were occupying themselves in various ways in different parts of the room. After a time, Mr. Danvers turned slowly round and faced the other occupants of the room.

"That is a fine creature," he said; "whether boy or girl. I repeat that the creature is fine. I don't often pay compliments to the softer sex, but I like that Irish girl. Now, can anyone in this room tell me what is the matter with her?" [325]

Cecil flung down her book, Molly stopped darning, and all the pairs of eyes were fixed on Mr. Danvers.

"Are you talking about Kitty?" asked Charlie.

"Yes, boy, I am," replied Mr. Danvers. "I am talking about the individual whom you all call



Kate. A fine unworldly creature, with a dash of poetry about her. I believe I could even teach her to respect Homer, if I had her under my sway for a spell. But what's the matter with her?"

"We didn't know there was anything the matter," said Cecil. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, why isn't she in this room instead of being drowned in an awful gale of this kind?"

"Oh, weather is a matter of indifference to Kate!" answered Molly. "She is Irish, you know. I think she was quite delighted at the thought of going down to see the sea in a storm."

"Well, I hope she'll come back soon," remarked Mr. Danvers. "It isn't safe for a girl to be out in an awful gale of this kind, particularly a girl with the look in her eyes which she wore when I met her this morning."

"What sort of look?" asked Cecil, rising from her seat and coming up to the little man. [326]

"A reckless, defiant, wretched look, which a young thing ought never to wear," he replied. "I am going out now to look for her. It isn't often I see a woman worth putting myself out about, but she's one. You can come with me, Maurice, if you like."

"Yes, sir, with pleasure," replied Maurice.

"And I," "And I," "And I!" cried the three other boys. "You can't keep us back, Cecil; we mean to go."

Cecil did not reply.

"Now that the men of the party have made themselves scarce, perhaps we can read," she said.

She resumed her book placidly; she was evidently not in the least anxious about Kate. Molly leaned back on her sofa and took up her darning. Matilda went to the window. It was strange that Matilda should be the only one of the three girls who felt the least bit uncomfortable, but such was the case. She, too, had seen that startled, defiant look in Kate's dark eyes. Perhaps there was danger down by the shore. Certainly the gale was an awful one. How the wind did shriek and scream! How the rain rattled against the window panes!

"Of course I can't pretend to care for her," said Matilda to herself, "but I shall be a little more comfortable when she comes home. I should not like her to be knocked down or hurt in any way; I should feel that I had done it. Oh, nonsense! what in the world am I thinking about? That *I* had done it? What have I to do with it? All the same, I'll be glad when she comes back. Mr. Danvers said she looked in trouble; well, yes, she did." [327]

"Matilda, won't you sit down?" said Molly; "you do fidget so by the window."

"I can't help fidgeting," said Matilda; "there's such an awful gale on. Say, you two girls, won't you be pleased when Kate comes back?"

"Of course," said Cecil, looking up with an expression of surprise; "but I didn't know that you cared."

"You think I care for nothing," said Matilda; "you have a hateful opinion of me."

"Sit down, Matty," said Molly, in a kind voice. "Here's a cozy seat on the sofa, and here is your novel, nice and handy."

"I can't read," said Matilda; "I am frightened. I never heard such wind, and how dark it is getting! What an awful day! I certainly do hate the seaside in winter."

"No one asked you to come," said Cecil. "If you won't read, perhaps you will stop talking. Molly, I think I'll get Mr. Danvers to go over this passage with me; I can't quite get at the meaning of it. Do you think he will mind?"

"No, of course he won't; he'll love to help you," said Molly.

"There's a flash of lightning," exclaimed Matilda, covering her face with, her hands. "Oh, how vivid! oh, I'm terrified of lightning! What a clap of thunder! it almost shook the house. Girls, it isn't safe for Kate to be out in this storm, is it?" [328]

Another flash of lightning came, even more blinding than the first. Matilda crouched and shivered. Cecil and Molly put down their different occupations and walked to the windows.

"I do wish they were all in," said Cecil. "It certainly is an awful day."

"Well, here they are, they're coming," said Molly. "Don't you see Jimmy, how he rushes down the street? and that's Charlie with him, and there's Ted in the background."

A moment later the three younger boys dashed into the room.

"I say, you girls," cried Jimmy, "there's something awful up! Oh, we don't know what it is! but Kate can't be found anywhere, and Mr. Danvers and Maurice have gone on to the coastguard station to get some of the coastguards to help to look for her. There is an awful gale down by the shore, and the tide will be several feet higher than usual to-night, and she's nowhere to be seen."

"I knew it!" cried Matilda; "I knew it, and it is my fault!"

She fell down in a heap on the floor, and lay there, with her face hidden.

The girls and the three boys, who were dripping wet, stood and stared at her.

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"Do speak!" said Cecil, catching Jimmy by the shoulders and turning him toward her. "Let Matilda alone. What did you say about Kate?"

"That—that no one can find her. She's nowhere along the shore," said Jimmy.

"But why should she be there at all?"

"She was there. An old fisherman saw her; he saw her more than two hours ago. She was going toward the caves where the skeletons are."

"Well," said Cecil, "well, speak! What is it, Jimmy? What is the matter? You look—terrified."

"I am," said Jimmy; "I can't help it. It takes a great deal to make a coward of me, but I am a coward now. It is *Kitty*, you know, Cecil. Cecil, they say the caves are completely covered; the others say they must be full of water now, and—and it's Kitty. If she's there, she's drowned like a rat. Oh, I'm going to help! I'll go back—I will help! Maurice and Mr. Danvers sent me back, but I *will* help to find her."

"I can't realize it," said poor Cecil, putting her hand to her forehead. "What are Maurice and Mr. Danvers doing?"

"They are going to take out a lifeboat to try and reach the caves."

"But they'll be drowned, too," said Molly.

"As if they cared for that when there's a girl to save!" said Jimmy, in a tone of withering scorn. "What are boys and men for but to save plucky girls like Kitty? Oh, I say, I wish you wouldn't make so much noise, Matilda!"

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"Do get up, Matty, and stop crying and pulling your hair about," said Molly.

Cecil did not speak, but her face was like a sheet.

"It is my fault," said Matilda; "it is my fault!"

"What in the world do you mean?"

Matilda sat up and stared round her. For the first time in her whole life she was completely natural; she absolutely forgot herself.

"I did it," she said; "I goaded her to it. She'll never come home; she'll be drowned, and I shall be haunted by her all the rest of my days."

"Stop talking in that way, and tell us the truth," said Cecil sternly. "What did you do? Speak at once! Oh, what a mistake we made in bringing you here!"

"You did; I wish I'd never come. I made her nearly mad. I don't care who knows now. Perhaps I wouldn't have been so bad if you hadn't been so cruel and spiteful."

"I?" said Cecil.

"Yes, you—you hate me so! I wouldn't have done it, perhaps, if only Molly had been here. Molly really tries to be good."

"Tell us!" said Cecil. "Stop talking about your motive. Speak—quick!"

"I heard all that Miss Forester said the other day about Kate."

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"Then you eavesdropped again?"

"Yes."

"When and where?"

"In the shelter down by the shore. I was afraid the boys would bully me, and I crept into the back part, where there was repairing going on; and I pulled a tarpaulin over me, and no one saw me. You and Molly came in, and you read Miss Forester's letter aloud. I heard everything, and I was delighted. I was glad that Kate was to be humbled, and was to be only a charity girl. You dropped the letter going upstairs. I found it and put it in my pocket. I was very anxious that Kate should know the truth."

"You are a nice specimen of humanity," said Cecil.

"Oh, do let her speak now, Cecil!" said Molly.

"I don't care who knows," said Matilda. "Oh, there's another awful flash of lightning! I'm afraid I'll be struck; I'm not a bit fit to die. Oh, yes, I'm sorry I've been such a bad girl! You can't scold me, Cecil, more than I scold myself. Oh, there's another flash! Oh, I shall certainly be struck! Isn't it safest to go down into a cellar or to get into a feather bed?"

"Do go on!" said Cecil.

"Oh, I'm terrified! Oh, I know I'm a bad girl! You can't hate me more than I hate myself. Oh, dear, do let me take off my watch, and fling the keys out of my pocket! It isn't safe in a storm to have any sort of metal about you."

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"*Will you go on?*" said Cecil.

"Yes, yes! I wanted Kate to know. You thought you had burned the letter with some other rubbish. I acted on that idea, and tore the letter in two, and burned the edges, and stuck the pieces under the fender here. Then last night I pushed the fender aside, and Kate saw the letter, and she recognized the writing, and I snatched it up and read a passage aloud before she could stop me. I read the part which told her everything. She knew her money was gone, and she was to be a charity girl. Oh, she was mad, mad, and she must have gone out to drown herself to-day! I expect she did. She's horribly proud, though you think her good. It's an awful sin on her part to be so proud. Why should she mind being a charity girl, if she is one? Oh, dear, oh, dear! another flash! That lightning will strike me dead. Oh, girls! do you think God will forgive me; do you think he will?"

"I can't speak to you," said Cecil. "I am going out."

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## CHAPTER XXVI.

### THE OPENING IN THE CLIFF.

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ECIL walked toward the door; Molly was following, when Matilda pulled her back.

"You shan't leave me," she said, flinging her arms round Molly's knees. "I won't be left alone in this awful, terrible black storm. You know how wicked I am, Molly, and that I am not fit to die. You can't—you shan't leave me! God will never forgive you if you do."

Molly hesitated for a minute; the thought of her vow in the cathedral came back to her. She longed to fly out after Cecil, but after all, she could do nothing in the fearful gale, and Matilda—wretched Matilda—really needed her presence.

"All right; I will stay with you," she said. She dropped down on the nearest chair and covered her face with her hands.

Meanwhile Cecil, having slipped on her waterproof cloak and tied a hat on her head, ran out into the gale; the boys had long ago disappeared.

Cecil was a country-bred girl, but she had never been out in such weather before. Her old waterproof cloak was not very waterproof, after all, and in the space of a few minutes she was literally wet through. The rain was running in rivers down the little street, the puddles were pools, the pools were ponds, the ponds were small lakes.

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"If this goes on, there will be a flood," thought Cecil. "How am I to get to the caves? How am I to save Kate? Oh, what awful lightning! It must be almost directly over our heads; there is not a second between the flash and the peal of thunder. Poor Kate, is she alive now? Why did she go to the cave where the skeletons are? We should have had none of this terrible trouble but for Matilda. But why did Kate feel it so much? Is Maurice's life to be sacrificed to Kate? I must find Maurice; he mustn't go in the lifeboat. No, no, he shan't! What shall I do? How am I to reach the coastguard station, in the teeth of such wind and rain as this?"

Cecil struggled on, every nerve strung to the highest tension; every faculty and force in her body stimulated to its greatest pitch to enable her to win the day in this terrible battle with the weather. She was buffeted and knocked about; her hat was torn from her head; her hair was loosened and flew wildly about her in the gale; she was so wet, too, that her heavy garments clung to her and impeded her progress. Suddenly, as she ran, a thought occurred to her. To attempt to put out to sea in such a gale as this was sheer and utter madness. Such a storm had not been known on the coast for many years. Cecil in all her life had never encountered such weather. If Mr. Danvers and Maurice really persuaded the coastguard people to launch the lifeboat, they would only cause their own death, and the death of the men who went with them.

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"I must stop them," thought Cecil. "I would do anything that human being could do to save Kate, but she can't be saved that way. I know what boys are in a moment of excitement; I know that my boys, at least, have not a scrap of fear in them. Thank God, they are not cowards! and I'd give them, yes, I would, if there were any chance of saving Kate, after all; but to know that there isn't, and then to give them up—oh, I can't do that! Stay, what have I heard? Is there not some way of reaching the caves—some way from the top of the cliff? What was that story Jimmy told us one night about a smuggler who hid treasures in the cave and hauled up his goods by the cliff? I remember the night quite well, and Jimmy's face, and how we begged and implored of him to stop talking rubbish; but perhaps there is something in it, after all. Oh, if I can only reach the coastguard station before the men have lowered the lifeboat!"

Cecil battled on desperately and bravely. For some time she obtained partial shelter by means of a high wall which guarded a certain part of the road, but to reach the coastguard station she had to cross a headland. There was not a scrap of shelter here; nothing whatever to break the

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fury of the wind, and the lashing, biting power of the rain. To add to her discomforts, it was turning bitterly cold, too; the rain was changing into sleet, the great hailstones hit Cecil's cheeks, lips, and forehead, causing her severe pain. She shut her eyes for one desperate moment, and almost gave up all hope of reaching her destination.

Suddenly the welcome sound of a human voice reached her ears.

"You'd best not go on, miss," said the voice; "the storm gets worse. Don't you venture nigh to the edge of the cliff; it aint safe."

Cecil looked up; a big, burly Jack tar was standing within an inch of her.

"I'm so glad I've met you," she said. "I *must* get to the coastguard station, without a moment's delay."

"Whatever for, miss?" said the man. "I don't believe you can," he added, "the storm's that fierce."

"I must," said Cecil; "it is a matter of life or death. There is a young lady drowning in one of the caves down by the sea, and my brother and another gentleman have gone up to the station to ask your men to lower the lifeboat."

"Whew!" said the sailor, drawing in his breath and emitting a long whistle; "those that go out to sea to-day do it with their eyes open. Why, no boat, lifeboat or not, would live in this gale half a minute, miss. Is it to help or hinder you want to reach the station? I've not been there for an hour or two. I say, miss, no lifeboat ought to put out to sea to-day."

"It is to prevent it—to prevent it," said Cecil. "It is because of my brother. I can't have him drowned. Oh, be quick! can't you help me to get to the station? He is so fearless, and——"

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"Take my arm, miss," said the sailor.

He turned without a word, pulled Cecil's hand through his arm, and, turning to face the gale, walked quickly in the direction of the coastguard station.

Cecil never remembered afterward how the end of that walk was accomplished. They reached the station just in time to see Mr. Danvers and Maurice helping two or three sailors to get the lifeboat out of its shed.

"You can't do it!" said Cecil, rushing down into their midst; "it isn't safe; it only means that several will be drowned instead of one."

"Then we must drown," said Maurice, with set teeth. "We must take our chance; it is a desperate thing, I know, but we can't stand here and do nothing, and let a girl die like a rat in a hole. I am surprised at you, Cecil!"

"Don't look at me like that, Maurice," said Cecil. "I am desperate—I don't pretend to be anything else. I'd let you go if there was any use in it, but there isn't. No boat could live in such a gale."

"You are right there, miss," said one of the coastguard men. "We couldn't refuse the gentlemen when they were so desperate earnest; but such a gale hasn't been known on the coast for the last twenty years."

"Come here, Jimmy," said Cecil suddenly. "What was that story you told us about a smuggler hiding goods in some of the caves?"

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Jimmy, whose face was blanched with terror, brightened up considerably at Cecil's words.

"What a goose I was to forget!" he said. "It is true, isn't it, Evans?" he added, going up and standing in front of one of the tall coastguard men.

"What is true, master?"

"That there's an opening at the top of the cliff, which leads right down into one of the caves—the cave where the skeletons are?"

"Well, I've never seen it, sir, but my grandfather used to speak of it. It's my belief it's closed up by now."

"Let us try and find it," said Cecil. "There is not a vestige of hope of saving Kate by the sea. Even if the lifeboat could live in such a gale, she would be dashed to pieces on the rocks by the caves. Let us go to the top of the cliff and search for the opening."

"It is a sensible thought," said Mr. Danvers. "I will go, anyhow. I hate giving up the lifeboat, but I don't believe she would live for a moment in this storm. The other idea has but a glimmer of a chance, but we may as well try it. Now, boys, start away. Evans, perhaps you will come, too, and lend a hand."

"That I will, sir, and so will my mate, Sharp."

"And I too, sir," said a coastguard man of the name of Adams.

The little party was soon under way. They held each other's hands, and in this manner were

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able to struggle against the ever-increasing storm. The coastguard men had provided themselves with coils of rope and some grappling-irons to fasten into the top of the cliff. The distance from where they now stood to the cliff over the caves was nearly a mile; but, after a fierce tussle with wind and weather, they reached the spot; and then their desperate and forlorn search for the lost opening began.

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## CHAPTER XXVII.

### ROCK OF AGES.

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MEANWHILE, Kate sat in the cave. She was all alone. In front of her raged the angry sea. She watched it at first from the entrance to the cave. Step by step, slowly but surely, she saw Death, the grim foe, advancing to meet her. Kate had been close to death a little earlier in the same year, but then she had been unconscious. If Death had really claimed her as his prey, she would have gone away into the other world knowing nothing of that last journey. In ignorance and oblivion she would have passed the boundary, and when she found herself in the Life beyond this life, she would recall no memory of the road by which she had come. To meet death by severe illness would have been in the ordinary course of nature, but the death which now awaited her was different. She was well again, and strong; she had recovered from her accident; all her feelings were alive and keen; she was young, too, and had nothing, in the ordinary sense, to do with death; it was very awful to Kate to see it coming up to her in this manner.

The very vividness of her imagination only added to the horrors which she now endured. She was about to part from life, and life at this moment became exceedingly precious to her. The thought of the real suffering which she had endured a few hours back, sitting in the entrance of this very same cave, now seemed trivial and of no account whatever. She had been a very angry and passionate and rebellious girl. She had thought her pride and independence honorable and righteous, something to hug to her heart, to cling to, whatever happened; now it seemed but a paltry sort of rag, not worth a moments thought nor a moment's pain. For the sake of it, however, she was about really to lose her life. Because she could not accept a great kindness, because she would rather turn her back on all her true friends than hear certain silly words applied to her, she was to die.

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"I was mad," thought Kate to herself. "I see the thing in its right light now. My proud heart could not brook the thing. Oh, grandfather! you used to tell me many times that I must conquer the pride which has been my undoing. I was proud of my very openness and humility; I was proud of telling the girls what I really was, but this last indignity I could not, I would not, submit to. I would not rule my spirit in this matter!

"'Better is he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city.'

"I would not rule my spirit, and now God has taken me at my word. I came out here to have a fight with my own proud heart. I know that God was whispering to me all the time not to be angry and impatient, not to throw away the chances he was giving me. He wanted me to cultivate my talents, and he showed me this way, which was hard to take, and bitter; but it was his way, and he wanted me to take it. Oh, I was mad! I refused—I gave the devil the victory, and God was angry, and now he is punishing me. God has taken me at my word. I shall never eat the bread of charity. No one will ever call me a charity girl now. God is taking away the life which I would not use as he wanted me to use it. Oh, I never thought I should fear death! How beautiful grandfather looked when he died! but he was ready, and I am not. I am young. How full of life I feel! how my heart bounds! how keen and strong my brain has got once again! but in a few minutes, perhaps an hour, it will all be over; my brain will have no more thoughts; my heart will be quiet. I shall be dead—drowned!

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"I wonder how people feel when they are drowning. I have read accounts of drowning people, and they say that, just before they go, they see all the old life, that it passes before them as a sort of vision. I wonder if grandfather knows that I shall be with him to-day. Perhaps I am not good enough to see him. I am so sorry to die. O God, is it possible that you can forgive me even yet, and let me use my life now in your way, and not my own way? Oh, I don't want to die!"

Kate crept a little farther into the cave. The great storm of nature was raging magnificently outside. Flashes of lightning were filling the cave with a lurid light from moment to moment. The thunder rolled and echoed. But Kate scarcely noticed the storm. Her whole mind, every nerve, every scrap of feeling she possessed, became soon absorbed in watching the water. She had no fear of the lightning striking her, but she dreaded the ever-rising tide inexpressibly. In a short time it reached the entrance to the cave—the next wave rolled in, washing the sandy floor. Kate started back in fear. She moved inch by inch farther and farther into the recesses of the cave; soon she was standing almost in the dark. The waves echoed with a horrible hollow sound as they entered the cave; they seemed to dance and play with one another.

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The storm of thunder and lightning was gradually dying away, but now and then a flash still lit up the cave; and cast a reflection, like momentary fire, on the crests of the rolling billows. Kate's agony and terror grew worse and worse. She found herself at last at the extreme end of the narrow cave. She climbed a shelf of rock, and took refuge where the skeletons of the long-dead

woman and child were lying in their clay bed; she felt the clay, and found it hard and dry. As a rule, therefore, the water did not reach this point. But Kate was well aware that this was a flood-tide, which, helped by the terrific gale, would reach a far higher spot than that usually gained by the waters. She clasped her hands, clung to the side of the rock, closed her eyes, and endeavored to pray.

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"I will try and be resigned," thought the poor girl to herself. "I will try not to be angry and impatient; I will try hard to turn my thoughts from the world. I deserve this punishment. God was very good to me, and I would not have his goodness; now he is taking me away. Oh, I will try to be patient, and not to be a coward! I will try to meet my death calmly. Oh, if only it were all over—the shock—the suffocation—the struggle for breath! Suppose I fling myself into the water and get it over at once. No, I won't do that; perhaps I may be able to hold on; perhaps the tide will not reach such a high point, after all, and if I stand up here, and cling tight to the rock, the water may really turn before I am drowned.

"Oh, I wish I were ready to go! I wish I had thought of the things of the other world a little more when I was well and strong. Grandad used to say so much about being ready to die. He used to say that it put everything into a right focus, and then this world never looked too big nor important, and there was no room in the heart for foolish, silly pride, nor any other merely *worldly* sins. Grandad was ready; I wish I were. Oh, it is awful to be drowned like this in the dark! I wish there was some higher shelf on the rock that I could grasp and cling to: I wish I were not so frightened. There, that is the first wave; it has touched my feet, it has washed just over the shelf where I am standing. How bitterly cold the water feels, and how strong! but the rock is stronger. I will cling to the side of the rock with both my hands. What is that hymn—'Rock of Ages'? Grandad and I used to sing it on Sunday evenings: 'Rock of Ages, cleft for me.' I will shut my eyes and try to think of the old hymn.

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"While I draw this fleeting breath,  
When mine eyelids close in death.'

"Yes; 'when mine eyelids close in death.'" It will soon be all over now. I shall see grandad, and I think, *somehow*, God will forgive me. Poor Kate! yes, grandfather used often to call me 'Poor Kate.' He said I had a stormy nature; he said he was the same when he was young, but he conquered himself. Poor Kate! I didn't conquer it, and now I am going.

"'Rock of Ages, cleft for me.' I am not so frightened since I have thought about the Rock of Ages. Yes, the water is very cold; icy cold. It is up to my knees now; how fast it is coming in! 'Rock of Ages.' I'll shut my eyes and try to think of the hymn."

"Kate!" called a voice; "Kate!"

It sounded, muffled, and from a long way off, but no clarion note from the clearest trumpet could have made a more complete revolution in all Kate O'Connor's feelings. When she heard it she roused herself on the instant from a state of stupor into one of vigorous action. She had thought herself almost in the other world, but once again now she was keen to battle for her life.

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"Kate!" called the voice. It sounded like Cecil's, only very, very far away. "Are you there? Answer me; shout up, if you are—say yes."

"Yes!" called Kate.

She was no longer weak—her voice had gone from her with a shout. Her vigorous "yes" was answered by a faint cheer, which seemed to come from miles away.

"Kate," called the same voice again, "there is a rope coming down to you—a stout rope; tie it firmly round your waist when it comes, and we'll pull you up. A rope will be with you in a minute."

"Be quick!" called Kate.

She had scarcely said the words before something dangled against her face; it was a thick rope weighted with lead. Here was her last chance. With vigorous, frantic haste she tied it securely round her waist.

"Say when you are ready," cried the voice from above.

Kate gave the rope another pull.

"Ready!" she called.

The next instant she found herself lifted gently off her feet. Up and up, through the narrow passage in the cliff, she was drawn; up, and up, and up, until at last, bruised and shaken, but still alive, she saw once again the glad, the beautiful, light of day. No matter that the elements raged and the winds blew, and the very earth seemed to shake—it was still the glad old earth; Kate was alive, and death was far away. It seemed too good to be true.

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They all brought Kate O'Connor back in triumph; she was petted, and soothed, and kissed, and made much of. Even Matilda rushed to her and flung her arms round her neck, and burst into

tears over her, and Kate, wonderful to say, did not repulse her. Then she had a hot bath and was put to bed, and she closed her eyes and dropped to sleep, while Cecil and Molly watched her, too excited and too rejoiced to leave her even for a moment. When she awoke from that sound sleep, she was none the worse for her terrible adventure.

"Molly and Cecil, I want to say something," said Kate, clasping both their hands in hers. "God saved me from drowning almost through a miracle; and I am so glad to be alive again, Molly, and so delighted to be able to kiss you, Cecil, and this bed is so delicious, and your dear faces are so lovely, and the earth is such a grand, splendid battlefield, and it is such a *good* thing to be young and strong, that if every girl at Redgarth taunts me with the fact that I eat the bread of charity, I shall not mind them now. For I think, there, in that awful gale, God showed me, himself, a way to rule my spirit. So, girls, I am going to forgive Matilda, and I'm going openly and frankly to accept Miss Forester's offer; and if I repent of it by and by, and have to fight my battles over again, you will promise to remind me of what I've said just now."

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"Oh, I think you are grand!" said Molly. "I think you've the best pride after all—the right pride."

"Kiss me!" said Cecil.

THE END.

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**Transcriber's Notes:**

Punctuation errors repaired.

Page 144, repeated word "like" removed from text. Original read (I felt like like cutting)

Page 166, "spirts" changed to "spirits" (all her high spirits)

Page 288, "season" changed to "reason" (for no other reason)

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