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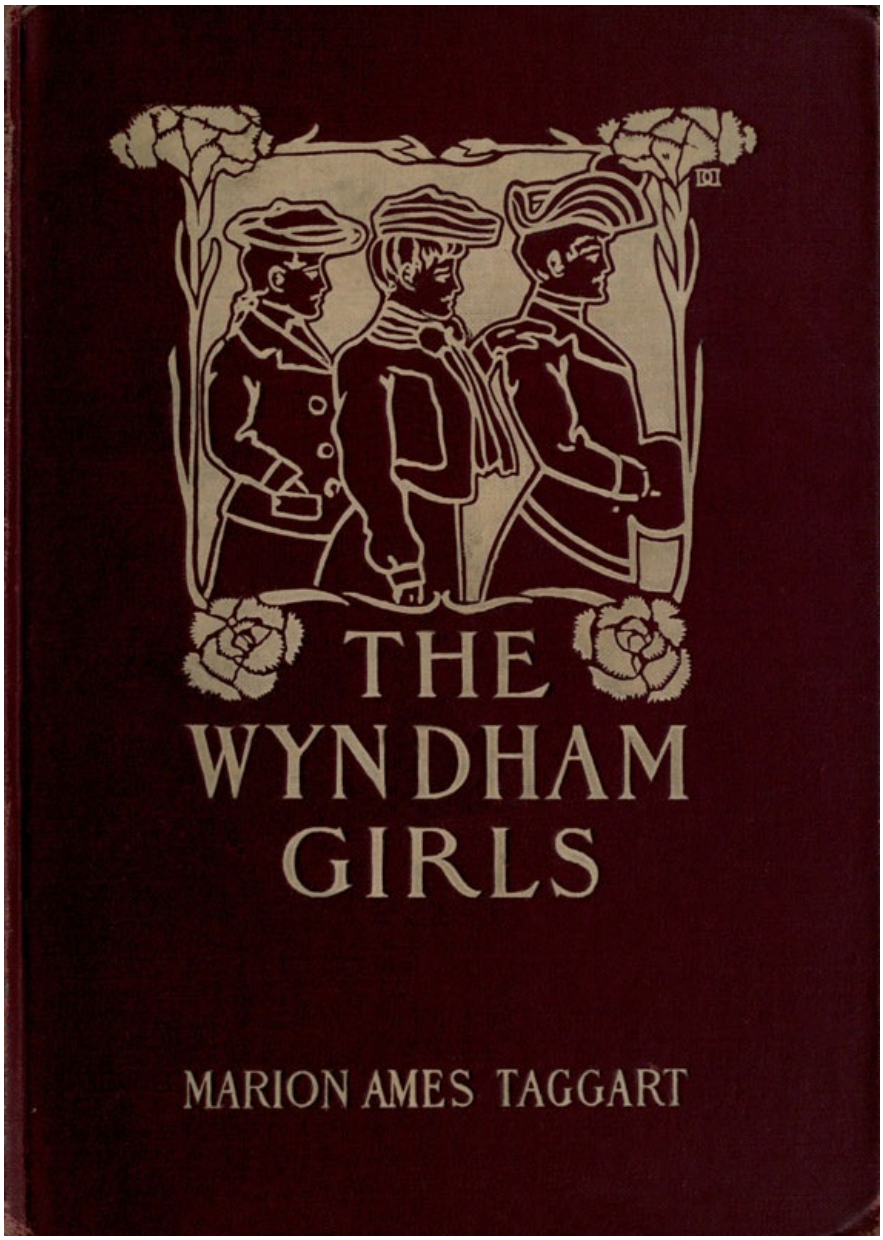

THE WYNDHAM GIRLS

"TOM HAD CAMPED OUT, AND HE INSISTED ON COOKING THE STEAK."

THE WYNDHAM GIRLS

BY

MARION AMES TAGGART

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS
BY C. M. RELYEA

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CHAPTER I
"POOR HUMPTY DUMPTY!"

"NO pink for me, please; I want that beautiful shimmering green, made up over shining white silk. It will make my glossy brown eyes and hair look like a ripe chestnut among its green leaves."

"Oh, Bab, such a glistening sentence! 'Shimmering green,' 'shining white,' 'glossy hair'—you didn't mean glossy eyes, I hope! Besides, chestnuts don't show among green leaves; they stay in their burs till they drop off the tree."

"Now, Phyllis, what is the use of spoiling a poetical metaphor—figure—what do you call it? Which do you like best? Have you made up your mind, Jessamy?"

"I want all white; probably this mousseline de soie."

"I'm rather inclined to the pearl, yet the violet is lovely."

"You both 'know your effects,' as that conceited little novelist said last night," cried Barbara. "Jessamy's a dream in white, and Phyl looks too sweet for mortal uses in anything demure." [4]

The soft May wind from the distant river blew the lace curtains gently to and fro, and lifted the squares of delicate fabrics scattered over the couch on which the three young girls were sitting. Jessamy, the elder of the two Wyndham sisters, was at eighteen very beautiful, with dainty elegance of motion, refinement of speech, almost stately grace, unusual to her age and generation.

Barbara, a year younger, was her opposite. Life, energy, fun were declared in every quick turn of her head and hands; small in figure, with sparkling dark eyes, and a saucy tilt of nose and chin, she could hardly have contrasted more sharply with her tall, gray-eyed, delicately tinted sister, and with what Bab herself called "Jessamy's Undine ways."

The third girl, Phyllis, was twin in age to Jessamy, but unlike either of the others in appearance and temperament. She was in reality their cousin, the one child of their father's only brother, but, as she had been brought up with them since her fourth year, Jessamy and Barbara knew no lesser kinship to her than to each other.

At first glance Phyllis was not pretty; to those who had known her for even a brief time she was beautiful. Sweetness, unselfishness, content shone out from her dark-blue eyes, with the large pupils and long, dark lashes. Her lips rested together with the suggestion of a smile in their corners, and the clear pallor of her complexion was shaded by her masses of dark-brown hair, [5] which warmed into red tints under the sunlight.

Across the room from her daughters and niece, enjoying the girls' happiness as she always did, sat Mrs. Wyndham, rocking slowly.

She was a fragile woman, still clad in the mourning she had worn for her husband for seven years,—a sweet and gentle creature, who, one felt at once, had been properly placed by Providence in luxury, and fortunately shielded from hardship; for the Wyndhams were wealthy. The morning-room in the great house on Murray Hill showed evidence of being the spot where the family gathered informally for rest and recreation; it made no attempt at special beauty, still it was full of countless little objects which declared the long custom of all its inmates of purchasing whatever struck their fancy, regardless of its cost or subsequent usefulness.

The three young girls, differing in many ways, were alike in bearing the stamp of having spent their short lives among luxurious surroundings, shielded from the cradle against the sharp buffets of common experience.

Even the samples fluttering under their fingers and the touch of the spring wind bore the name of a French artist on Fifth Avenue whose skill only the highly favored could command, and the consultation under way was for the selection for each young girl of gowns fit for a princess's wearing, yet intended for the use of maidens not yet "out," in the hops at the hotel at Bar Harbor in the coming summer.

"Madrina, do you care which we choose?" asked Bab, jumping up in a shower of samples which [6] flew in all directions at her sudden movement, and running over to hug her pale mother. Jessamy said Bab was "subject to irruptions of affection."

"Not in the least; the samples are all bewilderingly pretty. I only ask to have a voice in selecting the style of the gown. Madame Alouette and I sometimes differ as to what is suitable," replied Mrs. Wyndham, when she had caught her breath.

"Do you remember the elaborate lace she used on Jessamy's dimity last year, auntie?" laughed Phyllis, on her knees collecting the samples Bab had scattered.

Jessamy rose slowly, gently putting together the bits of soap-bubble-tinted gauzes on her knee; her fingers stroked them reluctantly, as if unwilling to part from them. "I am afraid I am dreadfully vain," she said, "though I hope I am only artistic. I am not sure whether I love

exquisite things for their own sake or because I want them for myself, but these lovely fabrics go to my very heart. I hate cheapness to an extent that I am ashamed of, and I certainly always have an instinct for the most expensive articles in the shops, though I never think of the price."

"I am sure it is because you're artistic, Amy," said Phyllis, coming up flushed from under an arm-chair. "You do like fine things for yourself, but it's just as you want only good pictures in your room. You crave beauty, and you're born royal in taste. If we were all beggared, Bab and I could [9] get on; for while I love beauty too, it's not with your love for it. Besides, I could be happy in a tenement if we were together, and Bab would revel in a sunbonnet and driving the cows home. But you're a princess, and you can't be anything else: *noblesse oblige*, you know, means, in your case, 'obliged to be noble.'"

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THE WYNDHAM GIRLS.

"You're a bad Phyl, whose object in life is to ruin people by making them perfectly self-satisfied," said Jessamy. "I only hope some of the excuses you find for me are true. I'm as luxurious in nature as a cat. I know that. Come to the window; I want to see this old rose in the sunlight."

Bab stopped swinging her feet, and slipped from the arm of her mother's chair, where she had been perching, to follow them. "Don't you abuse cats, nor my sister Jessamy, miss," she said, putting her arm around slender Jessamy and peering over her shoulder at the sample of old-rose silk, while she rubbed Jessamy's arm with her chin like an affectionate dog. "They're two as nice things as I know. Madrina, I see Mr. Hurd coming across the street; he's headed this way."

"Oh, dear!" sighed Mrs. Wyndham, almost fretfully; "I suppose he is coming to talk business again. He has been tormenting me all winter to withdraw my money from the corporation; you know, he thinks it isn't secure. I am sure I cannot see why—do you, Jessamy and Phyllis? You are as good business women as I am. Don't leave me when he comes to-day; I should like to have you [10] hear his arguments. Young as you are, you can understand quite as well as I do. He says I ought to sell my stock, or enough to secure us against misfortune, but I cannot get as high interest elsewhere, and it is safe."

"He—you said Mr. Hurd thinks it isn't safe, didn't you, mama?" asked Jessamy, turning from the window.

"But that is ridiculous! Your poor father's partner is at the helm, and your father always said he was both clever and unimpeachable; he trusted him like himself," said Mrs. Wyndham. "It is all because they won't show the books lately—as though I wanted to see the books, or minded if Mr. Hurd did not, as long as Mr. Abbott is managing! I cannot see why Mr. Hurd is so nervous; he has talked hours to me since last fall, and yet I don't see. I will not put our stock on the market—in the market—what is the right word?—and shake public confidence, flood the market—inflate it—oh, I cannot remember terms! And Mr. Abbott wrote me, and came especially to see me in March to say that would be the effect of my offering my bonds or stock now. I understand him much better than Mr. Hurd; he is more patient, and won't leave his point until I have mastered it. He said industrial stock was different from—from—the other kind. He said one must not bear the market on one's own stock, but must bull it. That means, in their queer terms, not depress it, but force things upward, which is, of course, what one would want to do with one's own values. You stay in the room to-day, children, and see if you understand. Mr. Hurd insists I am risking [11] beggaring you, and that distresses me unspeakably."

"Don't mind Mr. Hurd, Madrina; he's an anxious attorney, that's all," said Barbara, with an air of lucidity.

"But one has to heed one's attorney, daughter," said her mother, half smiling. "Only I can't turn my back on my dear husband's business, which he brought to such splendid success, and sell out Wyndham Iron Company stock as if we weren't Wyndhams, but outsiders."

"Mr. Hurd, ma'am," said Violet, the black maid, extending a card in one hand, while the other

twisted her apron-string nervously; she had caught alarm from a glance at the visitor's face.

"Bring him here, Violet. Mr. Hurd will pardon feminine confusion," Mrs. Wyndham added, rising and pointing to the samples on the couch with her extended hand, for the lawyer had followed the maid without delay. "We are pluming, or more properly donning, our feathers for flight, Mr. Hurd."

"Yes, yes," said the little man, shaking hands, without looking at Mrs. Wyndham. "Good morning, Miss Jessamy; good morning, Phyllis; how do you do, little Barbara? May I interrupt your—Gracious powers! dear madam, I mean I *must* interrupt your plans, Mrs. Wyndham."

Jessamy and Phyllis clutched each other with sudden pallor; the little lawyer's voice shook with emotion. Bab flushed and ran to her mother, putting her arms around her frail figure as though [12] to place herself as a bulwark between her and ill.

"You will not interrupt anything more important than the selection of dancing-gowns for the children," said Mrs. Wyndham, with her soft dignity, though she turned a little paler. "Is there any special reason for your visit—kind visit always—Mr. Hurd? And may the girls hear what you have to say, since their interests are at stake?"

"Special reason, madam? Special, indeed! God help me, I don't know how to say what I have to say, but I prefer the young ladies to hear it. You remember, I have urged their presence at our previous conferences, but you considered them too young to be troubled—Poor chicks!" he added suddenly.

"Evidently you feel that you have something unpleasant to tell me, Mr. Hurd; but I feel sure you exaggerate; you know, you are always more timid and pessimistic than I," said Mrs. Wyndham, dropping into the nearest chair and trying to smile.

"Good heavens, Mrs. Wyndham! It isn't a matter for self-gratulation. If I could have made you listen to me six—even two—months ago, I should not be here to-day, the bearer of such dreadful news," burst out the lawyer, impatiently.

"Wouldn't it be better, Mr. Hurd, to tell us quickly? You frighten us with hints," said Jessamy, in her silvery, even voice; but the poor child's lips were white.

Mr. Hurd glanced at Jessamy. "Yes," he said; "but it is not easy. I heard the definite news last [13] night in Wall Street; rumors had been afloat for days. I wanted to give you one more night of untroubled sleep. It will be in the papers this evening."

"What will, Mr. Hurd?" burst out Barbara, impatiently.

"The failure of the Wyndham Iron Company."

There was dead silence in the room, broken only by the low-toned little French clock striking ten times.

"The company—failed?" whispered Mrs. Wyndham, trying to find her voice.

"What does that mean, Mr. Hurd?" asked Phyllis.

"It means that your mother's bonds and stocks are valueless; and as she holds everything in her own right and has kept all that your father left in the business, it means that your inheritance has been wiped out of existence," said the lawyer, not discriminating between the daughters and the niece in his excitement.

"How can it be—total ruin?" asked poor Mrs. Wyndham. "Henry gone but seven years, and such a splendid success as he left the company! How can it have failed? I don't believe it!" she cried, starting to her feet with sudden strength.

"Dear Mrs. Wyndham, it is too certain," said her husband's old friend and attorney, gently. "When they refused to open up the books for inspection, and you would not authorize me to take steps to compel them to do so, I knew this would come."

"Mr. Abbott—" began Mrs. Wyndham. [14]

"Mr. Abbott is an outrageous villain," interrupted Mr. Hurd, passionately. "I have lain awake all night cursing him, or I could not mention him before you without swearing. He has got control of the corporation by holding the majority of stock, and he has run the thing on a speculative basis instead of a solid business one. At the same time, justice to his business capacity compels me to add that he has kept himself clear of possible failure, using the stockholders' funds and not his own for his operations, so that though you and others are ruined, he is safe. I shall never be able to make you understand the case more fully; but that is the sum of it, and he's a consummate rogue."

"But Henry trusted him—" essayed Mrs. Wyndham once more.

"Henry Wyndham was an honest man, and a good friend. He is not the first who has been deceived in his estimate of a man. That is all to be said on that score," said the little lawyer, grimly.

"I never knew any one who was ruined, outside of books," said Jessamy, trying to smile. "What does it mean? Going to live in an East-side tenement, and working in a sweat-shop?"

"Nonsense, Jessamy!" said her mother, sharply, drying her tears, which had been softly falling, while Bab burst into wailing at the picture. "Nonsense! I shall sell some stock, and I am sure that we shall get on very well—perhaps economizing somewhat."

"Dear madam, you no more grasp the situation than you saw it coming," said Mr. Hurd, struggling between annoyance and pity. "Your preferred stock might bring five cents, and the common stock three, but I doubt it; their value is wiped out. Practically, you have no stock. Still, I hope the situation will not be as grave as Miss Jessamy pictures. You will have an income greater than enough to give you comfort, though by comparison you will be poor. You cannot stay in this house, for it alone, and its contents, must furnish your income. But it will rent or sell at a figure to insure you six to eight thousand a year; and if you sell your pictures and some of the furniture you will have a very respectable principal to live upon. Bad as it is, your case might be far worse." [15]

"Do you mean that this house will be the sole—actually the sole—source of income left me?" gasped Mrs. Wyndham, with more agitation than she had yet shown.

Mr. Hurd nodded. The poor lady uttered a sharp cry and fell back, sobbing wildly. "Then I have nothing—nothing!" she screamed. "My darlings are beggared!"

Phyllis rang for wine, and Mr. Hurd leaped to his feet with apprehension of the truth.

"What do you mean, Mrs. Wyndham?" he demanded.

Mrs. Wyndham rested her head on Phyllis's arm and drank the wine she held to her lips.

"Last March," she began feebly, "Mr. Abbott came to me and explained—or seemed to explain—matters to me. At that time he told me he had bought iron for the works as a speculation, expecting it to appreciate in value. Instead it fell, and the business was temporarily embarrassed in consequence. He asked me to let him negotiate a loan with this house as security." [16]

Mr. Hurd, who had been pacing the floor furiously, stopped short, with a fervent imprecation. Halting before the feeble creature who had been so duped, he thrust his hands deep into his pockets and gazed down on her. "And you did it?" he growled.

Mrs. Wyndham bowed her head lower. "It was a mere formality, he said. The business needed but to be tided over its present embarrassment, which the ready money thus raised would do, and then the loan would be paid and the house stand as free as before. So I gave it as security."

"Just heaven! Why didn't Henry leave everything in trust for you in the hands of a decent man!" cried Mr. Hurd, furiously. "To trick a woman, and such a guileless woman as you, like that! The miserable, currish scamp! Why didn't you mention this to me, madam?"

"Because Mr. Abbott begged me not to; he said none but ourselves, partners in the concern, stockholders of the corporation, should know of it, or it might make the stock panicky—I am sure he said panicky," murmured the wretched woman.

"Then I am afraid Miss Jessamy's picture is not so overdrawn," groaned the lawyer. "You will have no principal except what the personal property, the furniture and the pictures will bring." [17]

"And I have ruined my children—my dear, blessed, pretty girls, for whom I would gladly die, and whose father was so happy to feel that he had secured them from the hard side of life! He knew in his youth what privation meant—my dear, good Henry. Oh, I can't bear it! I won't have it so! It isn't true!" And Mrs. Wyndham went off into hysterical cries, which ended all possibility of further discussion.

Jessamy ran to call Violet to help her mother to her room; Bab lay on the floor, a collapsed heap of misery, sobbing in terror of her mother's agony and the affliction, dimly understood, which had fallen on them in the midst of the dainty fabrics and happy plans. But Phyllis, trembling and white, yet calm, laid her cold hands on her aunt and gently forced her into quiet. She lifted her eyes, no longer blue, but jet black, with their dilated pupils blazing with righteous wrath, to Mr. Hurd's face. "Is there no law to make that villain give up what he stole?" she demanded fiercely.

The lawyer looked at her with the good fighter's quick recognition of the same quality in another. "I'll try mighty hard to find it, Phyllis," he said. "The trouble is that a consummate rogue knows how to cover his tracks. He has undoubtedly put everything out of his hands. But we'll make him show when it was done; and if he has taken such steps this winter past, we can force him to disgorge. There is one comfort: I'll make New York a confoundedly unpleasant place for him to try to do business in." [18]

Kind Violet, with her black face gray from sympathy and fright, came back with Jessamy, and put her strong arms around her mistress's fragile body, lifting her like a baby. "Come right along, you po' little lamb lady," she said. "Miss Jes'my telephone for doctoh, an' I'm goin' make you quiet an' comf'able in bed. Don' you cry 'notheh teah; Vi'let ain't goin' let nothin' come neah you."

Utterly exhausted in mind and body, Mrs. Wyndham found comfort in the soft voice and loving arms. She drooped her head on the pink gingham shoulder of the tall girl, and let herself be carried away to her chamber as if she had been a child.

Jessamy turned to Mr. Hurd. "You will not mind if we received the news rather badly," she said. "We shall all do our parts when we have learned them. It—it—came rather suddenly, you see." Evidently Jessamy was going to be the princess her cousin called her, and meet misfortune proudly.

"You dear child," said the lawyer, his eyes softening and dimming as he looked in the pretty face, blanched white, and noted the lines holding the soft lips grimly set to keep them from quivering. "You are little heroines—you and Phyllis. Don't try to be too brave; it is better to cry, and then wipe away the tears to see what is to be done after the shipwreck."

"There is only one thing I want to ask you now, Mr. Hurd; then, perhaps, we would better not talk any more to-day: What are we likely to have to live on if we sell our things?" asked Jessamy. [19]

"You know it is guesswork; no one can more than approximate the result of sales," answered Mr. Hurd. "Your father knew good pictures, and there are many of considerable value here, but summer is no time to offer them. I should say you were likely to have returns of about thirty thousand dollars, which, if I invest it at six per cent., will give you nearly two thousand a year. Now, good-by, my dears, for this morning. Try not to grieve; no one knows what is best for him in this curious world, and the day may come when you will be grateful for this change of fortune. People are usually better and stronger for trying their mettle as well as their muscle. God bless you."

Jessamy did not attempt to answer. Mr. Hurd laid his hand gently on each head, and went away.

Left to themselves, Jessamy and Phyllis looked at each other and around the pretty room, with the couch still strewn with the samples for their dancing-gowns; the books, pictures, ornaments they had bought scattered everywhere. With a sudden rush of memory, they saw themselves little children, playing about their kind father—for he had been father to them both—in that very room, and with equal clearness saw the years before them in which this beautiful home had no being, but, instead, privations more awful to their imaginations because they had no clue to their actual meaning.

The necessity for self-restraint being removed, with a common impulse Jessamy and Phyllis turned, and, throwing their arms around each other, burst into passionate weeping—the despairing weeping of youth which has not yet learned that nothing on earth is final. [20]

Bab stirred uneasily and sat up on the floor, wiping her own eyes and trying to smile. "Don't cry like that, girls; please don't," she said. "It doesn't matter so much about me, because I always go off one way or the other, but I can't stand it if you are wretched." She gathered herself up, and went slowly over to the others. "We're young and beautiful," she said, "and we have some few brains; we'll make another fortune for ourselves. I think, perhaps, I'll marry an oil man with millions. Smile—for mercy's sake smile—Jess and Phyl!"

But Jessamy and Phyllis, who had controlled themselves while Bab sobbed, could not raise their heads.

Bab was mercurial—always, as she herself put it, "going off" to extremes. She had cried her first terror away, and now the necessity of her nature to look on the bright side and find something funny in all situations began to assert itself.

"I think likely two thousand a year will be a lot when we get used to it, though it costs that to clothe us all now, I suppose. I expect to learn to manage so well that we can adopt twins on the money we have left over. I shall go to get points from Ruth Wells; I always thought she was splendid, and longed to know her; she understands how to make every quarter a half-dollar. Now, [21] girls, we're going to be like the people in the story-books, and learn who are our true friends—don't you know how misfortune always tests them? Look up—smile! 'Rise, Sally, rise; dry your weeping eyes!'"

"Don't, Bab," murmured Jessamy, faintly. "You haven't an idea of what has really happened." But she raised her head, and attempted to check her tears as she spoke.

Bab saw it with secret triumph; she was actually talking herself into something like cheerfulness. "Don't I! I have quite as much experience as you, miss, anyway. Still, I'm willing to confess I'd rather not be poor," she added, with the air of making a generous concession. "But I feel sure we'll be happy yet, because I, for one, have got to be. But it is rather hard to get thrown off your high wall when you've sat on it all your life. Poor Humpty Dumpty! I never properly felt for him before."

And Bab was rewarded for her nonsense by a tearful smile from Jessamy and Phyllis.

CHAPTER II [22]
FRIENDS, COUNSELORS, AND PLANS

THE evening turned cool and damp, with the unreliability of May. Mrs. Wyndham was too ill to rise; the doctor had given her sedatives, and she slept in utter exhaustion. Jessamy, Phyllis, and Barbara dined lightly alone; no one had any desire for food, although the cook sent up the dishes dearest to each young palate, hoping to tempt her young ladies to forget sorrow enough to eat. But this very kindness on the part of Sally below stairs, combined with Violet's positively tragic efforts to be cheerful while she served them, brought sobs into the three throats, and defeated the end of their good will.

After dinner the three girls carried their burdens to Jessamy's room, where an acceptable wood fire was burning. The great house was amply large enough to afford a room for each of the young Wyndhams to occupy unshared. Phyllis's and Bab's were on the third floor, connected by dressing-rooms; Jessamy's was next her mother's, over the dining-room, on the second. Each [23] room expressed, as rooms always do, the character of its occupant. Phyllis's was cheery, yet beautiful, with simple elegance and plenty of space. Her pictures were good, but not all the very highest art; "literary pictures," those which told a story, were not lacking, and many of the photographs, abounding everywhere, were portraits of literary people. The room was lined with low bookcases, and books crowded the tables and the desk.

Barbara's room was an anomaly. Bright Eastern colors gave the general effect of a field of poppies on entering. Pictures of animals, casts of Barye's splendid beasts abounded, with Luca della Robbia's happy cherubs, and a copy of Dürer's portrait of Stephan Paumgärtner, and Rembrandt's "Lesson in Anatomy" to prove how many-sided little Bab was thus far in her development. A small upright piano, with a guitar and mandolin lying on its top, between busts of Paderewski and Beethoven, testified truly that she was the most musical girl of the three.

Jessamy's room was all soft greens and moss browns as to color. Her pictures were chosen for beauty alone, and that of the highest sort. Copies of Botticelli's "Triumph of Spring," his lovely Madonna in the National Gallery, some of Holbein's glorious portraits, two Corots, Carpaccio's "Dream of St. Ursula," Donatello casts, as well as antiques, demonstrated at a glance that the eye of an artist had chosen them to rest upon. But, revealing the corresponding side of Jessamy's nature, were softest down cushions heaped on a divan, dainty toilet accessories in ivory and gold, [24] carved chairs of slumbrous depths, flowers in delicate green Venetian glasses, and, above all, volumes of poems, with Thomas à Kempis and the "Celestial City" on the stand nearest the bed; for Jessamy loved perfect beauty, and turned naturally to its highest ideals and expression.

Into this half-studio, half-chamber, and wholly beautiful room the three girls crept after dinner, drawing their chairs close to the fire and speaking softly, not to disturb Mrs. Wyndham in the next room.

"The only thing for us to do is to find out what we can live on, and then make our plans. If we haven't quite enough money, we must earn it in some way," said Jessamy, with her most mature and responsible air.

"I think the very first thing of all is to find out what that income will be, and Mr. Hurd says we can't know positively until after the sale," said practical Phyllis. "And the next and most awful thing is to find out what we can do. I doubt if we know anything thoroughly enough to earn money by it."

"Do? Why, we'll do anything!" cried Bab. "Jessamy draws and paints beautifully, you are all kinds of a genius, and I—oh, there are lots of things I could do if I tried. Some girls make ever so much money; I'm sure we sha'n't have any trouble when we are once started."

"We have some talents between us, but I am afraid they're trained only well enough for the admiration of ourselves and our friends; when it comes to getting something more solid than [25] flattery for our cleverness—well, I'm afraid! I can't help seeing that Jessamy's work, though it is talented, is amateurish. Bab plays, and burns things with her pokers, to our delight; but she can't play like a person who has been grinding at music in earnest six or eight hours a day. And as to me, when I write a story you think it is great, but I see it lacks something. It may be correct English and a good idea, but it is not worth money because of the thing that isn't in it; and I suspect that quality is the mark of training and experience," said Phyllis, sadly.

"I don't see why you try to discourage us, Phyl," said Bab, in an aggrieved tone. "I think we ought to bolster each other up."

"And I think we ought to face facts, and that as soon as we can," said Phyllis, firmly. "We've lived so far in a dream. I've been thinking hard all the afternoon, and I've realized how cruel such cases as ours are. There was auntie, left with great wealth and no more business knowledge than a baby. And here are we, three girls with brains enough to be useful and enough money to have had a practical training in some direction, no more ready to meet emergencies than so many kittens. We couldn't compete with tenement-house girls, with all our advantages and their drawbacks."

"Phyllis is right," said Jessamy, with conviction. "Still, we must compete if we must."

"She is not right; I'm sure we can make lots of money with no special training," said Bab, [26]

indignantly. "Good gracious! There's 'our inheritance'! We never once thought of it!"

Six years before, an aunt of Mr. Wyndham, dying on her New Hampshire farm, had left each of her grand-nieces five thousand dollars. They had rather laughed at it, and never alluded to it save as "their inheritance"; yet now, recalled suddenly by Bab, it shone across their path like a ray of sunshine. Taken from the bank where it lay and reinvested at higher interest, it would materially help them in an hour when a thousand dollars had assumed new proportions.

"Mercy, yes! I quite forgot it," cried Jessamy, her face brightening. "At six per cent., what would that be a year?"

This was too great a mental problem for these would-be business women, whose arithmetic was that of most pupils of fashionable schools for girls. Bab sprang up for pencil and paper. "Nine hundred dollars!" she announced triumphantly. "That is quite an addition to our fortune, isn't it?"

"I suppose there isn't much good in making plans," said Jessamy. "We've got to trust Mr. Hurd to guide us. If we are no use, as Phyllis believes—and probably is right in believing—we had better live quite poorly for a while, and fit ourselves to do something well. I don't want to rush into any kind of half-good employment, if by self-denial, perhaps even hardship, at first, we might amount to something in the end."

"Hail Minerva!" cried Phyllis. "You'll be as thoroughbred a working girl, if you must, as you were fine lady; and that's what I love you for, Jasmine blossom." [27]

"My poor, unfortunate children, are you sitting here in the dark?" said a voice. "Violet told me I should find you up-stairs. I saw that dreadful item in 'The Evening Post,' Is it true?"

"How do you do, Aunt Henrietta?" said Jessamy, rising, while Bab barely stifled a groan. "About the failure? Yes, I am afraid it is quite true."

Mrs. Hewlett was Mr. Wyndham's aunt; he had been her favorite nephew because he was her namesake. Her nieces did not love their great-aunt; she had a strong tendency to speak her opinions, if they were unpleasant to the hearer; sincerity and a profound conviction that she was infallible in judgment being Mrs. Henrietta Hewlett's most marked characteristics. Jessamy, Phyllis, and Barbara recognized in her coming an added hardship at the end of their hard day.

"I always knew it would end this way," said Aunt Henrietta, dropping into an easy-chair and letting her cloak slip to the floor while she untied her bonnet strings. "Your mother has no business ability whatever. Poor Henry!"

"Mama did not make the iron company fail, aunt; and papa can't need pity now as much as she does," said Bab, losing her temper instantly, as she always did on encountering "the drum-major," as she irreverently called her great-aunt.

"How are you left?" demanded Aunt Henrietta, ignoring Bab, to Jessamy's profound gratitude. [28]

"We shall have only what the contents of this house will bring, besides the five thousand apiece left us by Aunt Amelia," said Jessamy.

Aunt Henrietta held up both hands in genuine horror. "My poor sister had no notion that her little legacy would be your all,—for of course you can't get anything for second-hand furniture. So you are actually beggared! Well, it is even worse than I expected."

"Not quite beggars, aunt," said Phyllis. "We expect to have two thousand a year. And if you foresaw Mr. Abbott's dishonesty, you are the only one who mistrusted him. Uncle Henry believed in him as firmly as in himself. Of course, if you read the papers, you know no one is to blame for anything, unless for trusting Mr. Abbott."

"Two thousand for such a family as you!" ejaculated Aunt Henrietta, characteristically passing over the less disagreeable points in Phyllis's remarks. "It is practically beggary. You have been brought up in the most extravagant way—never taught the value of money. Your mother has spoiled you from the cradle. I suppose you will run through what little ready money you have, and then expect to be helped by your friends."

"Really, Aunt Henrietta, I cannot see why you assume us entirely to lack common sense, principles, and pride," said Jessamy, struggling hard to keep her voice steady. "We have already determined to make our income suffice us, investing our little capital."

"H'm! Two thousand suffice! You're exactly like your mother—absolutely unpractical. If poor Henry—" began Mrs. Hewlett. [29]

"Now, Aunt Henrietta, just drop mama, if you please," said Barbara, hotly. "She is the dearest mother in the world, and papa loved her with all his heart. I don't see what good there can be in trying to blame some one for this trouble; but if any one were to blame, it was dear papa himself, and not mama, for he left her all his wealth and all his trust in Mr. Abbott, and never taught her the least thing about business. Mama never said nor did an unkind thing in all her gentle life, and I won't have her abused. And, in spite of what you say now, you were always very proud of her lovely face and manners, and glad enough to point out your niece, Mrs. Henry Wyndham. And you've boasted about all of us while we were rich, and now you talk as if this trouble was the punishment of our sins, especially mama's. And I won't have you mention her—dear, crushed mama—lying in there heartbroken for our sakes!"

Bab's cheeks had been getting redder and her voice higher through this speech, until at this point she burst into tempestuous tears.

"Hoity-toity, miss! Don't be impertinent," said the old lady. "You'll be dependent on your friends'

charity in six months, and you will be wise not to offend them."

"I won't! I'll beg from door to door or be a cashgirl at Macy's first," sobbed Bab. "Besides, I'm not impertinent; I'm only firm." [30]

The idea of Bab firm on the verge of hysterics made Phyllis and Jessamy smile faintly. "Don't say any more, Bab; you know it's no use," whispered Phyllis, stroking the hot cheek, while Jessamy said: "You must not mind Bab, aunt. We are all somewhat overwrought, but I agree with her that, if you please, we will leave our mother out of the discussion."

"I don't mind that flighty child; she never had a particle of stability, and has not been taught self-control or respect," said Aunt Henrietta, with what in a less dignified person would have been a sniff. "What kind of work are you going to take up? For of course it is ridiculous to talk of living on two thousand a year, and you must earn your living."

"We have not decided anything yet, aunt; we've had only a few hours to get used to being poor," replied Phyllis.

"Well, I've been considering your case, and I don't believe there is anything you can do decently; your education has been the thistle-down veneer girls get, nowadays," said their aunt, disregarding the fact that she would have been still less prepared to meet misfortune than her nieces at their age.

"Veneer!" echoed Jessamy. "I hope not, though I don't know what thistle-down veneer is. I wouldn't mind being honest white pine, but I should despise the best veneer."

"As far as I can see, you would do well to go out as a nurse girl. There are many who would be glad to get a young woman of refinement, and you would be treated nicely in a good place," said Aunt Henrietta. [31]

Bab gasped. Phyllis cried: "A nurse girl! Jessamy!" But Jessamy turned white to her lips. "Will you allow me to sit on your steps and sun my young charge, if I take care to keep my aprons clean?" she asked slowly, her voice low and ominously steady.

"Don't be a fool, Jessamy, and have high-flown notions. Any work is honorable, and you are not trained to skilled labor," said her aunt.

"All labor is certainly honorable, aunt," said Phyllis, seeing that Jessamy dared not speak again. "But there are degrees in its attractiveness. It would be short-sighted wisdom to put a talented creature like our princess to doing what the humblest emigrant can perform, wasting all her opportunities. I am afraid I cannot understand how you could consent to pushing any of us down, instead of helping us up."

"We shall not need help," said Jessamy, her head up like a young racer. "I hope to manage quite well alone. Will you excuse us from more of this sort of talk, aunt? We have had a hard day, and are tired."

Mrs. Hewlett rose; her eldest niece always overawed her, in spite of her determination not to mind what she to herself called "Jessamy's affected airs."

"I felt sure I should not find you chastened by misfortune," she said. "You should take your downfall in a more Christian spirit. I trust you will heed me in one point, at least. Sell your best clothes and ornaments. It will be most unbecoming if, in your altered circumstances, you dress in articles bought for Henry Wyndham's daughters. People will make the most unkind comments if you do." [32]

Barbara had recovered by this time. "Aren't we still Henry Wyndham's daughters, aunt?" she asked guilelessly. "I didn't realize parentage as well as inheritance was vested in the business. What a calamity that it failed! As to unkind remarks, no mere acquaintances will make them; all but our relatives will understand that we could afford fine things when we had them, and that failure naturally did not destroy them. I give you fair warning, I mean to look my best, whatever the rest do, else I may be defeated in my plan to get back to luxury by a brilliant marriage."

"Bab, how could you?" said Jessamy, reproachfully, as their aunt disappeared. "She will take that for solemn truth and despise you. There's no use in making her worse than she is."

"I couldn't, Lady Jessamy; nature is perfect in her works. And I'll tell you one thing for your edification: If I did mean it, and did succeed in marrying for money, so far from despising me, she would be proud of me, and talk to every one about 'my charming niece, Barbara,'" said Bab, venomously.

"Oh, don't, Bab!" cried Phyllis, distressed. "We've been poor only one day, and here are you growing bitter! That's the worst of this sort of misfortune, I feel sure in advance. It shows people in such a horrid light that the victims get cynical and nasty. Do let us keep sweet and wholesome through it all, for if we're that, and have each other, nothing else matters seriously." [33]

"You dear little saint Phyllis!" cried Bab. "My bitterness so far is shallow, so don't worry. You're better than bicarbonate of soda to sweeten what Sally calls 'a sour risin'.'"

An hour later Violet brought up a note that came opportunely to counteract the disagreeable effect of Mrs. Hewlett's visit. It was from an old friend of their mother, and ran thus:

> "My dearest little Girls: I am not going to bother poor Emily to-night, but I cannot sleep unless I write you. I read that horrible item in 'The Sun' about the Wyndham Iron Company, and I am wretched. Maybe it will be less bad than it now seems—I pray it may! But I want you to realize that my house, my love, are entirely yours. You are all

coming to spend the summer with me at Mount Desert—there is plenty of room in my house—so that is settled. And in the fall we shall see. If there is to be a sale, I shall attend to it myself, with Mr. Hurd's help, for I am a good business woman. And don't make too heroic resolves just now. If you must earn your living, some of us will see that it is done in ways in which your sweetness, cleverness, and delicacy will not be wasted. But I should try very hard not to be pushed out into a world unfit for women to fight in. [34] And don't forget how much is left, how much you are blessed in yourselves—I know you do remember it—and be sure you are going to be perfectly happy again. Dear little girls, I'm crying as I write, but that is because I love you so much, and am so sorry. We won't let you do anything too bitter, and I know how splendidly you are meeting trouble, because I know your dear, good mother, and how truly well you have been taught. Tell my old friend I am coming to her in the morning—to refuse me if she likes, but I hope to comfort her. Good night, my poor little chickens, out in your first storm. There is sunshine ahead, but I wish that I could gather you all under my wings.

"Your old, loving friend,
"MARY VAN ALYN."

The girls cried on one another's shoulders after they had read this warm message, full of loving comprehension of their needs and natures; but they were tears which did them good and sent them to bed refreshed and comforted.

In the morning Bab started off early to see Ruth Wells, as she had planned. Ruth was a brisk little creature of the same age as Bab, who had been the Wyndhams' schoolmate for a short time, but who had met with misfortune too, and had left school and dropped almost entirely out of their lives; only Bab had kept up a desultory friendship with her.

Ruth lived with her mother in a little flat—apartment is too dignified a word—not far from [35] Morningside Heights. She was skilful with her needle, as at any work of her hands, and earned, by embroidering for two wholesale houses, enough to supplement sufficiently an income hardly large enough to pay their low rent.

Bab had always wondered to find her so blithe and happy; to-day she came determined to solve, if possible, the secret of her content.

As she pressed the electric button under the speaking-tube over which the name "Wells" shone on a narrow strip of brass, the latch of the front door clicked, and, pushing it open, Barbara mounted the three flights of stairs and rang the bell by the door at their head.

Ruth herself answered the summons, and uttered an exclamation of pleasure on seeing Bab. "Oh, Babbie, dear, it does affect you, doesn't it?" she cried at once. "I saw an account of the Wyndham Iron Works failure in this morning's 'Times.'"

"It affects us so much, Ruth, that I came up here the first thing to get your advice; you have had experience in coming down in the world. And I want to say just here," Barbara added, with heightened color, "that I wish I had been here oftener, and that Phyl and Jessamy had been with me. We never realized how lonely you must have been at first." And Bab looked around the little parlor with new interest.

"Oh, I was so much younger than we are now when our troubles came that it was easier to bear," said Ruth, brightly. "Besides, I never had nearly as much as you to lose. And as to coming to see [36] me, you have always been a good friend, Bab. We lived too far apart in every sense to meet often. When one is poor one cannot be intimate with those who are living luxuriously; it is so stupid for those who have fallen from past glories to expect old friendships kept up, and call old acquaintances snobs when they are not. It is impossible for extremes to meet often or agreeably, for one doesn't care to know the very wealthy; they are not half as interesting as those whose faculties have been sharpened—they don't know facts, and it is not their fault that they don't. Even you, Babbie, have not understood words in the sense I did when we have talked lately, and I saw it. Then a busy person hasn't time for people who don't know what *must* means. It is far nicer to have friends who are busy too, and don't waste precious time. But goodness! You see, I talk just as fast as ever; and maybe you are not going to be poor, after all! Is the loss as heavy as the papers had it?" While Ruth had talked she had gotten off Bab's outer garments, and now seated herself at her embroidery frame, while Bab drew a chair in front of it and shook her head. "Quite as bad; worse, in fact," she said, and proceeded to tell Ruth the whole story.

"Now, what I want to know, Ruth, is whether four persons can possibly live on two thousand a year—supposing we have that—until we can learn to be useful?" she said in conclusion.

"Of course they can," said Ruth, with cheerful decision; she did not seem to think the case very [37] bad. Taking a pencil and paper from the window-sill at her side, she began to reckon.

"Do you think you could take a little flat and do your own work?" she asked.

"Mercy, no!" cried Bab, in horror. "Why, we'd starve! We can't do anything; we must board."

"That's a pity, for cheap boarding is unwholesome, vulgar, and generally horrid," said Ruth. "However, if you must, you must; but I'm sure you'll be taught better. Mama and I began that way, but we were soon cured. You can get two rooms, and pay—let's see—two in a room—say seven dollars each—twenty-eight dollars a week. Twenty-eight times fifty-two—fourteen hundred and fifty-six dollars a year. That leaves you five hundred for washing, clothes, possible doctor's bill, and so on."

"Can we board for seven dollars apiece?" asked Bab, rather awed by Ruth's businesslike methods.

"You can; it will be pretty horrid, but, honestly, I wouldn't spend more till you increase your income. Your mother isn't well, and you will need extra dainties for her, no matter where you board nor what you pay. Mama and I ran too close to our margin once, and then she got ill. It taught me a lesson I did not forget," said Ruth.

"You have been very kind and interested, Ruth; and you have helped me a lot in more than advice," said Bab, rising to go. "I shouldn't mind being poor if I could be like you." [38]

"Well, I believe I have a talent for poverty; it has its good side," laughed Ruth. "And I'll tell you one thing, Babbie. Real troubles keep one from imagining affliction, and that is no small gain. I am happy because I am busy, and my mind is too full of my responsibilities and cares to let me worry over shadows; I haven't time to consider how I feel, even; and sometimes, when I suspect I might be a tiny bit ill if I thought about it, I go to work and drive it away. You don't know what a good thing it is for girls to have lots that must be done. Come see our flat," added brave Ruth, leading the way into a bedroom off the parlor. "This is mama's room; next it is mine. Then, here is the bath-room—you see, it is quite large—for a flat! And isn't this a nice little dining-room? Sunny too! And here is the kitchen. Mama, this is Barbara Wyndham."

Mrs. Wells was bending over a double boiler set on the gas-range; she was plainly dressed in black, shielded by a large apron. She lifted a sweet, well-bred face to smile at Bab, and held out a delicate, daintily formed hand to greet her, with no apology for her employment. "The maid's room is our store-room, for we do our own work, with a woman coming in to wash and iron and sweep. Now, isn't this a nice flat? And we pay only twenty-eight dollars a month for it!" cried Ruth, triumphantly.

Bab looked at the rooms, as they were shown to her, with newly perceptive eyes. Everything was [39]
of the plainest, yet so refined and dainty it could but be pretty. She began to suspect there were many things in life to learn which would not be unpleasant knowledge. She wondered, coming from the spacious rooms of her home, how Ruth and her mother managed to move about without seriously damaging their anatomy; the chambers, with the furniture in them, looked hardly larger than a good-sized napkin.

But Ruth was so proud of it all, so unconscious of any defects in her home, that Bab could only envy her, though the tiny box of a place did look rather meager in her eyes, and Ruth worked hard all day to maintain it.

"Thank you again, Ruth," she said, as her friend hugged her at the head of the stairs, letting the pity which she had not dared express show in the warmth of the embrace and the tears in her eyes as she kissed her. "I'm coming often, please, for advice and courage. You have already shown me that I need not fear. I suspect our first additional revenue will come from the sale of my book, 'How to be Happy Though Ruined,' illustrated by Ruth Wells."

CHAPTER III
WAYS AND MEANS

[40]

EVENTS moved swiftly for the Wyndhams, impelled by the force of necessity. The trust company that had made the loan to Mr. Abbott which had been secured by Mrs. Wyndham's house, learning of the failure of the corporation and that it was unable to meet its indebtedness, fell back on its security, and seized the house so unfortunately pledged to it.

Although Mrs. Wyndham was prepared for this inevitable result of her fatal confidence in Mr. Abbott, it came upon her like a bewildering blow that her house was hers no longer. This, and the fact that the expense of running such an immense establishment would make ruinous inroads on her slender principal in a few weeks, determined her upon hastening her movements and quitting as soon as possible the home she loved, taking up an existence which seemed to her, as she tried to picture it, a horrible nightmare in which she must die if she did not waken.

[41] It was no more difficult for her true friends to mislead Mrs. Wyndham kindly in business matters than it had been for her false friend to defraud her. Mr. Hurd and Mrs. Van Alyn combined to take advantage of her ignorance of affairs, to her profit. It was a bad time of year for a sale, as Mr. Hurd had said; but it was of paramount importance that the painful severing of old ties should be made quickly, not only because it was necessary to begin to receive an income immediately, but in order to avoid the torture of keeping the Wyndhams' troubles an open wound.

To all those whom she hoped the news might interest, Mrs. Van Alyn sent notices that the pictures were to be sold. Collectors and dealers came not only from the city, but from Boston and Philadelphia, for Mr. Wyndham had been well known for the value of his art treasures. Offers were made for the pictures as they hung on the walls, as well as for the marbles and bronzes; on the whole, the prices were fair, considering that it was a forced sale, with no time margin to allow the owners opportunity to do better. At least this method saved the commission on an auction sale, which had to be added to net profits in estimating them.

The horses brought an excellent price; they were young, perfectly matched, and spirited, yet gentle. Parting from them was perhaps the hardest pang Barbara had to endure. Castor and Pollux were really her friends—as, indeed, any animal she came in contact with was sure to be. But she derived a grain of comfort from the promise, which she went personally to obtain from [42] their new owner, that even if they began to break down he would never allow them to be sold into hardship—a promise which, it is to be hoped, was kept for the sake of the girl who had tried to protect the creatures she loved.

Mrs. Van Alyn persuaded Mrs. Wyndham to come to her for the final two weeks of her nominal ownership of the house. It would be less painful, she thought, if the poor lady could pass its threshold for the last time, shutting the door on everything as she had loved it, rather than remain during the dismantling, to see profane hands ruthlessly dragging from their places the mementos of her happy marriage and the childhood of her daughters.

Accordingly, one warm, sunny morning, Mrs. Van Alyn's rotund horses drew up at the door, and Mrs. Wyndham, looking very frail and newly widowed under her long veil, came slowly down the stairs, leaning on Jessamy's arm. She had made a painful pilgrimage to each room, pausing at certain spots, laying her hand lingeringly on the furniture, and kneeling long before the great brown-leather chair which had been her husband's, her face hidden on its glossy seat, which was wet with her tears when she raised her head.

At each door she stopped, rested her cheek a moment against the casement, and kissed the dark wood as lovingly as a Jew would kiss the *mazuzah* on the casement; for this had been her home, a sacred temple, and the law of love was written on its door-posts. It was a long and weary task to [43] get the poor creature to the end of her stations of sorrow, and the three girls, as well as she, were white and faint when they reached the hall. But finally Mrs. Wyndham came forth on the door-step, and for the last time the heavy mahogany door swung close, shutting out its mistress forever.

Jessamy drove with her mother to the kind friend who waited her with loving welcome, but Phyllis and Bab sobbed long and tempestuously on the stairs after Mrs. Wyndham had gone, and black Violet and blacker Sally, with Irish Ellen, the laundress, on the basement stairs, sobbed with them.

That afternoon the work of stripping the house was begun. The pictures were boxed for their various owners, vans were coming and going, taking the furniture to auction-rooms, and all was melancholy confusion.

Mrs. Van Alyn and Phyllis took charge of the painful work. Mrs. Van Alyn quietly set aside some of the dearer mementos of past happiness not too valuable to be kept out of the sale, to be sent to a store-room she had taken for the purpose. Nothing splendid was retained; only the pictures in the girls' rooms, their own special pet chairs, desks, tables, Bab's piano, and Mr. Wyndham's library chair. Mrs. Van Alyn foresaw and tried to provide for the day when, in one way or another, some of the Wyndhams would again have a home in which this flotsam and jetsam from their early shipwreck would be welcome. Not even Phyllis knew that their kind friend was doing this, though she unconsciously furnished the information which guided Mrs. Van Alyn in making her [44]

selections.

It took but a week to undo the work of twenty years. Mr. Wyndham had bought this house on his marriage, and his family had known no other home; yet by the Saturday following the Monday on which Mrs. Wyndham had gone away from it, it was barren of everything except a bonnet and shawl hanging on a hook behind the kitchen door, the property of the woman who had come in to sweep out the empty rooms.

Jessamy, Phyllis, and Barbara roamed through the house as their mother had done, like her, bidding it farewell in every corner, listening, half frightened, to the echo of their footsteps on the bare floors. Their power to feel had been spent in the preceding days of their painful tasks; utterly weary in body and mind, they closed the door of their dismantled home behind them, and passed down the steps into their new existence.

It had been agreed at first among the Wyndhams that they would not accept Mrs. Van Alyn's invitation to Mount Desert for the summer; but Mrs. Wyndham was so ill with utter prostration of nerves and strength, and the girls themselves so unfit to encounter any further trials, that the question decided itself otherwise. They gladly availed themselves of another kindness from the devoted friend who was an antidote against heavy doses of the poisonous bitterness of finding there were many the warmth of whose affection was much tempered by change of fortune.

The summer at Mount Desert sent the Wyndhams back to New York fortified in mind and body to [45] meet their fate. Phyllis especially was much cheered by the fact that she had made a friend in Maine in the person of an old lady from Boston, who had been quite charmed by her, of whom she always spoke as "the dear little girl," and to whom she promised a position as reader and companion to herself at any time that fortune failed Phyllis in New York or that her family could spare her.

The sale of the Wyndhams' effects—silver, glass, jewelry, as well as pictures, marbles, furniture, and horses—had brought but a trifle over twenty thousand dollars. Fortunately Mrs. Wyndham disapproved of bills, so there was but little outstanding indebtedness to discharge before investing the remnant of their fortune. But even at six per cent. it could not yield more than half of the sum they had calculated on having, and the once lightly valued legacy to the girls from their unknown great-aunt Amelia was required to bring their little capital up to the point of returning them two thousand a year.

The first step to be made by these novices in the ungentle art of living was to find a boarding-place. This undertaking was assumed by Jessamy and Phyllis, aided by Ruth Wells, who knew better than they did what to seek and what to avoid.

The limitations of their purse defined the boundaries of their search; only places where low prices obtained were open to the Wyndhams—a fact in itself difficult to master at first; and the [46] poor little pilgrims up Poverty Hill shrank from the mere exterior of some of the houses, the advertisements of which they had cut out and pasted on a sheet of paper, making a "vertebrate" like Mrs. March's in Howells's story.

At last they summoned courage to ring the bell of an old-fashioned, high-stoop house in a quiet down-town street.

"What a queer smell, Ruth!" murmured Phyllis, sniffing the air critically and speaking low, because the sight and sound of some one moving about, opening and shutting drawers in the back parlor, were distinctly visible and audible through the plain places in the pattern of the ground-glass panels of the folding doors.

"Boarding-house!" said Ruth, laconically. "It's the regular odor; ghosts of Christmases—past Christmas dinners, I mean—Fourth of July, and no particular days besides."

At this moment the doors slid back, revealing a folding-bed, let down and unmade, and a gaunt figure in a worn black silk skirt and lavender waist stood confessed.

"We are looking for board for four ladies—a widow with two daughters and a niece," said Ruth, making herself spokeswoman. "You take boarders, I believe? We saw your advertisement in yesterday's 'Herald.'"

"We receive a few guests," replied the gaunt person, correctively. "We prefer gentlemen."

"Yes; we knew that on general principles," said Ruth, easily; "but these are ladies. What rooms have you?"

"A hall bedroom on the second and two square rooms on the third," returned the gaunt one. "Will [47] you look at them?"

"If you please," said Jessamy, and they were conducted up the dingy stairs to the third floor. The floors were covered alike with red Brussels carpet; the wall-papers—gray with gilt figures in one, brown with red roses in the other—were alike tarnished and stained. A marble-topped bureau of black walnut, a bedstead, and three chairs, with one rocker, all of the same expressionless wood, furnished each room.

"We could never put up with this, Ruth; don't delay here," whispered Jessamy, but Ruth shook her head. "What do you ask for these rooms?" she inquired.

"Twenty dollars a week for each, two in a room," replied the gaunt person.

"Thank you; they would not answer," said Jessamy. "Why, I should die here, or go mad of odors and ugliness," she added for Phyllis's private ear.

"We might consider thirty-five a week, as it is one family," suggested the gaunt person at the door.

"No, thanks," said Phyllis. "Only fancy! Seven dollars more than we mean to pay, and for what? Are all boarding-houses like this, Ruth?"

"Not in detail; similar in genus. I tell you, you would be far better off in your own little flat, cooking your own little meals on your own little gas-range, in your own little spider. However, don't lose heart at the first one; there are degrees of badness," laughed Ruth.

The second attempt was made further up town, in a street among the Thirties. The parlor into [48] which the girls were ushered was more cheerful here than in the first case, but was furnished in a style that jarred on the nerves through the eyes, just as grating slate-pencils jar them through the ears.

A portly person, with a much jetted front, sailed into the room, smiling affably.

"We take a few guests," she said in reply to the inquiry for board, precisely as the gaunt person down town had replied, adding, like her, that she "preferred gentlemen." "I have the back parlor on this floor and a hall bedroom on the third vacant just now, though we rarely have a vacancy," she said graciously. "You might manage with a folding-bed in the large room and the hall bedroom."

"And your prices?" asked Phyllis. "Still, it doesn't matter; we must have two square rooms near each other."

"I should charge eighteen dollars for two in the back parlor, and I would let the hall bedroom to two for fourteen—my table board is six dollars apiece without a room," said she of the jets.

"No; we shall pay only fourteen for each of the rooms we are looking for," said Jessamy, whose courage was rising.

"Oh, I couldn't consider it," said the landlady, sternly. "Still, there are two lovely rooms on the top floor you might have for that. The furnace does not go up there, so they would be heated by a [49] stove. You wouldn't mind looking after your own fires?"

"I should mind my mother going up so many flights; still, we will look at the rooms," said Jessamy. The long climb to the top of the house brought them to two rooms together, though not connected; sunny, rather cheerful, and, though plainly furnished, not so ugly as the first ones.

"We are not willing to go up so high, but we will let you know if we consider them further," said Jessamy.

"I should require references as to respectability," said the landlady, firmly.

"I am glad to hear it; so should I," said Jessamy, and departed, cutting short a list of distinguished people who had once boarded there.

Three days of weary search brought forth no better results. The main difference in the places the discouraged girls visited was that in one house the stairs went up on the right side of the hall, in another on the left; that in one the furniture of the rooms was black walnut, in another oak—when it was maple or mahogany it was beyond the Wyndhams' limit of price.

These days taught the three girls—for Barbara had joined the others—more of life than their entire years so far had shown them, and the fruit of this tree of knowledge was bitter indeed.

They were unable to find anything within their means better than the upper rooms in the West Thirty —— Street house, and decided to risk the four flights—five including the basement—and [50] the dubious prospect of the care of their own fires.

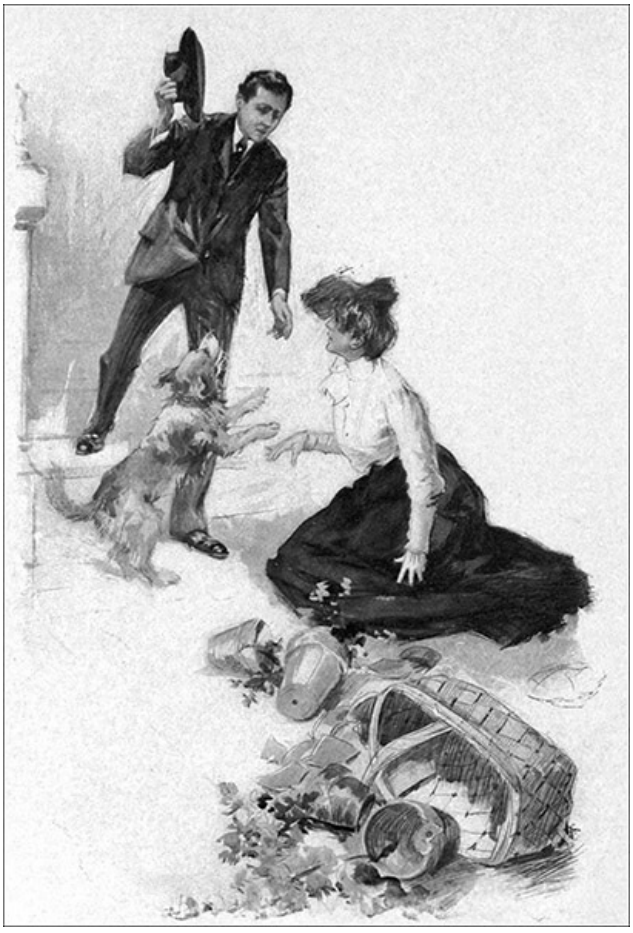
Having decided, they proceeded to make the best of what each felt in her heart to be a very bad bargain, with the courage each possessed in different forms.

There were two days intervening between that on which the new boarding-place was engaged and the day on which it was to be "infested," as Bab called taking possession. That young person assumed the task of beautifying their unattractive quarters, nor would she permit any of the others to see her improvements, but hammered her thumbs and strained her unaccustomed arms putting up curtains, shelves, casts, and photographs unassisted, in order to "usher her family into a bower of bliss" when it moved in.

On the afternoon before this event, Barbara came along Thirty —— Street from Sixth Avenue. Her arms were full of flower-pots—two filled them—and a boy came behind with a basket containing six more. Bab had not been able to resist the temptation to invest in plants to fill her mother's sunny window and make the room a little more cheerful. She hurried down the street, and paused at the foot of the steps long enough to let her listless attendant squire catch up with her. She had no hand to give her skirts, but she sprang up the steps, regardless of the danger of tripping. At the same instant the front door opened and a cocker spaniel rushed out, barking wildly and throwing himself downward with that apparent utter disregard of whether head or tail went first, and of anything which might be in his path, characteristic of a young and blissful little dog.

[51]

[52]



"A YOUNG MAN DASHED DOWN THE STEPS INTO THE RUINS."

He flung himself down, and Barbara stepped aside; her balance was uncertain, and her skirts unmanageable by reason of her laden arms. She tripped, fell, and flower-pots, dog, and girl rolled crashing and scattering dirt in all directions into the boy and basket two steps lower, ending in a tangle on the sidewalk. [53]

From the doorway a horrified voice cried: "Good heavens! Nixie!" and a young man dashed down the steps into the ruins.

"Are you hurt?" he cried anxiously, as he fished Barbara out of the wreck. Nixie had already slunk out from under, and was wagging his tail deprecatingly, with glances of mingled shame and amazement at his master.

"I think I am," said Barbara, raising her head and trying to speak cheerfully.

The young man replaced her hat—it had fallen over her eyes—and revealed a woebegone little face. Earth plastered the saucy chin, one cheek was cut, and blood trickled from the bridge of the poor little tilted nose, making a paste wherever the loam from the flower-pots had spattered, and this was nearly everywhere. Barbara's hair was coming down, her hat was shapeless, and her eyes tearful from the smarting wounds.

"By Jove, you're a wreck! It's a shame!" cried the young man. "I'll whip Nixie."

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" said Barbara, with spirit. "How did he know I was coming up—coming up like a flower—at that moment? You might as well whip me. Nobody is to blame, and I'll be all right when I've washed and sewed and plastered, and done a few other things." [54]

"Well, you're plucky," said the youth, admiringly. "I'm a doctor in embryo—full fledged next June. I'll take you in and fix you up. Do you—you don't live here?"

"We shall to-morrow; I'm a new boarder," said Barbara. "Oh, I hope my plants aren't broken! Can they be re-potted? We've become poor, and I ought not to have bought them. Why on earth doesn't that boy get up? Is he killed?" she demanded, realizing that her companion in misery was still lying, with his head in the basket, under a debris of flower-pots.

"It's why *in* earth, rather," laughed the medical student. "Here, you boy, are you alive? You're buried all right! Get up."

The listless boy gathered himself slowly together. "Well, I'll be darned!" he said.

"You'll have to be," cried the doctor, sitting down to laugh, and pointing to the rent across the shoulders of the inert one's jacket.

"What ailed that dog? Did he have a fit?" drawled the boy, scowling at Nixie, who slunk behind Barbara self-consciously.

"He wasn't a dog; he was a cat-apult," gasped the doctor.

"Oh, please help me into the house," cried Barbara, half laughing, half crying. Several people had [55]

paused to gaze, grinning sympathetically at the scene.

"I beg your pardon! What an idiot to keep you standing here!" cried the medical student, jumping up. "Here, hustle these plants into your basket," he added to the boy. "They're not broken; we can fix them up all right. Where's my key?—there you are! Walk in. Get into the house, Nixie, you crazy pup; you've lost your walk. Leave those plants in the hall, boy, and rush back to your employer and tell him you want as many pots as you had at first, and a bag of dirt, and hurry back with it. Now, Mrs. Black—Mrs. Black, where are you?"

"Here," said the landlady, emerging from the rear. "Why, Miss Wyndham, what has happened?"

"Introduce us, please; we met on the steps," said Barbara's new acquaintance.

"Miss Wyndham—Doctor Leighton," said the bewildered Mrs. Black, automatically.

"Happy to have the honor, Miss Wyndham. There was a mix-up on the steps, Mrs. Black; there's some of it there yet. Let me have some warm water and a sponge, please. Miss Wyndham, take off your hat and have your face washed," said the unabashed boy.

"Not by you," said Barbara.

"Precisely. I'm almost a doctor, and I'm going to see that no dirt is left in your wounds to scar you. Don't be foolish, Miss Wyndham; it's not exactly a ceremonious occasion."

Barbara submitted with no further demur, and soon her face was adorned with strips of court- [56]
plaster laid on in a plaid pattern.

"Shall I be scarred?" she asked, surveying the crisscross lines on the bridge of her nose.

"Not a bit," said Doctor Leighton, cheerfully. "Mrs. Black might give you a cup of tea to brace you up."

"Yes," said Mrs. Black, without enthusiasm.

"No, thanks; I hate tea, and I'll be all right. There's the boy back with the new pots," said Barbara.

"Let me help you get the plants in, and I'll settle with the boy, because it's all Nixie's fault," said the young doctor. "Not a word! Get to work, Miss Wyndham."

He placed papers on the floor in the rear hall, apparently oblivious to Mrs. Black's icy disapproval, which inexperienced Barbara found oppressive.

"My father and your father were friends," said the young fellow, packing the earth around a begonia. "I knew you were coming here to board, and I know about the hard blow you've had. It's a shame, and it's all the fault of that scoundrel Abbott."

"Oh, how nice that your father knew papa! That is almost like being friends ourselves," said Barbara, simply. "Yes, it's dreadful for mama to be poor, and for Jessamy. Phyl and I are not going to mind it so much."

"Is Phil your brother?"

"No; Phyllis it is; she's my cousin, only she's just as much my sister as Jessamy, for she has always lived with us. I'm a year younger than she and Jessamy. Jessamy's perfectly beautiful and [57]
princessfied, and Phyllis is the most unselfish blessing in the world. I'm only Barbara."

"And I'm only Tom; I'm not a doctor yet. It's awfully jolly you're coming here. Mrs. Black gone? Yes. There isn't any one in the house I care to know; the young people are not my sort. I hope you'll forgive Nixie and me enough to speak to us once in a while," said Tom, getting up and dusting his knees.

"Oh, we shall want to talk to you; Nixie is such a nice dog," laughed Barbara.

"Only Nixie? Well, love my dog, love—oh, it's the other way about! Never mind, though; we can improve old saws. Where are your rooms?"

"First floor from the Milky Way," laughed Bab. "We hate to have mama climb so far, but we couldn't afford better rooms."

Tom Leighton looked down on the swollen, patched little face with brotherly kindness; respect and pity were in his voice as he said gently: "You will make any room bright and homelike. I see why you took your tumble down the steps so well. You are brave in falling, Miss Barbara."

Barbara stooped suddenly to pat Nixie, hiding her wounded face in his glossy curls.

"I'm not always brave," she said huskily. "I am ashamed to think so much about my beautiful room and home. I feel so little and lost in this boarding-house."

"Poor little woman!" said Tom Leighton. "Try to feel you have one friend in it. I have two sisters, [58]
and it was lonely for me when I left home. Good-by; we shall meet to-morrow." They shook hands, feeling like old friends; and Nixie sat up to shake hands too, though the dignity of his farewell was much damaged by a surreptitious lick of his quick red tongue on Bab's chin.

Tom departed, whistling, to give Nixie the walk the accident had postponed; he found himself seeing, all down the street, a tilted little nose adorned with court-plaster, and brown eyes, wistful like Nixie's. "She's plucky and simple and frank; just the girl to be a fellow's good chum," he thought. "What luck they're coming to the Blackboard!"—Tom's name for his residence.

Bab finished her tasks, and went home with glowing accounts of the little dog who had undone her and the jolly boy who had patched her up.

"There are two nice things in our new home," she said; "and I believe we'll be happy, in spite of fate."

CHAPTER IV
MAKING THE BEST OF IT

[59]

"I DON'T know where to put another thing," said Mrs. Wyndham, pushing aside a hat-box to sit beside it on the rocker, and casting a despairing glance from the shallow closet, already full, to the floor, covered with the heterogeneous contents of two trunks, in the midst of which Barbara was sitting.

It had been decided that Bab, as the liveliest member of the family, should share her mother's room; and a compact was drawn up solemnly pledging Barbara to keep a sharp lookout for symptoms of "blues" in her mother, and, if necessary, take as vigorous measures against them as the immortal Jerry Cruncher used to prevent his wife "flopping." The Wyndhams had taken possession of their new quarters but two hours earlier, and forceful measures against slight despondency were not considered yet in order.

A scream from the next room prevented Bab replying to her mother, and Nixie bounded through the open door, triumphantly worrying a slipper. He recognized Barbara, and dropped his prize to [60] bestow several rapid kisses on the nose he had been the means of damaging before Bab, from her disadvantage-point on the floor, could stop him.

Tom Leighton appeared immediately behind his dog, calling Nixie with no result, for Bab had her arms around the wriggling black bit of enthusiasm, hugging him hard and begging his master to let him stay.

"Mama, this is the doctor who repaired me so nicely. Doctor Leighton—my mother," said Barbara.

"Please don't think me intrusive, Mrs. Wyndham," said Tom, stepping forward to take the delicate hand extended to him. "I am the son of John Leighton, a friend of your husband, and I wanted to ask if I could be of use in getting you in order. I'm a jack-of-all-trades, and have been boarding long enough to have learned dodges."

"I remember your father," said Mrs. Wyndham, cordially. "It is very pleasant to find a friend among strangers. I don't see what you can do, unless you can build a closet. This tiny cubby Bab and I must share is already overflowing, yet just look!" And Mrs. Wyndham made a comprehensive gesture toward the littered floor.

"I suppose we've too many clothes, but we don't dare give away one thing, because we may never be able to get any more, and we're going to buy patent patterns and make over this stock until we're old and gray. I expect that to be soon, however, if I have to sew," said Bab, scrambling to [61] her feet and tossing up Nixie's purloined slipper for him to catch.

"A dog broke and entered—entered any way—and stole Jessamy's slipper—oh, I beg pardon!" said Phyllis, stopping short in the doorway at the unexpected apparition of Tom.

"My niece, Miss Phyllis Wyndham—and my elder daughter Jessamy, Doctor Leighton," added Mrs. Wyndham, as Jessamy followed Phyllis.

"I came to ask if you had any idea of what Jessamy and I could do with our things, auntie," said Phyllis. "We haven't begun to make an impression on the room, yet the closet and drawers are full."

"Bab and I are in the same plight; how do people get on in such narrow space?" sighed Mrs. Wyndham.

"You'll have to have a wigwam," said Tom.

"A wigwam! That would have no closet at all; besides, where could we build it in New York?" laughed Phyllis.

"In that corner; I'll make it," said Tom. "It's a corner shelf, with hooks in the under side and a curtain around it. It's the only kind of closet I have, for my room is a hall bedroom. You can keep things dust won't hurt in there. Then you want a divan—a woven-wire cot-bed, with the legs cut off, fastened by hinges to a box made to fit it. We could upholster it between us. It would be larger than the ready-made divans, and hold more; you'll be surprised to see what it holds. Then, if one of you were ill, it would be useful as a couch."

"There spoke the doctor," said Jessamy. "A couch is always useful. I suppose we shall have to [62] have a trunk in each room besides," she added ruefully.

"If you could bring yourself to part with that table, you could set the trunk—the flat-topped one—in the window, and I could case it in with white pine; we'd cover it all over with felt, and it wouldn't be a very bad-looking book-stand," said Tom.

"Well, you are a genius!" cried Bab, in open admiration.

Phyllis sang softly under her breath, to the tune of "St. Patrick's Day in the Morning":

> "All hail to the doctor who seems to be able
> To mend up a nose, or to make up a table!
> We gladly would cheer him, but that it seems risky,
> For cheers in a boarding-house may be too frisky."

"Well, I never!" laughed Tom. "Say, was that—of course it had to be—improvised?"

"Oh, Phyl is a genius," said Jessamy, proudly. "One of these days her name will be in all the magazines, and at last in the encyclopedia."

"And maybe in oblivion," added Phyl. "What time do you—do we dine, Doctor Leighton?"

"At six; I suppose you want to get ready. It is your first appearance in a boarding-house dining-room; you must make a strong impression."

"Yes, and only look at my court-plaster! Nixie, your first impression was too strong," groaned Bab.

"You mustn't let Nixie bother you; he'll try to be friendly," warned Tom. [63]

"Let him, and his master, too," said Mrs. Wyndham, heartily. "You will both cheer us, and I appreciate your kindness very fully."

"Not a bit kindness, ma'am," said Tom, promptly. "I tell you, you don't know how forlorn a boy is alone in a boarding-house. It does me good to get a home breath again."

"We'll help each other if we can," said Mrs. Wyndham, gently. "You can't be more than a year or so older than my girls, and a nice boy will be a welcome addition to storm-tossed lassies' lives."

"Not to mention Nixie; *dogs* are so dear," said Bab, with a slight, naughty emphasis on "dogs."

Tom and Nixie departed, followed by praise from all the Wyndhams. Fifteen minutes later a gong sounded through the house, and Mrs. Wyndham and the girls made their long descent into the basement.

Two tables ran the full length of the dining-room, at the first of which the newcomers took their places. A severe old lady, presented to them as Mrs. Hardy, sat at its head, beside Mrs. Wyndham. She demanded—and so received—more attention than any one else in the house; her favorite theme was her past splendors and the dignity of her acquaintances. Opposite Mrs. Wyndham sat a big, kindly-looking man, who said he was "just in" from a Western trip, thus revealing himself a traveling salesman. He was pathetically fond of his two overgrown, ill-mannered children, and deprecating toward his peevish wife, who, with the elegance brought from her early apprenticeship to a milliner, assumed superiority to her less pretentious husband, thus keeping him in wholesome abeyance and general readiness to endow her with ornaments. [64]

Three over-dressed, painfully vivacious girls in a row completed the line opposite the Wyndhams, with a big man at the other end of the table, who combated with a sort of fury every proposition made by any one else. Beside him sat a widow who was a bookkeeper in a department store, and who looked utterly worn out and anemic. Two school-teachers, middle-aged and drab of complexion, with the aggressive air of women who had from girlhood fought the world to maintain a foothold in it, filled in the line between the wilted widow and Jessamy.

The girls were too young to realize all that these melancholy types stood for, but their poor mother felt, with utter heartsickness, that this was the fate of those whom poverty made homeless and forced to struggle for existence.

The second table was filled with men of varying degrees of youth, solitary and unattached, some of whom lived under the roof, but the majority came in from outside for meals only, thus belonging to the class designated as "table boarders."

This table almost to a man stared at Mrs. Wyndham and her three charges, especially at Jessamy. Tom Leighton sat there, and Phyllis, who was quickest of the three to seize a situation, saw him flush with annoyance, and guessed that they, and particularly Jessamy's beauty, were the subject of impertinent comment. [65]

Bab was half amused and wholly excited by the new experience; there was something she liked in rubbing elbows with such a singular world. But the sense of humor of all the others failed them, and they ate but lightly, pecking from the individual vegetable-dishes, which resembled birds' bath-tubs, with not much more appetite than the birds themselves would have had.

Jessamy heard a loud whisper asking for "a knockdown to the beauty" as she smiled and bowed to Tom Leighton in leaving the room, and Phyllis was stopped by the three resplendent maidens, who introduced themselves as May Daly, Fanny Harmon, and Daisy Heimberger. "You just come?" they asked—it seemed to Phyllis they all talked at once. "Say, ain't your sister handsome? My, I think she's simply great! Too bad the other one got cut so; must be her who fell up the steps yest'day when the young doc was goin' out. Mis' Black was tellin' us last night. Funny way to meet! Do you know any of the other young gentlemen? They're awful nice, but I s'pose we won't have any chance now you've come!" This with a giggle that showed doubt of her own prediction. "They take us girls to the theater real often Sat'day nights—not doc, though; do you know him?"

"Mrs. Wyndham's husband and his father were friends," said Phyllis, prudently. It was the first time in her short life it had occurred to her to explain her actions. [66]

"Well, come see us; we've got a room with two beds on the third floor." And Phyllis noticed, as they nodded good night, that each wore two buttons bearing photographs of the other two members of their trio.

"Very likely they are nice in their way—poor things!" she thought; "and share comforts and sorrows—but, oh, dear!" And she followed her family sadly up the stairs.

Their own rooms looked very peaceful and refined to the Wyndhams when they got back to them,

and Phyllis and Barbara felt comforted when the door was closed behind them; but Jessamy sank into a chair in blank despondency, and her mother could not smile at Bab's wildest sallies.

"First aid to the injured!" cried a cheery voice, and Ruth Wells burst into the gloom—"like an arc-light," Barbara said, jumping up to hug her rapturously.

"No, don't; I've tacks and a hammer here," said Ruth, struggling free. "I knew you had no closets, or none worth calling one, so I came to show you how to make a charity."

"A what?" asked Jessamy.

"A charity; it covers a multitude of things, you see," laughed Ruth. "You take a board—we can get one down-stairs, probably—saw it off to the right length, and put it in a corner. Then you drive hooks—"

"In the under side—we know," interrupted Phyllis. "Only Doctor Leighton says it is a wigwam." [67]

"Mama, let me call that boy; we'll have a bee—a be-autiful time, too," cried Bab, springing up. "I wonder if I could get him." And she looked wistfully out of the door.

By a strange chance, Tom's door happened to be open. "Do you want me?" he called, seeing the eager little face he had patched up so carefully.

"Yes. Ruth Wells has come, and we're going to make a wigwam, only she calls it a charity, because, she says, it covers a multitude of things," said Bab. "Nixie too; come, Nix."

"I don't know who Ruth Wells is, but we shall be glad to come," responded Tom, with alacrity.

In five minutes the little room was ringing with fun. The "charitable wigwam"—Phyllis's compromise on the name—could not be made for lack of boards, but the young people managed to cover up the dismal impressions of their first experience of the bleak side of life, and that was making a real charity, as Jessamy pointed out in bidding Ruth good night.

The wigwam was made in the end, the divan too, and the Wyndhams began to learn to adjust themselves to the new conditions. Tom had become almost one of themselves, and Nixie a necessity and no longer a luxury, as Bab noted. Tom was such a bright, honest, boyish young creature that no greater piece of good fortune could well have befallen the girls in their new trouble than his friendship—a fact their mother recognized gratefully. As to Tom himself, the [68] motherly kindness of Mrs. Wyndham and the sweet, frank companionship of the girls were a boon to the young fellow, who had loved his own mother and sisters well.

Bab and he were the best comrades, but he admired beautiful Jessamy, and was not less proud of her than the girls were; and Phyllis he regarded from the first with affectionate reverence, as the embodiment of perfect maidenhood.

Winter was coming on, and for the first time in their lives the Wyndhams tried to make old answer for new in the matter of garments.

"Not a penny must be spent this season," declared Jessamy, sternly. "A year hence we may earn new clothes."

All the summer garments had been laid away in the new divan. "Never throw away a winter thing in the spring, nor a summer thing in the fall," advised Ruth, that little woman wise in ways and means. "You can't tell how anything looks out of its season, nor what you may want. Set up a scrap-box, and tuck everything into it; it's ten to one you'll be grateful for the very thing you thought least hopeful. Many a time I've all but hugged an old faded ribbon because its one bright part was just the right shade and length to line a collar."

The scrap-box was therefore established, and easily filled from a stock not yet depleted. Jessamy's artistic talents developed in the direction of hats. Ruth taught her to take the long [69] wrists of light suede gloves which were past wearing, and stretch them over a frame for the foundation of especially pretty hats.

Jessamy made three hats, one for each of them, with crowns of old glove wrists and velvet puffs around the brims; and in the new scrap-box she found quills and ribbons and flowers to trim them, so that all three were different, yet each "a James Dandy," according to Tom Leighton's authoritative verdict.

Dressmaking was a more serious matter, but the three Wyndhams essayed it with the courage of ignorance. Ruth brought down mysterious brown tissue-paper patterns—"perforated to confuse the innocent," Bab said—and announced that she had come for a dress parade. Her friends were still too unversed in being poor to realize that when she came to them Ruth was sacrificing her own good for theirs, since her time meant money, and little Ruth's pockets jingled only when she spent long days at her needle.

"Get out all your last year's glories," commanded Ruth, perched on the footboard of Jessamy's and Phyllis's bed. "That's a pretty dark-blue cloth suit; whose is that?"

"Phyllis's; it was nice, but she tried it on the other day, and it's too full in the skirt," said Jessamy.

"I don't believe I'd dare touch anything so tailor-made; if we rip it we shall never be able to give it the same finish. I'll tell you, Phyllis; we can take out the gathers and lay a box-pleat in the back; that will make it look flatter and more in the present style," cried Ruth, with sudden illumination. [70] "Now isn't it true that there's good blown to some one on all winds? If you didn't have stoves in your rooms, you wouldn't have any place to heat irons; and don't I know the impossibility of getting a flatiron from the lower regions when one is boarding?"

"Infernal regions do you mean, when you say 'lower'?" inquired Tom, from the doorway.

"Go away! This is a feminine occasion; no boys allowed," cried Ruth.

"Mysteries of Isis?" suggested Tom. "I only want a buttonhole sewed up; wouldn't the goddess allow that?"

"Yes," said Phyllis, holding out her hand for the collar Tom was waving appealingly. "It is rather in the line of the service about to begin in this temple. We are going into dressmaking."

"You'll succeed; you can do anything," said Tom, watching Phyllis's fingers as she twitched the thread in a scientific manner to draw the gaping buttonhole together. "Those laundry people apparently dry collars by hanging them upon crowbars thrust through the buttonholes. Couldn't I help with your dressmaking? I know there are bones in waists, and maybe I could set them."

The four girls groaned. "Such a pale, feeble little jokelet!" sighed Bab. "Take it to the hospital to be measured for crutches."

"Here's your collar. Run away and play with the other little boys; we're busy. By and by, if you're good, we may let you take out bastings," said Phyllis. [71]

"Jupiter! That sounds familiar," sighed Tom. "My mother used to say just that when I was seven. Much obliged for the collar. When you want me for the bastings sing out, and I'll pardon your impertinence in consideration of service rendered." And Tom disappeared.

"Phyl will do very well with the blue, then," said Ruth, resuming practicalities. "What are your prospects, Other Two?"

"I had this gray, and I loved it," said Jessamy, smoothing a chinchilla-trimmed jacket fondly. "I think it isn't hurt at all, and I shouldn't dare touch it."

"There's a spot on the back where you leaned up against something greasy, but French chalk will make it all right," said Ruth, issuing her mandates from her perch like a mounted general at the head of an army.

"Mine was brown, with mink," said Barbara, sadly; "but I spilled something, sometime—I don't know what or when—on the front of the skirt, and I don't see what you can do with it; I haven't a smidge of the goods."

"A what?" murmured Ruth, absent-mindedly, wrinkling her brow over the problem. "Tailor-made or not, we shall have to rip that skirt and put in a breadth of something else; and it will never look right—No, I have it!" she cried, interrupting herself and sliding to her feet with a triumphant little shout. [72]

"Eureka, Miss Archimedes! What is it?" asked Phyllis.

"Braid!" cried Ruth. "We'll get narrowest silk soutache—Jessamy shall draw a design—and you shall braid the entire front breadth of your skirt, Bab, resolving with each stitch to be neater in the future."

"I never saw such cleverness!" cried Jessamy, admiringly, while Bab made a wry face over the prospect.

"And now for house wear," said Ruth. "Here are some pretty light silks; the skirts are good, but the waists are worn out."

"I thought, perhaps, we could make fancy waists of the skirts to wear with our cloth gowns," said Phyllis, doubtfully, turning over a heap of light colors.

"Could? Why, of course we can. Let's rip them now," said Ruth, whipping out her own little scissors with alacrity. The four pairs of hands made quick work of the ripping, and Ruth cut out three waists by the tissue-paper patterns she had brought, pinned and basted them together, and left her friends to carry out her instructions.

Phyllis proved most adept at the new art; Jessamy succeeded fairly, but Bab had a dreadful time with her waist. Seams puckered and drew askew because of her reckless way of sewing them up in various widths, yet she felt aggrieved when the waist proved one-sided on trying on. And as to sleeves, Bab's would not go in with anything approaching civility and decorum. The poor child ripped, basted, tried on, ripped again, refusing all help in her proud determination to be independent, till her cheeks were purple, and she threw the waist down in despair and cried forlornly. [73]

Tom surprised her in this tempest, and laughed at her until she longed to flay him. Then, sincerely repentant for having aggravated her woes, he humbly begged her pardon, and took her out for a walk with Nixie to cool her cheeks and calm her ruffled nerves. When she returned, Phyllis had taken it upon herself to disregard her wishes, and had basted in the refractory sleeves for her, which, like everything else, had yielded to Phyllis's charm and gone meekly into place. From this point Bab's path was smooth before her, and the last of the three waists, the first attempt of the girls at practical work, was brought to a triumphant finish.

There was real pleasure in using their wits in these things, the girls found; there was truly a bright side to poverty. But the ugly side remained—the jealousy of the three girls who were their opposites at table, as well as literally, and who disliked the Wyndhams for their difference in accent, manners, birth, for their unlikeness to themselves, for which neither side was to blame nor to praise.

And Mrs. Wyndham was ailing, fretting her heart out over the present situation and her poor

girls' future. And—hardest of all to bear—the landlady made them feel that she considered the rate of their board insufficient to remunerate her for the immense, though to them imperceptible, generosity with which she served them. [74]

But the most serious aspect of the anxieties closing in around the Wyndhams was that, in spite of all their prudence, money slipped away, laundry bills took on alarming proportions, and they had never dreamed how fast five-cent car fares could swell into as many dollars. Although they had taken care to make their expenditures come well within their income, they saw that there was not going to be enough to meet an emergency should it arise, and Jessamy and Phyllis talked till midnight many a night discussing how they could put their young shoulders to the wheel and join the great army of wage-earners.

CHAPTER V

PHYLLIS AND BARBARA ENTER THE LISTS

[75]

AUNT HENRIETTA always stayed until November in her cottage near Marblehead. She said that she never enjoyed the ocean until she was alone with it, and Jessamy suggested afterward that it was a trifle hard on the ocean—a severe remark for Jessamy, whose genuinely high standards of good breeding forbade unkind comment on others—even on Aunt Henrietta, though she was trying.

Immediately on her return to town, Mrs. Hewlett came to look up "her fallen kindred," as Barbara said. That young lady went down to the parlor to conduct her great-aunt to her mother. "It would make a lovely title for a Sunday-school book, wouldn't it?" she said, turning from the glass, where she had been inspecting the last faint trace of the mishap to her nose. "'Little Barbara's Upward Leading,' or 'Toward the Skies,' or 'Helped Upward,' or 'Mounting Heavenward,' or even simply 'Uplifted.'"

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"Barbara, I am ashamed of you!" said her mother, as severely as she could, while trying not to laugh.

"Now, Bab, do be nice," pleaded Jessamy.

"Nice! I'd like to know what could be nicer than to plan moral little titles like those?" said Bab, in an injured tone. "But don't worry; I'll be a sweet morsel when I get down there."

"You look thinner," said Aunt Henrietta, when Barbara had delicately touched the unresponsive cheek offered her to kiss.

"I *am* thinner, aunt; we're none of us waxing fleshy. Black Sally's marketing and cooking seemed rather more comforting than our present fare," said Bab.

"H'm! Where under heavens are your rooms?" asked Mrs. Hewlett.

"Just there, Aunt Henrietta. Right under heavens—on the top floor," laughed Barbara.

"Do you mean to say you have taken your delicate mother up all those flights?" demanded her great-aunt. "You ought to be ashamed of yourselves."

"What could we do, aunt?" asked Barbara, meekly, though her cheeks grew very red. "We were not able to make any boarding-house keeper give us better rooms at our price for mama's sake."

"Do? You ought to be earning money—three great healthy girls—and Phyllis only a niece-in-law of your mother's into the bargain! I came to talk to you about this," said Mrs. Hewlett.

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"Please wait till we get up-stairs; I fancy there are always ears about here," said Bab, and led the way to their own quarters. "'Excelsior!' is our motto, aunt," she said, pausing at the head of the second flight, and finding malicious pleasure in her relative's labored breathing.

"Well, Emily, the consequences of your imprudence are severe. I am sorry to find you thus; you don't look well," was Aunt Henrietta's greeting to Mrs. Wyndham. "Now, I want to get down to business without delay," she added, removing her splendid furs. "I suppose you are using your principal?"

"On the contrary, our living, such as it is, comes well within the limits of our income," replied Mrs. Wyndham.

"Really!" exclaimed Mrs. Hewlett, disappointed of the chance to find fault on that score, but swiftly rallying to another point of attack. "Then it is because you are living so wretchedly in order to keep these girls fine ladies. You always spoiled them, Emily; but your weakness really should have some limit. It is outrageous for you to be compelled to climb all these stairs, that a slender income may support four people. These girls should be a source of income, not a drain upon you; you can't be poor and be fine ladies at the same time."

"We hope that we can be, aunt," said Jessamy; "but you are quite mistaken if you think we wish to spare ourselves at mother's expense."

Only Mrs. Wyndham's hand holding Bab's wrist tight kept that small torpedo from exploding.

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"This question has been discussed among us, aunt, especially lately," said Mrs. Wyndham, quietly, though her voice trembled. "Jessamy has clearly determined her course; she has talent, and we all think can do good book illustrations. She is going to fit herself for her work, and we hope will be successful. From the first Jessamy has declared that she should prepare herself to do something well, and devote herself to one vocation."

"Jessamy has sense," said Aunt Henrietta, surveying the girl with something like approbation. "She is so pretty that she will undoubtedly marry before she follows any business long. I only hope that she will remember your necessities, and marry well."

"If by 'well' you mean a good man, whom she loves, I hope so too, Aunt Henrietta," said Mrs. Wyndham, with heightened color. "Bitter as our recent trouble has been, it would be unbearable if I thought it would lead one of my girls to sell herself, forgetful of self-respect, goodness, and true womanliness. Thank heaven, I believe there is no danger of what I should feel was a great crime."

"Sentimentality! You never were practical, Emily," said Aunt Henrietta, impatiently, but too

intent on her object to quarrel. "Now, how about Phyllis and Barbara!"

"I agree with Aunt Henrietta that I, at least, ought to be earning money," said Phyllis.

"Not you any more than me, Phyl," cried Barbara, with more warmth than correctness.

"Well, I cut out an advertisement from the morning paper for one of you to answer," said Aunt Henrietta, producing a clipping. "I want to help you get started. Barbara, you might try this; it would probably be easy employment, and you are too flighty for most things." [79]

"Thanks, aunt," said Bab, with double intent, and read aloud: "'Wanted: A young lady correspondence clerk in gentleman's office. Good salary to right person. Address X. Y. Z. Trumpet, Downtown Office.'"

"That sounds rather nice," commented Barbara, spearing the slip to the pin-cushion with a hat-pin. "I will answer it, Aunt Henrietta."

"If you write now, I'll post it when I go out," suggested Mrs. Hewlett.

"Afraid to trust me? I always do what I say I will, but I would as lief write now as any time," said Bab, and seated herself at the table.

"How is this?" she asked later, and read: "'The inclosed advertisement from "The Trumpet" noted. The undersigned applicant for the situation would say that she is seventeen years old. This note is a specimen of her handwriting; and for character, ability, personal qualities, etc., she can furnish best city references. An interview requested. Address,' etc. Will that do? I'm not so sure about the reference for ability, but I hope some one would guarantee my honesty."

"Mercy, Bab! where did you learn such business-like forms?" cried Jessamy.

"Oh, but fancy my little Bab—my baby—going down to business every day! There is no doubt that it is a misfortune for women to be forced to compete with men; I never could let little Babbie do it," cried poor Mrs. Wyndham. [80]

"I promise not to compete, Madrina; the men shall go on as if nothing—as if I, at any rate—had never happened. It can't do any harm to send in my application," said Bab.

"There is just where your foolish pride comes in, Emily," said Aunt Henrietta, sternly. "Your daughters are no better than other people's daughters; and every one knows that if a girl behaves herself no harm can befall her under any circumstances."

"It is not pride," said Mrs. Wyndham, stung to self-defense. "Nor do I fear harm, exactly. Unwomenly women are a misfortune to themselves and all the community, and it is impossible to knock about the world without losing something of that dear and delicate loveliness which, at best, is fast going out of fashion. If it can be avoided, I think no girl should be placed in the thick of the fight, striding through the world in fierce competition with men."

"If it can be avoided—precisely; but it cannot be avoided," said Aunt Henrietta, calmly; "for none of your relatives can afford to help you, Emily."

"Help? When did I ever dream of wanting or being willing to accept help, aunt?" cried Mrs. Wyndham, hysterically. "But if I prefer to practise stern self-denial to keep my girls sheltered until such time as they can help me in more feminine ways than you propose—or would let them follow if they were your own, I feel sure—is that wrong?"

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AUNT HENRIETTA.

"Not wrong," said Aunt Henrietta, with exasperating soothing in her voice, and entire conviction of being right, "but utterly foolish and impractical. Now, I have a proposition for Phyllis. A friend —an acquaintance of mine—desires a nursery governess. She has three charming children, and will pay a girl twenty-five dollars a month to teach them the simple things children between six and three years of age learn, take them out—in short, be, as I said, nursery governess; you know what those duties are as well as I do. There is no exposure to the world in that position, so you ought to like it, Emily." [83]

"Could I go and come every day, aunt?" asked Phyllis, while Mrs. Wyndham twisted her handkerchief nervously. This was bringing poverty home to her; she clung strongly, poor lady, to the hope of sheltering her little brood, and no amount of privation at home seemed to her like thrusting the burden on them, as did their going out into the world to earn their living.

"She would want you to," said Aunt Henrietta, rising, well pleased at finding her grand-nieces so amenable to reason—"amenable to reason" meaning, to her mind, as to most others, readiness to accept her opinion. "I wrote this introductory line on the back of my visiting-card. You will find Mrs. Haines at that number on East Forty —— Street, just beyond Fifth Avenue. You will do well to apply at once, for there will be many after the situation."

"You won't mind if Phyllis mentions that she is your niece, in case she does decide to apply?" inquired Jessamy, with meaning hidden under a gentle manner. [84]

But the satire was quite lost on Aunt Henrietta. "Not at all; you are only my grand-nieces, and my social position is beyond being affected by trifles," she said, in self-gratulatory tones. Then she went away, leaving a perturbed roomful behind her.

"Now, let me tell you, my dearest auntie-mother, that I think I'll try the nursery governess," said Phyllis. "Twenty-five dollars a month will nearly pay my board, and I'd be happier to feel I were helping. It won't be the end of my career, I hope, but it will answer for a beginning. I honestly think our beloved metallic great-aunt is right—that we ought to be bettering matters, rather than settle down satisfied to such a life as this. Jessamy and I have reached that conclusion lately."

Mrs. Wyndham was crying softly. "To think that if I had heeded Mr. Hurd we should still have enough," she moaned.

"If—if! Mama, what is the use of 'ifs' now?" cried Barbara. "You did what you thought right, and we can't bear to have you reproach yourself. My letter has gone, and we will try to enter the lists to fight for you like true knights—pity we're girls, for it spoils my fine simile."

"I think not, Babbie baby; a knightly spirit is quite as often in a girl's breast as in a boy's," said her mother, kissing her.

"The worst of it is that I feel so mean and selfish to let you all help, while I stay at home," said Jessamy. "But I honestly believe I can do more and help better by waiting and following my natural bent. You won't think me shirking? When even little Bab is answering advertisements, I feel horribly indolent and self-seeking." [85]

"'Even little Bab'—who is anything but even—is only a year younger than you, miss," said Bab; while Phyllis put her arms around Jessamy and kissed her as she said: "No one could ever suspect you of not playing fair, my crystal cousin."

Phyllis went forth in her dark-blue gown the next day to "secure the young ideas which in the end she would probably want to shoot," Bab said.

Mrs. Haines was at home, and came down immediately. Phyllis presented her card of introduction, and stated her errand.

"It seems absurd to inquire into the qualifications of a Miss Wyndham to teach children as young as mine are—but do you understand kindergarten methods?" Mrs. Haines asked affably.

"I am sorry, but I do not," said Phyllis.

"No; you would hardly have studied them, not having foreseen the necessity of teaching. The books can give you suggestions, and you can easily pick up those charming song-games. You sing?"

"A little; enough for that," said Phyllis.

"And speak French?"

"As well as English," said Phyllis, glad to answer one inquiry affirmatively. [86]

"Oh, then I should be glad if you would speak it with the children," exclaimed Mrs. Haines. "Fancy having a daughter of Mr. Henry Wyndham for one's nursery governess! What a land of reverses America is! Frankly, I made up my mind to take you the moment you came."

The vulgarity of this remark struck Phyllis dumb for a moment. Never in her life had she felt that the money standard existed. In her home she had been surrounded by luxury, but never before had she imagined that any one could estimate a person by what he had, or desire to know those who had wealth, merely for that reason. In a flash, the vision of a world of shams, snobbishness, insincerity, spread before her, calling forth the fierce revolt, the sickening repulsion, proper and natural to her youth and better teaching.

"I am not Mr. Henry Wyndham's daughter," she said; "I am his brother's daughter, but I have lived with my uncle since I was almost a baby, and neither of my cousins feels any difference between me and her own sister."

"Oh, but there *is* a difference; your uncle and aunt must have felt it, if the children did not, or if they were too kind to let you see it. They were very nice to look after you. Are you the only one who is going to work, now that the money is gone? Why did not one of the others come?" asked Mrs. Haines, with evident disappointment, wrinkling her pretty, if rather common, face fretfully. [87]

"Miss Wyndham and Miss Barbara Wyndham have other plans," said Phyllis, haughtily. Then, realizing that she was actually the applicant for a position, and that this tone would never do, she added, with the intention of influencing the shallow creature before her, though she despised herself for appealing to such motives: "I doubt very much if the world knows which is niece and which are daughters. We have always been to every one merely 'the Wyndham girls,' with no distinction to outsiders any more than among ourselves."

"How lovely! Of course it makes no real difference; you must come to me, just the same," said Mrs. Haines, brightening. "Would you like to see the children and the nursery? All mothers *think* their babies sweetest, but I *know* that mine are." And she led the way up-stairs.

Poor Phyllis! Her heart melted somewhat toward her future employer at this remark, but when she reached the nursery even her innocence could hardly help discovering that this too was a pose. No mother-light leaped into Mrs. Haines's eyes at the sight of the three little creatures playing there, nor did the children spring to meet her, as the three little Wyndhams had always sprung at the sight of their mother—mother to them all equally, in spite of Mrs. Haines's doubt.

Phyllis loved children, and her quick perception of the lack in the lives of these filled her with pity. She stooped down to them, and ran her fingers through the curls of the second child, a girl [88] of four, and drew the baby, another girl of three, toward her. The eldest, a pale boy of six, gazed at her steadily. "Who are you?" then he said.

"This is Miss Wyndham, and she is coming to teach you and play with you every day," said his mother.

"Oh, wouldn't it be better for them to call me Miss Phyllis? It sounds less distant, and I want them to love me. You will love me, won't you?" said Phyllis.

"Don't touch my hair; you'll spoil it!" said the elder girl; but the baby laughed and cuddled closer, and the boy said gravely: "I think I shall, because you've got such a lamp behind your eyes."

"Decidedly, one of my charges is going to prove interesting," thought Phyllis; but she only said: "Won't you tell me your name, and your sisters'?"

"Mine is Lionel Ferdinand Haines. What would you do if the boys up in the park called you 'Nellie' Because you wore curls? My mother won't cut them off."

"Then I should laugh at the boys for trying to tease me when I didn't care what they said; and I should try to like curls because my mother liked them," said Phyllis. "And the girls' names?"

"The big one is Muriel Dorothy Haines, and the littlest one is Gladys Gertrude Haines," said Master Lionel, and was about to propound another question when his mother interrupted him to say that she must take Phyllis away, because she had an engagement.

"Shall I consider the matter settled, Miss Wyndham, and that you are coming?" she asked. [89]

"Yes, please," said Phyllis.

"And at twenty-five dollars a month? Mrs. Hewlett mentioned the wages, I suppose?"

"Yes—please," said Phyllis again, forcing the last word, as she kissed the baby.

Lionel extended his hand to be shaken, but Muriel said "Good-by" crossly, refusing to be touched.

"I am engaged, girls," said Phyllis, coming into the room with very red cheeks on her return, and maintaining silence as to the discouraging aspects of her new employment.

Phyllis began her labors on the following Monday. Barbara, who had heard nothing further from her application for the correspondence clerkship, now turned to Mr. Hurd for help, and the little lawyer obtained for her the position of cashier with a friend of his own, where the young girl would at least be secure from many of the drawbacks to a business career which her mother dreaded for her.

But, to Bab's unspeakable mortification, she found that she was incompetent to fill the position. She made change slowly, often wrongly, and at night her columns would not add up right, no matter how often she went over them nor how carefully she counted her fingers. At the end of a week she came home crestfallen, having been kindly dismissed, to be comforted and petted by her mother and the girls. Accomplishments she had, but practical knowledge, especially [90] arithmetic, she lacked. Phyllis had been right, in the first place, when she said they were not able to compete with their inferiors in doing the serious work of the world.

After this experience, Mr. Hurd placed Barbara in an office to address envelops. This she did well, for her fingers and brain were quick; but she was far from an expert, and her salary was but three dollars and a half a week. Fortunately, the office was within walking distance for her, so that car fare did not have to be deducted from this magnificent result of six days' labor.

Jessamy was working hard at her drawing. Phyllis said little of her daily experiences, from which her family concluded that they were not wholly pleasant.

A single ray of hope shone out of the gloom for Phyllis. A little story she had written was accepted by one of the large syndicates and paid for—fifteen dollars. The money was not much, though it was more than half of what she was paid monthly by Mrs. Haines; but the glory and the hope it shed on the future were invaluable.

On the whole, Phyllis and Barbara found their entrance into the lists not easy, and the blows of the tourney hard, but they kept on with a courage fine to see.

They all felt that in some way their skies would brighten when Mrs. Van Alyn returned; she was their "Lady from Philadelphia," and would be sure to find a way through their difficulties. But Mrs. Van Alyn had gone to England till February, and in the meantime the Wyndhams struggled on to the best of their ability.

CHAPTER VI

MARK TAPLEY'S KIND OF DAYS

[91]

PHYLLIS was finding her occupation trying. The children had not been accustomed to obedience, and Muriel proved intractable; Phyllis could neither win her affection nor subdue her by sternness. Lionel minded her because he loved her; in a week's time the boy had become her doglike adorer, and Phyllis loved him with pitying tenderness. The baby was like a little garden patch with the sun shining upon it through the tree branches, in alternate sunshine and shadow, and her obedience was patchy, too; no child more properly deserved the insignia of "a little curl right in the middle of her forehead." But she was only the baby; no one could take very seriously the misdemeanors of a mite of three, and Gladys was a dear mite when she was not the other sort.

It was hard to assume the charge of three children for six hours a day; hard to bring them, and herself as well, into the discipline of stated hours and tasks; not easy to take them out to walk, [92] and feel perfectly independent and indifferent to the possibility of meeting old acquaintances when thus employed.

But the hardest thing about her new life to Phyllis was the insight it gave her into a manner of living which shocked and tortured her, for Phyllis was a conscientious girl, and the first actual contact with the worldly side of the world is bitter to such as she. Mrs. Haines did not love her children. Sometimes, when they were beautifully dressed, she flattered them and devoured them with kisses; but more frequently she repulsed them, scolded them petulantly and unjustly, and answered their questions with a fretful "Don't bother me! I don't know; ask Miss Wyndham." Sometimes she would say in their hearing that she detested children; that they all ought to be fastened up in the barrel Holmes suggested and fed through the bunghole; and that she would give anything if she were free to have a good time like other young women. And Phyllis could see Lionel's lips quiver and then set hard at these speeches, and she knew the little lad understood that though he had a mother, he had not her love, but was a burden to her.

It made her sick at heart; less experienced than her tiny charges, she had never for a moment dreamed that a woman who had children could do less than love them beyond all the world, holding no pleasure, no admiration, worth a thought while her babies' little arms clung to her. But Mrs. Haines boasted the flattery she received. Evidently husband, as well as children, was [93] nothing to her beside her idea of pleasure; and honest Phyllis went home daily, heavy in mind and foot, weary with loathing more than with work.

Tom saw that she was looking blue and ill, and he made it his business to come home her way and meet her, and try to cheer her into forgetfulness of the annoyances of which he was ignorant; for Phyllis could not reconcile it with her standard of honor to talk to any one of what she saw in the home to which she had been admitted. Yet she longed to ask some one if all the world, but her own narrow one, was like this new one; Jessamy and Bab knew no better than she, and her aunt was too ill to be troubled.

Mrs. Haines soon discovered the handsome young fellow who came to meet her governess, and rallied Phyllis on what she called "her conquest." "I hear you have an admirer, my dear," she said.

Phyllis flushed scarlet with indignation. "Tom is a dear boy, like a brother to all of us," she said. "There isn't the least silly thing about him; we are only girls, and we don't want nor think of flirtations."

Mrs. Haines laughed with contemptuous good nature. "Would it be silly in him to admire you?" she asked. "As to the rest of it, girls you may be, but children you are not; I was no older than you when I married, and am only seven years older than you are now."

"My aunt has taught us that love and marriage are so sacred and solemn that we must never think nor speak of them lightly, and, above all things, never spoil our lives and hearts by flirting," [94] said Phyllis, trying to speak without excitement.

"Very good teaching; very poor practice, my dear," laughed Mrs. Haines. "Do you want to be three little gray nuns? But I hoped this 'Tom' of yours might prove something more serious than a flirtation—that is, if he has any money; your business is to marry well, under your present circumstances; don't go in for romance."

"I never think of marrying, Mrs. Haines; I am much too young and girlish. But I would rather die than marry just for money," said Phyllis.

"See here, Miss Wyndham; I was a poor girl too," said Mrs. Haines. "I had just about enough money for gloves and hats, but not for gowns and shoes. My husband is fourteen years older than I; do you think I cared for him? Not a bit, but I married him at nineteen, and now I have a fine house, carriage, everything I want, and more beaux to say I'm pretty than most girls of my age. Don't you think I was sensible?"

In spite of herself, Phyllis shuddered; she thought of Mr. Haines's solitary breakfasts, frequent dinners at the club, the unloved children, and realized how blessed she had been in her bringing up.

"There are better things than money, Mrs. Haines," she said, almost pitying the little creature before her, hardly, as she said, older than herself, yet so frankly pagan and sordid. "I would

rather work till I died working than—"

She stopped, frightened at her own boldness. Mrs. Haines looked at her, understanding what she did not say. "There will always be these two kinds of people," she said, and Phyllis wondered, not quite comprehending. [95]

Phyllis met Tom with a sensation of relief, as well as pleasure; he looked so manly, so reliable. "It's no use, Tom," she said. "I've been trying not to tell you, but I must. Is it I or the world that's out of joint?"

"On general principles, I can assure you that it's not you, Phyllis; you're all right. But, if I might, I should like to have something more explicit," said Tom, looking very kindly down on the flushed, earnest face.

Phyllis began at the beginning, and poured forth to Tom all the matters that had distressed her in the Haines household, ending with the conversation of the afternoon, suppressing his part in the theme.

"Well, what do you want me to tell you, Phyllis?" asked Tom. "Surely you don't have to question whether you or a heartless, flirting, worldly woman is right? Or whether any woman worth the name will sell herself for an establishment and clothes?"

"No, not that; right is right, and wrong is wrong—" began Phyllis.

"Always," broke in Tom.

"Yes, I know; but what makes me downright sick is the fear that dear auntie has kept us shut away from a world that is full of this sort of thing—that all the world is like this," cried Phyllis. "Are we different from the rest of the world? These last months have frightened me." [96]

"Not much wonder," said Tom, heartily. "Poor little soul! Now, look here, Phyllis; you're not different from all the world, but you're different from lots of it. The best never gets run out, but it runs low often. You've been given the highest standards in all things, and they can never be common. It is much easier to be bad than good for people who start crooked; you started straight, you and Jessamy and Bab. All you've got to do is to be yourself and not worry. Keep your own ideas, and steer by them, and let the rest go. Do you suppose I don't see heaps and piles of things I hate? More than you ever will, because a fellow runs up against the world as no girl does. I'd like to be able to tell you I see none but sweet, modest, true girls; but, honest, I see fewer of them than the other kind. Girls make me sick, though I feel mean to say it; they wouldn't if I didn't think they are so much better than we are when they are nice. You see, Phyllis, girls don't understand that the whole world is in their hands; we're all what women, young and old, make us. Now, you and I had good mothers and sisters. When I went away my oldest sister—she's past thirty—talked to me. 'Shut your eyes to the bold girls, Tom,' she said, 'and make no woman friend you would not introduce to your sisters. Keep your ideals, and be sure there will always be sweet, wholesome girls to save the world.' So I have been shutting my eyes to the strong-minded sisterhood, and the giddy ones too; and just when I needed you, because I was getting too lonely, [97] the Wyndhams turned up, thank heaven! So you'll find it, Phyl; it's a queer, crooked old world, but there are straight folk in it. Keep your ideals, miss, as my sister told me, and 'gang your ways,' And don't take it so hard that there is wrong and injustice in the world. That's being morbid. You'll get used to it; it's only your first plunge that costs; the world's like the ocean in that. And there's heaps of good lying around, mixed up with bad too, sometimes, and that's what no young person sees at first. You know I am ever so much older than you because I've had my eyes opened longer. Don't you get to thinking it's a bad world; it's a good one. The Lord saw that, and said so, when it was first made. Thus endeth my first lesson. I never talked so much in my life at a stretch. Come into this drug-store for hot coffee; you look fagged."

"You're such a comfort, Tom," said Phyllis. "I feel much better. There was no use in talking to Jessamy or Bab, because we all know no more nor less than one another, but I wanted straightening out. And auntie looks so ill of late, don't you think so?"

Tom looked very serious. "I think she is ill, Phyllis," he said. "There is nothing the matter with her, except one of the worst things: she is exhausted, worn out with fret and trouble. She doesn't get enough nourishment; she needs nursing."

"Oh, I see it, Tom," cried Phyllis, as they left the soda-fountain. "What can I do?"

"Take care of yourself, for one thing; you don't look right, either," said Tom. [98]

"I feel dragging—that's the only word I know for it," said Phyllis. "And Lionel is pale and languid. I wonder if the child and I are both getting ready to be ill."

"Poor little beggar, I hope he isn't," said Tom; "but that would be nothing to your coming down. I'm going to fix you up some quinine and calisaya; I am not pleased with you of late, Miss Phyllis."

Four days later Phyllis trailed her weary way homeward. The end of her first month of servitude had come; the twenty-five dollars she had thus earned lay in her pocket-book in four new bills. Her head ached, her knees felt strangely unreliable, her spine seemed to be some one else's, so burning and painful it felt in its present place, and her eyes played her tricks by showing her objects in false positions and sizes and occasionally flaring up and darkening completely for a dreadful few seconds.

Jessamy met her at the door with an anxious face. "Mama has given out wholly, Phyl," she said. "She is in bed and frightens me, she looks so weak, and her heart beats unevenly and feebly."

"That's bad," said Phyllis, so indifferently that Jessamy stared in amazement, then saw with utter

sinking of her heart that Phyllis looked desperately ill herself; if Phyllis, the rock they all leaned on, gave out now, what should she do?

"What is the matter, Phyl?" she cried, putting her arm around her cousin. [99]

"I have no idea. My head aches unbearably, and it seems to be a headache that reaches to the soles of my feet," answered Phyllis, miserably. "What does Tom say about auntie?"

"He thinks it is just complete giving out, as though that weren't bad enough! And he made me send for Doctor Jerome; he says he wouldn't dare take the responsibility of our resting on his opinion, so the doctor is to come soon, I hope." said Jessamy.

"Yes, that's right. I have twenty-five dollars in my purse; that will pay for several visits, won't it?" asked Phyllis, uncertainly; she dropped her hat on the floor beside her and pushed the hair back from her temples as she spoke, resting both elbows on her knees. "I shall have only the little girls, I am afraid, for a time; Lionel is ill."

"What ails him?" demanded Jessamy, her breath shortening; suppose it were something dreadful, and Phyllis had caught the infection!

"The doctor thought it might be typhoid; it was too soon to tell, he said," replied Phyllis.

"Typhoid! Is that contagious?" demanded Jessamy.

"I don't know. Don't be afraid, Jessamy; I am too full of pain for anything else to get in; I couldn't catch it," said Phyllis, with no intention to be humorous.

Jessamy waited to hear no more. Running across to Tom's room, she knocked impatiently. "Oh, Tom, dear Tom, do come into my room," she cried. "Phyllis has come home so ill I am more [100] frightened about her than about mama now."

They found Phyllis exactly as Jessamy had left her. Tom felt her pulse; her hands were burning, the pulses galloping. "She must lie down and wait till the doctor comes," said Tom, looking grave. "I'll give her something sedative that can't do any harm, but I'd rather not do anything more. Doctor Jerome ought to prescribe. Help her into bed, Jessamy, and don't look so hopeless, dear girl; all's not lost save honor, even though that's a good deal to have left. Phyllis is very likely going to have grip—the real thing, not a cold under that name—and though that is bad to go through, it does not need such a tragic face to meet it."

But Jessamy would not smile. "The Haines boy has a fever; the doctor thinks it may be typhoid; is that contagious?"

For the life of him, Tom could not repress a slight start; then he bethought himself, and answered cheerfully: "Not a bit—only infectious. Get Phyllis quiet in bed, and try not to borrow trouble."

But as he crossed the hall he shook his head like an old practitioner. "Not contagious—only infectious, is true; but Phyl has been in the same atmosphere as the boy, and may have contracted it under the same conditions," he said, rubbing Nixie's head absent-mindedly, as the little dog poked it into his hand. "I don't like it, Nixie, old man; I confess I don't like it."

Doctor Jerome came to find two patients instead of one. His verdict as to Mrs. Wyndham [101] corroborated Tom's; she needed nursing, constant nourishing, utter rest, and cheer. And, to make sure of the latter prescription, there was Phyllis! On her case the doctor said it was much too early to pronounce; typhoid was misleading in its first symptoms, sometimes; but—yes, it might be typhoid. He would do all he could to break it up, but Phyllis was decidedly ill. Jessamy must have a nurse, even though Barbara gave up her employment to help her; they were both too inexperienced, not strong enough to undertake cases in which everything depended on the nursing.

Phyllis did not resist the doctor's verdict that she should give herself up to being ill, though Jessamy fully expected to have hard work persuading her. She lay quite passive, her dark lashes sweeping her crimsoned cheeks, and only lifted her eyes to say, "Tell Mrs. Haines," and then sank into unnatural slumber again.

Barbara came home into the trouble very tired and discouraged over her own uselessness; she who had felt so confident that she could do anything had thus far been able to earn but three dollars and a half for many hours' labor; in the old days she had spent that in a week at Huyler's.

Jessamy and she had a consultation, at which Tom assisted, as to their possibilities. By their prudence in living within their income the Wyndhams had nearly four hundred dollars a year more than their actual living expenses cost them. But this income came in quarterly; a trained [102] nurse would cost them twenty-five dollars a week, besides her board, yet Tom and Doctor Jerome said it was of the utmost importance to have the best of nurses. "I have an inspiration!" cried Tom. "There's a fine woman I know of, disengaged now; she has nursed in our family, and she's all right. If Doctor Jerome approves, I'll see if I can get her, and I am nearly certain she would come for me for fifteen dollars a week."

"Then I must see Mrs. Black as to her terms; and how about the arrangement of the rooms?" asked Jessamy.

"The two patients must be separate; that goes without saying," said Tom. "You and Bab will use my room, and the nurse will take her share of rest where it suits her."

"And where will you sleep, you dear, generous boy?" cried Jessamy.

"I have a friend I can bunk with till you are through with the room," said Tom. "It won't trouble me a bit, so don't call me names, princess."

Jessamy interviewed their landlady, and had a tempestuous time. Mrs. Black refused at first to allow her house to be turned into a hospital; then she demanded an exorbitant sum for the nurse's board, although the room was not to be included. At last, when Jessamy, calling up the spirit which usually lay dormant under her quiet manner, threatened removing both her charges to a hospital and leaving the house at once, Mrs. Black compromised, with a mental reservation [103] to get even in the end, as the girls suspected from her subsequent behavior.

It would have been wiser to have taken Mrs. Wyndham and Phyllis to a good hospital, where a private room would have been no heavier drain on their purse than the present arrangement, and the accommodations better; but Jessamy was so shocked at the proposition that Doctor Jerome waived the point, and the nursing began at home. Tom's good woman came; she was the kindest soul in the world, and no less competent than kind. Barbara gave up her envelops to help Jessamy. With two patients she was needed, and even then there were hardly hands enough to render the service required. Tom ran in and out at all hours of the day and night; Jessamy felt that if she lived ninety-nine years she never could repay him for his help and cheer, though she devoted her life to trying to do so.

Mrs. Wyndham lay in that wearying state of feebleness peculiar to exhausted nerves; there was no actual danger, unless it were the danger of continued prostration. But Phyllis grew more ill; twice a day the old doctor came to watch her progress. The typhoid symptoms did not develop positively, but she burned with a low fever, and no one could foretell the end.

Out of the five hundred dollars coming to the Wyndhams quarterly from their total income, there was an excess over necessary expenditures amounting to something like ninety dollars. This was all the capital Jessamy had in hand to meet the present emergency; and underlying all her other [104] anxieties was the dreadful fear that she should be obliged to borrow of Aunt Henrietta to tide herself through the double illness which had come upon them. For her mother required all sorts of expensive food preparations, and Jessamy realized that her little fund would not take them further on the hard road than three weeks' distance, when out of it she had to pay a nurse, and that nurse's board.

Christmas was coming—the Christmas they had dreaded, at best, to meet in a boarding-house, the first since they had become homeless; but now what a Christmas it was! Barbara, sitting, as she did every moment that the nurse would intrust Phyllis to her, close by her cousin's bed, thought, with quietly falling tears, of what Phyllis had always said, that nothing mattered while they had one another. What if they were not always to have one another? What if Phyllis herself—dear, unselfish, sweet Phyllis—was to be the one to go away, leaving forever a void which no one could fill?

For Phyllis had become delirious, and raved ceaselessly of the horrible faces grinning and mowing around her bed; of the recent troubles, begging pitifully to be taken home and laid in her own big, pretty room where her head would not ache so. And she did not know Barbara nor Jessamy, but confounded them with Mrs. Haines, and implored them by turns to love the children, for Lionel was ill, and his head was aching inside of hers, which made him and "poor Phyllis" both worse, and they might die, and then his mother would never forgive herself. She [105] always spoke of herself as "poor Phyllis," apparently with some dim idea that she was unlike herself—another personality—and invariably ended every burst of delirium with the same appeal for mercy, and to be taken home again. Barbara had never seen delirium; these ravings nearly broke her heart, and took every particle of hope out of her. In vain Doctor Jerome and Tom, whom she trusted even more, told her it was nothing unusual. Bab, the light-hearted, refused to fulfil her title, but sat stonily, looking forward to Phyllis's death.

Jessamy, more equable, kept up a little courage; but she too was utterly inexperienced, and it was very hard for her to hope for Phyllis's recovery.

And so Christmas eve dawned grimly enough upon the two poor girls, and on them alone, for Mrs. Wyndham was too weak to give more than a sick woman's passing thought to the day, and to Phyllis there was neither day nor night.

Doctor Jerome came that morning, and looked more anxious than ever. "Your mother is doing fairly," he said; "but this little girl does not mend. Nurse, if you will get your scissors, I think this heavy hair must come off."

"Oh, don't—please don't cut off Phyllis's beautiful hair," cried Bab, while Jessamy clasped her hands, mutely making the same appeal.

"Nonsense, Bab; it will relieve her more than you can imagine," said Tom, sharply, who had [106] followed the doctor into the room. "It would all fall, anyway, after such an illness. It is better for the hair; but if it weren't, it would still require doing. Pray, be sensible."

The nurse brought the scissors, and with a few strokes the long, warm, dark masses of hair lay on the quilt. "That's better," said the doctor, as Phyllis moved her head as though at once conscious of relief. He left a few additional directions for the nurse, and went away. Phyllis's hair lay on a paper on the table; the sunlight, resting on it, brought out its rich reddish tint. Tom lifted a tress tenderly. "Poor, sweet Phyllis," he said. Jessamy turned away to the window, without a word. What a Christmas eve, indeed!

CHAPTER VII [107]

TAKING ARMS AGAINST A SEA OF TROUBLES

CHRISTMAS morning dawned clear and cold, with a few errant snowflakes drifting on the wind as if to show New York that the great Northwest had not forgotten her, but had only delayed its Christmas box of winter weather for a little while.

It is hard wholly to escape the universal joy in the Christmas air; and, in spite of anxiety, Jessamy and Barbara felt more hopeful than they had the night before. Then little crumbs of comfort floated their way in the morning, as the snowflakes were floating without. Beautiful flowers came to Mrs. Wyndham from Mr. Hurd and other friends, and the expressman had left some packages for the girls late the preceding night, which the chambermaid with the chronically dust-branded forehead brought up the first thing in the morning.

Relations had been strained between the three Wyndham girls and the less fortunate trio who sat opposite them at table; Jessamy, Phyllis, and Bab, finding their overtures of peace misunderstood [108] and rejected, had given up making them. But this morning the Christmas spirit seemed reflected in the softer looks under the towering pompadours across from them, and, hearing May Daly say that she was "dreadful sorry they hadn't any flowers for the dance that evenin'," Jessamy ventured to suggest that her mother had received lovely roses, which she would be glad to share with her neighbors if they would accept them.

"You're real kind," said Daisy Heimberger, flushing with pleasure. "If you've got so many you'll have enough for your ma and we, they'd be about 's nice a Christmas card as you could give us."

"We'll accept them with pleasure, and be much obliged," added May Daly, who, the Wyndhams had learned, was more ambitious than either of her friends.

"We was sayin' this mornin' that it must be a sorrowful kind of Christmas to you, and we'd like to show we thought of you if we knew how, or you wouldn't be mad," added Fanny Harmon.

"That was lovely," said Jessamy, heartily, flushing in her turn, and wondering that she felt so glad of a kind word from one of these girls. "We have had a good many more merry Christmases, but we won't mind if only my mother and cousin get well—" She stopped abruptly.

"Don't you fret," said Daisy Heimberger, coming around to pat dignified Jessamy kindly on the shoulder. "I wish you was goin' to the dance to-night like us; but your turn'll come, sure, an' most [109] likely your ma and sister'll be all right in a day or two."

"Thank you," said Jessamy, gratefully, while Bab added: "We're very glad you are going to have a nice time, if we can't; but we shall be happier if we can add to your pleasure with the flowers. We'll send them down, and if you wrap them in wet newspapers and lay them outside on your window-sill in the shade they won't open, but will be just right to wear to-night. We have lots, so don't be afraid to take what we send."

"All right; we'll do something for you if ever we can," said May Daly. "So long, and I hope you'll have something nice happen to you to-day."

This little incident made both Jessamy and Bab feel that the sun shone brighter; it is such a pleasant thing to feel one can add even a trifle to some one's happiness, and every one's good wishes and liking are worth having.

Then the postman came and brought Christmas greetings for the girls from several of their old friends, and a letter from Mrs. Van Alyn, with an ivy-leaf from Stratford-on-Avon for Phyllis, a photograph of Botticelli's beautiful little picture of the "Nativity" in the National Gallery for Jessamy, and for Bab an oak-leaf from the sleepy old English town whence the first ancestor of the Wyndhams had sailed away to America two hundred years before. But, best and most wonderful of all, he brought a note from Aunt Henrietta, which Jessamy read aloud to Bab after they got up-stairs.

"'My dear nieces,'" it ran, "'I am concerned to hear that your mother and Phyllis are ill, though it [110] would be more becoming if you had acquainted me with the fact directly, rather than leave me to learn it circuitously through Mrs. Haines. I trust Phyllis is not going to have typhoid, like the Haines child. Also that your mother will try to overcome her natural weakness. It is a pity she has none of the Wyndham endurance.'"

"Yet dear papa died, not Madrina," interrupted Bab.

"'I should have been to see you,'" continued Jessamy, "'but that I myself have been suffering. I have had a severe attack of bronchitis, and the doctor thought I should not escape appendicitis —'"

"Mercy! They're not much alike, except in having that horrible long-i sound!" exclaimed Bab, who grew what Tom called "Babbish" the moment pressure on her spirits was relaxed.

"Do be still, Babbie," cried Jessamy, and read on: "'Escape appendicitis, but the symptoms were caused, as you may conjecture, by acute indigestion. When I am able to be out, I shall go to see you. In the meantime, I send you each a small Christmas remembrance, which may be useful to you in your present circumstances. Your affectionate aunt, Henrietta Hewlett.'"

The small Christmas remembrance was a check for twenty-five dollars for each member of the family. Jessamy snatched them up greedily. No one knew how she had dreaded applying to Aunt Henrietta for a loan, and now Aunt Henrietta herself had precluded the necessity. A hundred [111] dollars! It would carry them more than two weeks beyond the New Year, when their interest came in; and perhaps before this windfall was used up they might be able to dispense with the nurse. It is difficult to be hopeful about anything with money anxieties to corrode one's heart, and for the first time Jessamy and Bab looked down on their two dear patients with courage, and pressed each other's waists with their encircling arms, feeling very grateful for the relief Christmas had brought them, and something very like love for Aunt Henrietta, who, in spite of ways all her own, had done a really beautiful thing.

Mrs. Black rose to the requirements of the festival, and gave "her guests" an unwonted feast. Mrs. Wyndham took little bits of the delicate meat around the turkey wishbone with more relish than she had shown for anything since her breaking down.

After dinner Ruth Wells came down, her basket on her arm, like a happy combination of Little Red Riding Hood and Little Mabel, whose "willing mind" could not have been as ready to serve others as kindly Ruth's. Out of her basket she produced a veil-case for Jessamy, a handkerchief-case for Bab, a glove-case for Phyllis, all embroidered in tiny Dresden flowers and wreaths on white linen, not in her spare moments—for Ruth had no spare moments—but in the moments she had pilfered from her work for her friends. And for the sick ones were clear jellies and a mold of blanc-mange, with bits of holly stuck blithely in the top.

"Oh, Ruth, how could you make all these, and how did you get them down here?" cried Jessamy. [112]

"That comes of having one's flat, and not boarding," laughed Ruth. "At least, as far as the making goes. As to getting them down, a little more or less, once you have a basket, doesn't matter. Your mother looks ever so much brighter."

"Yes; she ate with a little appetite to-day. But Phyllis doesn't seem to change. And, oh, Ruth! They have cut off her hair!" said Bab.

"Well," said Ruth, stoutly, "what of it? You speak as though it were her head. I suppose it won't be like the raveled-yarn hair on the knit doll I had when I was a little tot; I cut that once when he was going to a party, and was dreadfully grieved that it never grew again. Phyllis's will, I suspect."

"Come and see her," said Jessamy. Ruth followed. She really was a wonderfully comforting girl. Not a shadow of regret could Jessamy and Bab, watching her closely, detect as she looked on poor shorn Phyllis, lying quietly just then, the delirium past. Instead, Ruth said cheerily: "It will probably grow out in little soft curls all over her head, and how pretty she will look!"

And, as if to reward Ruth for her goodness, Phyllis opened her eyes, smiled faintly, and said: "I'm lazy, Ruth."

It was the first sign of recognition she had given since she became unconscious, and Jessamy and Bab clutched each other with speechless joy. To be sure, Phyllis said no more, but dropped away [113] again into that mysterious space wherein the sick seem to exist, and Tom was gone home to keep the holidays with his family, so they could not fly, as they longed to do, to ask some one just how good a symptom this might be. But the nurse told them that though it might mean little, it was encouraging; and Jessamy and Bab resolved to take it at its highest valuation—to get all the joy they could out of a Christmas which was not too bright at best.

Bab went out with Ruth for a breath of air, and they walked up town, passing one or two elevated-road stations which Ruth might have used, but that she preferred keeping Bab company. They came to a little church; its doors were ajar, and Bab proposed entering. "I think I feel like church," she said, and Ruth understood that tired Babbie craved support and help. So she did not suggest that she was due at home, but went in willingly. A strong odor of spruce and pine filled the air, together with a kind of close sweetness, the lingering reminder of incense used in the morning service.

"It must be a Catholic church," whispered Ruth. "What do you suppose that is on the side where everybody is kneeling?" The girls followed two women who had preceded them up the aisle, and came to a curious scene at the altar-rails. On the right side a small grotto of firs had been made, with rocks represented by unmistakable painted canvas. At the back of the grotto were little figures, dressed in bright colors, mounted on camels, coming in procession down the rocks toward the foreground. And in that foreground were far larger figures, some shepherds with [114] lambs on their shoulders, an ox and an ass, a man leaning on a staff, a young woman dressed in blue, with a white veil floating backward, all adoring a tiny infant, lying, with little hands clasped, on straw in the middle of the group.

"It must represent Bethlehem, and the birth of Christ," whispered Barbara.

"Isn't it queer? And do see those funny little Wise Men on the camels, and the big tinsel star," returned Ruth.

"Don't, Ruth," said Bab. She saw that the representation was childish, far from artistic, and yet that it had another kind of beauty. For old women and men were kneeling around it at prayer, with rapt faces or wet cheeks, evidently carried back to the first Christmas; and little children came and went hand in hand, kneeling a brief time before this quaint reminder of Bethlehem, then going decorously away. Sometimes, as the girls watched, funny round tots, in faded hoods or with tattered caps in hand, would rise from kneeling on the altar-step, so high to them that their shabby shoes stuck straight out in the air, and make a bobbing curtsy of farewell with the best of

intentions, but with their backs frequently turned toward the Bethlehem where their serious faces should have been. It was droll, but it was touching. Barbara was endowed by nature with the simplicity and love which enabled her to see beyond the ugly colors, the tinsel, the inartistic figures, and grasp the love and faith they were meant to awaken. It was a simple representation, [115] for simple people, and Barbara saw for what it stood.

She knelt in a pew, watching the strange scene, and feeling as though some magic had transported her far from New York to a distant European village; but as she watched and wondered, wordlessly her heart prayed too among these imploring visitors to the manger. "Mama, Phyllis; mama, Phyllis," she thought, but the thought was a prayer, every pulse and heart-beat crying out for those she loved.

At last they left the dark church, lighted only by the reflector behind the star and a light above the altar. "Did you ever see anything like it?" said Ruth, who had been less touched by the scene than Barbara.

"No; it is so foreign and queer, but I think I see what it means," said Bab, slowly. "Only fancy there being such quaint things among us! If we went to Europe, and saw what we have seen on Christmas, we should write long letters home, and probably you would think it pretty in Italy, Ruth."

"Well, I don't see how it could be pretty, but I suppose it has a kind of beauty, too. I am glad we went in. I'll take the train here, Bab, for I'm late already. Keep up heart; everything is coming right for you, and Phyllis is better, or she wouldn't have known me."

"Thank you, Ruthy; you're so heartening. I wish mama could take you for a tonic. I'm sure I don't know any other equal to you," said Bab. And she went her way alone, quickening her steps, for it [116] was growing dusk, and feeling comforted by the quiet quarter of an hour in the little dim church, where she had poured her heart out silently and it had come back to her refreshed.

The last seven days of the year slipped by with alternations of hope and fear for Phyllis filling Jessamy and Barbara's moments,—for Phyllis, because the question of whether she was to throw off the fever or settle down to long typhoid was determining, and Mrs. Wyndham's condition involved no present danger. On the whole, hope predominated; the times in which Phyllis had lucid moments grew more frequent and longer. Doctor Jerome looked more cheerful each day.

But finally, as if she knew that the time of good resolutions and amendment had come, on the closing night of the year Phyllis threw off the last trace of her fever and lay weak and white, but smiling and conscious, to greet the New Year's dawn.

Tom and Nixie came back just in time to hear the good news and rejoice with the grateful girls, bringing cheer with them; altogether, Jessamy felt that night, when she lay down to sleep, that her troubles were nearly over, and she saw light ahead.

She had yet to learn that the long days of convalescence held trials greater than those she had borne, though the haunting fear that had hung over her during Phyllis's danger was relieved.

In the first place, the January days fulfilled the old prophecy of increased cold, with longer hours of light; and the little stoves, to which she and Bab offered up holocausts of knuckles and finger- [117] tips, tried them almost past endurance.

"It really isn't the stove which bothers us," said Bab, falling back on her heels as she knelt before it, and raising a discouraged and smutty face to Jessamy. "The stove is like the rest of us—it would work better if it could get something to consume."

That was true; it took constant battling to keep coal on hand to replenish the fire. Mrs. Black was not interested in fuel, or, more correctly, she was interested in it to keep the supply low, and the result was that the swift-drawing cylinder stoves were precariously near being fireless half the time.

The matter of getting food for their convalescents kept Jessamy and Barbara's nerves quivering. Even when they sacrificed their own dinners, and toiled upstairs again with clumsy trays, hoping to get a warm chop, bowl of soup, or slice of beef to their mother or Phyllis, who was pathetically hungry and begged for plenty to eat, they failed in their object, though they went hungry themselves to attain it.

They bought chops and gave them to Mrs. Black to be cooked, bribing the cook to do them nicely; but the meat that had looked so succulent and juicy when it was cut, reappeared dry and blackened, with congealing fat around the edges of the plate, or else was so rare that Phyllis's hungry eyes filled with tears at the sight of it.

They bought beef and glass jars, and tried extracting the juice in cold water and salt, as Mrs. [118] Wells taught them to do; and they got a broiling-fork and cooked chops over the coals in their stoves till the irascible old man below them and Mrs. Hardy, who disapproved of the Wyndhams' friendship for Tom, complained to the landlady of the odor of broiling. Jessamy began to have a little line between her eyes, and her sweet voice grew almost sharp from nervous strain, while Bab, though she really struggled hard to "be good," as she said, found her naturally quick temper roused beyond her ability to curb it in the effort to obtain justice, if not kindness, for her dear patients, whose recovery depended on proper care.

For a month the two poor little heroines struggled on in a daily round of petty annoyances that were not petty when one considered what they involved.

"We're getting awful, Jessamy," said Bab, tearfully, one night. "We're getting sharp-tempered,

nervous, hard, and where shall we end?"

"Come in here, girls," called Phyllis's voice, still tremulous, from the next room. "Bring Tom."

Tom and Nixie had resumed their old quarters since the nurse had gone, and they both came as readily as they always did when Jessamy and Barbara called them.

"I heard what you said, Babbie," said Phyllis, motioning Tom to the seat of honor, and making Nixie welcome by her side in the big chair. "I heard you say you were getting horrid, and I've been seeing what a hard time you were having, and I want to tell you what we're going to do."

"It sounds rather solemn, Phyl," said Jessamy, "summoning us to a conclave like this. If we're [119] going to do anything bad, don't tell us to-night."

Phyllis laughed. "Hand me that book, Bab, please," she said, and Bab wonderingly gave her a volume she had been reading that afternoon. Phyllis produced from it a sheet of paper covered with figures. "What we're going to do," she said, "or what I am going to do, is go to housekeeping."

There was a shout of laughter from her auditors, after a moment of surprised silence.

"You look like housekeeping just now," said Bab.

"I look less like boarding," said Phyllis, stoutly. "Ruth Wells is perfectly right; we should be far better off in a little home of our own—'be it ever so humble.' It takes strong—no, I mean tough people to get on without home comforts. You and Jessamy are getting utterly worn out, as nervous and fretted as you can be, and if you put half the strength it takes to live this way into healthy housework you would have everything you need and not be tired, still less cross."

"Phyllis is right!" exclaimed Tom. "It's a miserable way to live."

"Of course I'm right," said Phyllis; "only this isn't living. Now, I've been figuring," and she held up her sheet of paper. "It costs us fourteen hundred and fifty-six dollars a year to board as we are boarding now. Our washing is about three dollars a week—that is a hundred and fifty-six dollars a year—and that makes sixteen hundred and twelve dollars. Then, I don't know what you are [120] spending besides for all these nourishing things auntie and I are having."

"I do," said Jessamy, with a half-humorous, half-genuine sigh.

"I am sure you do, and that it is awful," said Phyllis. "Well, now, listen; we are going to take a flat, wherever we can find it, and the best for the money, at forty dollars a month. We are going to have a woman come in two days in the week, to wash, iron, and sweep, at a dollar and a quarter a day, and that is a hundred and thirty dollars a year. And we are going to cook on gas, and spend about six dollars a month for our gas—Ruth said so—and that is seventy-two dollars more. And we're going to live plainly, but have nice, wholesome things to eat, and all we want, for six hundred a year—Ruth told me that too, and she knows—and that makes a total of thirteen hundred dollars, allowing a little margin. That's three hundred dollars less than we spend now; and who wouldn't rather live in her own dear little home, with all scratchy, maddening things and people shut out?"

Phyllis stopped, breathless, and the others had listened in so much the same condition that it was a moment before any one spoke. Then Bab leaped to her feet and ran over to hug Phyllis in rapture. "You dear, quiet, splendid old Phyllistine!" she cried. "It's just blissfully lovely. To think of you being the one to do it, when you're still so weak and forlorn!"

"Ask me to tea, have me up to help, and let me catch the crumbs from your table," said Tom. [121] "Phyllis, you're a trump, and you've saved the day!"

"Crumbs from the table!" cried Jessamy, catching her breath. "That's just it. It is a dream, Phyl; but how in the wide world can we do it? There won't be any crumbs from the table, nor anything to eat; we don't know anything, any of us; I'm not sure mama understands cooking."

"Auntie can direct a cook; I've heard her do it," said Phyllis. "And as to anything to eat, we'll learn a few necessary things, and do them every day if we have to. But I'm not afraid, with a good cook-book and Ruth to ask. It's better than this at the worst, and we shall save money, too. As to that, if we failed we could have one servant and still spend no more than we do now. You and Bab go out to look for flats to-morrow. You'll see I am right."

Phyllis's last remark settled the question; if they could afford to keep a servant in case they were forced to it, there could be no risk in the attempt. Indeed, Barbara would not admit that there was risk in any case.

Tom was unselfishly enthusiastic over the scheme, though he said he dared not think of his loneliness if they left the "Blackboard." But Bab hospitably gave him the freedom of the new apartment, and before they separated for the night the place was rented, furnished, and they had moved in. And, best of all, Tom had promised Phyllis a kitten.

CHAPTER VIII
THE TURN OF THE LANE

[122]

JESSAMY and Barbara were ready for their expedition in search of peace by nine o'clock the next morning. Phyllis had solemnly promised to prepare for herself and her aunt alternate cups of beef-tea and malted milk for every two hours of their absence, a task to which she protested she was quite equal, especially as she would be sustained by the remembrance of the errand on which they were bound. If they were detained over lunch-hour, the willing but overworked maid was engaged to serve them, a provision for possibilities suggested by Phyllis, who realized that Harlem was a long distance away and flat-seeking consuming of time.

"Phyllis is rather like the centurion in the gospel: she tells one to go, and she goeth, and another to do this, and she doeth it. That isn't irreverent, because the centurion was only a Roman soldier, not even a prophet," said Bab, as she and Jessamy toiled up the elevated-road steps at Thirty-third Street. "I wonder what it is about Phyl that we all yield to?"

[123]

"She is very decided, with all her quiet manner, for one thing," said Jessamy; "and we have learned that she is generally right, and pulls us out of difficulties for another. Wait till I get up, Bab; I think I've two tickets."

"What does it matter? Keep them; we shall need them when we've moved up town," said Bab, airily, as she dashed ahead and deposited ten cents at the ticket-seller's window.

They had a list of apartments to rent, cut from the paper, and they decided, after consulting it, to make One Hundred and Fourth Street what Bab called "their distributing-point," whence they would scatter themselves impartially over the neighborhood.

It is not wholly an attractive section of the city; Jessamy and Bab felt their ardor somewhat dampened after they had rung several janitors' bells, in uniformly small vestibules decorated with stencil-work on the ceilings and walls, and with little brass speaking-tubes, and electric bells, and, in many cases, with several small children munching cookies and staring, round-eyed, at the strangers. The apartments they were shown were not what they had dreamed of the previous night. They were tiny, with chambers "just about large enough to iron a pocket handkerchief on the floor," said Jessamy, forlornly.

[124]

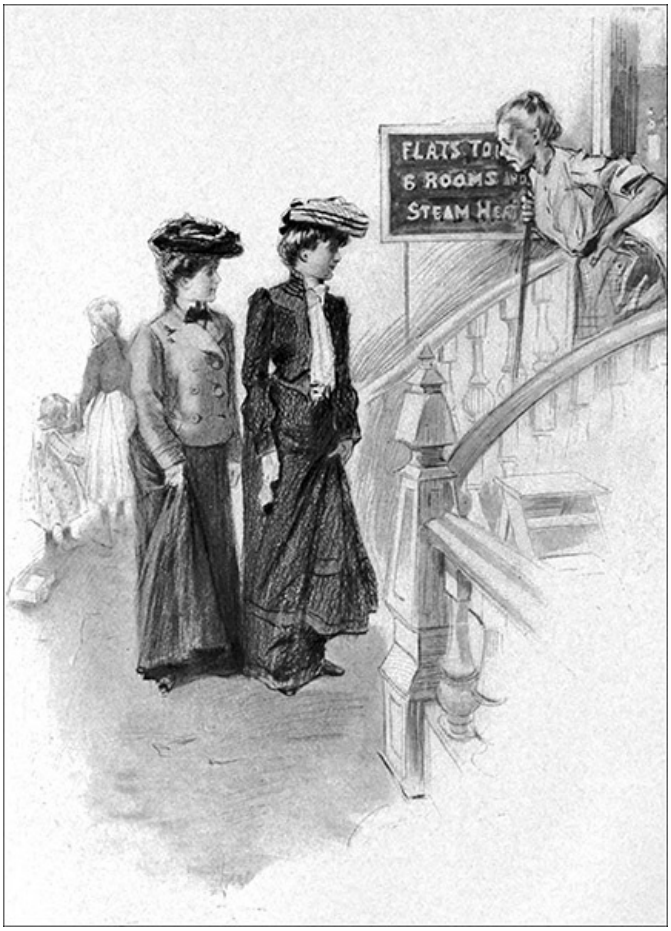
But Barbara said, "Where there's scope there's hope, and New York is large," and kept on cheerfully. At last they discovered a house further up, but still below the bend of the elevated road, around which, the girls felt sure, they would never be able to persuade their mother to travel. It looked very neatly kept; the janitor's wife, a ruddy German, showed them the rooms, up two flights, with no elevator, it was true, but the stairs were not steep ones. There were seven rooms in the little place, not large, but not as small as the others they had seen; the outlook was on a quiet street, the chambers were not all dark and aired from a well, and the upper entrance to Central Park was but two blocks away. The rent of the apartment, they were told, was forty-five dollars a month; but, since it was February, the janitor thought it could be had for forty. Jessamy and Barbara were unversed in the ways of landlords, and did not know that this was a method frequently resorted to in trying to enhance the attractiveness of unrented property; it had its desired effect in their case, and they quite trembled lest some one else should secure their bargain before they had time to report it to their mother.

"We will go to see the landlord," said Jessamy, making a note of his address, and hoping she did not seem too eager.

They got home, tired but triumphant, to be greeted by two faces so much brighter than the ones they had left that they were amazed, until Mrs. Wyndham and Phyllis told them in a breath that Mrs. Van Alyn had come home, and had been to see them.

[125]

[126]



THE EXPEDITION IN SEARCH OF PEACE.

"And, oh, girls!" cried Phyllis, giving them each a rapturous squeeze. "I got her in this room all alone and told her our plan, and where you had gone, and she thought it the wisest move we could make. And—and—oh, Jess—oh, Bab, I'm half crazy! She's had some of our dearest things stored away for us, and we never knew it! Uncle's big chair, Bab's piano, our desks, tables—oh, I don't know what they are—and photographs and casts out of our own dear, lovely old rooms; and now they will be all ready for this little home!" [127]

Bab turned white, then took a header into the pillows to smother the cry of joy which she could not keep back, but which her mother must not hear, while Jessamy, who had silently mourned her lost treasures as neither of the others had, dropped into the rocking-chair, crying for joy.

Mrs. Van Alyn had advised the girls to settle the matter without consulting their mother. She was so weak, so dead to all interest around her, that her friend thought it would be better to take her into the little apartment when it was ready to receive her, without giving her a chance to worry over the difficulties in their path—difficulties which, in her condition, would impress her more than the advantages of the plan.

Jessamy took Mrs. Van Alyn to see their discovery, and she approved; that made it somewhat better if matters went wrong later, for Jessamy did not like to assume all responsibility for such a radical change of which her mother was to be ignorant.

So the flat was taken, and then arose the question of "Only necessities, dear girls, at first, if you are guided by my advice," said Mrs. Van Alyn; "but buy good things, and select wisely. The articles I have saved for you out of your old home are rather of the nature of luxuries, so you will have almost as much as your little nest will hold of pretty things, which is fortunate." [128]

The new apartment was repapered from front to back, and the girls had the pleasure of selecting the colors. A soft gray-green in the parlor, a rich red, olive, and brown tapestry in the dining-room, light, cheery papers in the darker bedrooms were their choice, and entirely changed the effect given by the ugly papers which had preceded them. The floors were stained in the parlor and dining-room, and for the floors of the little chambers Jessamy bought tasteful denims, which were not only pretty, but would save labor in sweeping. The three-feet-wide hall running through the apartment was stained also, and black goatskin rugs bought to lay at intervals; they were real of their kind, and Jessamy abhorred imitations. The parlor had a pretty Wilton rug to cover it, and the dining-room likewise. Curtains were not among the first necessities, though the girls thought longingly of their softening effect against the woodwork, which was not of the best quality. However, there must be many things left for time to supply; the outlay for dining-room and chamber furniture was all their first quarter's income could spare.

Ruth was called into consultation for the kitchen; she and Barbara had a delightful morning in a hardware shop, buying bright tins and fascinating japanned boxes, and all the other homely articles—homely in the English sense, for they looked beautiful to the homesick girls—which go to furnish the most important room in the house. [129]

Jessamy, Phyllis, and Bab were wild with delight during these last days; they hardly knew how to

get through them, so impatient were they for the day to come when they should take possession of their kingdom. Tom was not less excited than they. Not a day passed without his bringing home some wonderful contribution to the coöperative housekeeping, in which he claimed his full share of coöperation. And at last, on the day before the Wyndhams were to move up town, Mrs. Van Alyn carried Tom off with her to the apartment, forbidding the girls entrance to their own precincts, and with his help set in place the priceless treasures of old association which her kindness had kept for them from a past more splendid, but which the present promised to equal in happiness.

And so the great day came. Mrs. Wyndham had been told only two days before of the home awaiting her, and received the news with rather more apprehension than pleasure.

Aunt Henrietta had been to see them, and had scolded the girls roundly for their madness, prophesying utter failure and expense far beyond their calculations, and telling them that it was quite evident they meant to kill their poor mother, putting a burden upon her she was so unequal [130] to bearing, for of course it was ridiculous to consider them, inexperienced, spoiled children, as either housekeepers or cooks.

But though there was a little time after this interview that Jessamy especially, having been the one who was inclined to doubt, felt her ardor somewhat dampened, it passed quickly, for Tom came, bringing in a patent washboard which did everything but iron the clothes laid in a tub in which it stood; and in the nonsense talked over it, and the lecture Tom gave on its merits, Aunt Henrietta was forgotten.

Phyllis had given up her position with Mrs. Haines. They hoped to save as much as she had earned there under the new arrangements, and her services were needed at home to do this. "Besides, you couldn't possibly be a nursery governess, Phyllis Wyndham," said Bab. "Won't it be blissful if we can earn money by saving it, and by making a home for ourselves into the bargain?"

Mrs. Van Alyn sent her carriage once more for her old friend's service. Mrs. Black "assembled," Tom said, to see them off; this time it was Phyllis who accompanied her aunt, and the two invalids were furnished with refreshments for the drive, and the coachman was ordered to take them up through the park at an easy pace. And so, in the carriage which had borne her away from her first home, poor Mrs. Wyndham, full of the recollection, too ill and too sad to share the girls' enthusiasm, rode away to her new one.

The trunks and all Tom's mad contributions to the apartment had gone away early, and as soon [131] as the door had closed on their mother and Phyllis, Jessamy and Barbara tore up the long flights to get their hats and jackets and hasten after them.

Bab seized Jessamy around the waist and waltzed her all over both empty rooms, singing at the top of her voice. The chambermaid pushed her reddish bang out of her eyes to see better, and grinned sympathetically; she liked the Wyndhams, who had been considerate of her, and she would have been glad to escape bondage herself.

"Oh, Nellie, here is our parting gift to you," said Jessamy. "We're much obliged to you for what you have done for us since we came here."

"Sure, 'twa'n't anything to thank me for, miss, thanks to you; an' it's sorry I am to see you goin'," said Nellie, wiping her forehead with her apron, for she knew from long experience that it was dusty without looking to see.

"Don't say it, Nellie, don't say it," cried Bab, wriggling into her jacket, both arms at a time. "I'm so glad I think I shall die before I get home—home, Nellie, home! Only think of that—*home*, and we have been boarding here since September! Come on, Jess! Don't stop for gloves; put them on in the train! Got everything? Oh, hurry! We must be there to look after Madrina and Phyl, and I'm wild to see what Mrs. Van Alyn and that boy did up there yesterday. Don't stop for gloves; I'm going crazy."

"You're crazy now," said Jessamy, but she tucked her gloves into her coat pocket, and her voice [132] shook, and her cheeks were crimson. "Come, then. Good-by, Nellie; I hope you will be well and happy. Good-by, old room; we might have left you sorrowful instead of rejoicing, and I thank you for that."

Barbara was already half way down-stairs; Jessamy ran after her, and they reached the front door breathless, to find Mrs. Black and Mrs. Hardy waiting to say farewell.

"I wish you luck," said Mrs. Black, with an air that seemed to imply it was a hopeless desire for any one mad enough to leave her sheltering roof. "You'll find housekeeping very different from having no cares and being free to enjoy yourself. I hope you may be happy, and your ma won't break down under the strain; she can't stand much."

"Good-by, Miss Wyndham and Miss Barbara," said Mrs. Hardy. "I thought, maybe, the young medical student might board with you. I hope you won't forget to send us cards to your wedding, my dear. I think you make a mistake to leave here, but I hope you know best."

"Did you ever dream of such a horrible old woman?" said Bab, walking indignantly down the street to Sixth Avenue. But these last shafts from the quiver which had pricked them so often in the past months could not annoy Jessamy and Barbara long, because they were the last; were they not going home, home, and is not home a word to conjure evils away?

The ride seemed endless to the two girls, feverish with impatience; the train dragged around the [133] curve at Fifty-third Street, and loitered as it had never done before at each station. But at last—at last the tedious journey ended, and once they had turned east out of crowded Columbus Avenue,

Jessamy and Bab fairly ran down the street where their apartment waited them.

They let themselves into the house with their own latch-key; the janitor's wife was cleaning brasses, and said good morning pleasantly, but with no notion of what a great event was happening before her Swabian eyes. How could she have, poor soul, since people move in and out of apartments every day, and few of them are young exiles, hungry for a home, come to take possession of their Land of Promise?

Jessamy's heart beat so she could hardly get up the stairs, but Bab honorably waited for her, and would not put the key in the lock—not the general, common lock of the outer door, solemn as that ceremony had been, but the sacred, blessed lock of their own private-hall door.

She threw the door open, clutched Jessamy's hand, who returned the pressure with interest, and together they entered their home.

How beautiful, peaceful, homelike everything looked! There stood Bab's piano, Jessamy's desk, and the pictures they had loved welcomed them from the walls like living things.

They ran from room to room, calling to each other, sobbing and laughing and kissing the [134]
inanimate things like crazy girls. Phyllis's desk stood in her room, and the little rocking-chair Bab loved best held out its arms to her beside her bed. In the dining-room they found silver they had thought never to see again, and dishes which, empty or full, they knew would be equal to food to their mother.

They made their excited way back to the parlor finally, and Jessamy dropped exhausted in the window, which was mysteriously draped with white lace, though they had made up their minds to self-denial in the matter of curtains. Her eyes rested on her father's chair, and her lips trembled with joy and gratitude. "Oh, God bless that dear, dear Mrs. Van Alyn!" she said, though she usually found such expression impossible.

Barbara opened the piano, and laid her hands on the keys. She struck two or three chords of "Home, Sweet Home," and then laid her head down on the pretty case to cry the happiest tears she had ever shed.

It was fortunate that Jessamy and Barbara had more than half an hour to await the arrival of the invalids, for neither Phyllis nor their mother was strong enough to encounter them while their excitement was at its height. When they arrived the girls had calmed down enough to open the door quietly and say, with only a little tremor in each voice: "Welcome home, mama and Phyllis!"

Phyllis looked white after her drive, but the color rushed from her throat to her short hair at the sight that met her eyes. She did not attempt to go further than the parlor sofa, where Bab led [135]
her, and let her cousin take off her wraps without an effort to help herself. She lay still in a trance of delight, looking from one dear picture to another, letting the soothing green tone of the room sink into her brain and rest her as if a quiet hand had been laid upon her nerves.

Mrs. Wyndham got no further than her husband's chair. She sank into it, laid her tired head against its cool leather, and burst into quiet tears. But even the girls, inexperienced as they were, recognized that they were tears which would restore her, that they stood for the breaking up of the apathy which had been the worst phase of their mother's illness, over which Doctor Jerome had looked gravest. And they felt certain that they had done well in taking matters into their own hands, and giving the frail little mother a home once more.

Bab, getting to herself again, saw that the taking possession must be keyed lower, and that they must get into the commonplace as quickly as possible if they wanted their mother and Phyllis to feel no ill effect of the drive.

"We shall now proceed, Miss Wyndham and I, to prove to you that we can build a fire and cook," she said. "We are going into our kitchen, and shall turn on our gas, which is the way we always build a fire, and light it with a safety match, and we shall take our new saucepan and heat for both of you ladies a fresh glass of milk. You will perceive, without my mentioning it, that [136]
everything we propose to do is new and up-to-date. You shall be served within fifteen minutes, Mrs. Wyndham, ma'am, with crisp, fresh crackers, hot milk, and a thimbleful of brandy, then you and your niece will be mildly but firmly compelled to lie down on your beds until luncheon." A program which was carried out to the letter.

Oh, the joy of preparing that luncheon, when for the first time Jessamy deposited the carefully measured tea—measured by the old rule of a teaspoonful to each cup and one for the pot—into the fat little Japanese teapot, and the unutterable bliss of peeping in afterward, with an air of experience, to see if it had "drawn" sufficiently! And the happiness of broiling the chops on the broiler of the gas-range, new and lovely to behold, if it was black! And the greater happiness of making cocoa for the invalids in the alluring agate saucepan, brought forth from the under part of the kitchen closet, to be useful for the first time in its gray, satin-finish life!

Bab was delirious, cut a slice of bread, and flew off to turn the chops; cut two more slices, and ran away to hug her mother. She set the cold water running, and Jessamy just stopped her afterward from filling the water-pitcher from the hot-water faucet. She set the table in a whirl, darting here and there with rapturous squeals at the discovery of some treasure she had not yet seen; on the whole, did all a mad child could do to prove that Aunt Henrietta was right, and that she was "flighty" and unreliable.

Jessamy took her happiness in another way. She went about with an uplifted look on her lovely [137]
face, touched everything with a kind of reverence, brooding over the teacups and lifting the butter-jar as if they were little babies. She forgot nothing, left nothing undone, and when she

went in to say, with an assumption of what she intended for a commonplace manner, though her voice would quiver: "Lunch is ready, mama; come, Phyllis," she called them to a meal perfect, so far as it went, thanks to her and in spite of Bab's temporary insanity.

Tom and Ruth came to that first dinner. Tom had camped out, and insisted on cooking the steak. Ruth showed the girls how to boil potatoes so that they would neither crumble to bits nor emerge water-soaked from the hot water. Ruth also taught them to prepare the canned peas so that the flavor of the tin would be taken from them; and more than this they did not attempt, beyond cutting oranges into flower shapes for dessert, and making black coffee, which the girls had supposed a simple accomplishment until Ruth explained to them the many ways in which they could spoil it.

Nixie had a brilliant red bow, which he despised, on his collar for the occasion, and was fed in turn by every one till he could eat no more and retired to the front of the radiator to meditate on the advantages of housekeeping.

Mrs. Wyndham made an effort, and took her place at the head of her table to please the girls, and really showed such an improved appetite that Jessamy and Barbara forgot theirs in the joy of [138] watching her. And Phyllis did her duty by the tender steak as only fever and half a year of "Blackboard" steaks could make her. Jessamy and Bab made a dinner chiefly of rapture; it was all so wonderful, so blissful, that they did not crave ordinary food, but beamed on their family in satisfaction that was as nourishing—for once—as steak.

Tom donned one of the new plaid gingham aprons provided for the young housekeepers and helped with the dishes. It was only a game, new and fascinating, this first time to wash even the greasy broiler; but Ruth had shown them the charm of ammonia and a patent preparation of potash, and even dainty Jessamy faced the prospect of future pans fearlessly.

"Now, I've one more contribution to this mansion," said Tom. "I wanted to show it to you when I came, but I feared for my dinner. Your mother has it in the parlor. It's for you, Phyllis."

"Is it—" began Phyllis, but Tom interrupted her. "Don't guess; come and see, all of you."

Phyllis fairly jumped from the rocking-chair, where she had been installed in range of the kitchen door to watch the dish-washing, and ran, as if she had never been ill, into the parlor. There sat her aunt, and in her lap, curled up like a powder-puff, the tiniest, whitest kitten ever seen. Phyllis had it in her hands and cuddled in her neck in a moment. "Oh, Tom, it's lovely! Oh, if you only knew how I've been wanting a kitten! How did you get such a white one?" she cried rapturously. [139]

"I've had it engaged for you for ten days; we've been waiting for it to learn to eat; it's only a month old," said Tom, looking very happy at Phyllis's pleasure. "His mother is a white lady of most honorable reputation and perfect manners; they say all her kittens are models in every way. Hope he'll do you credit."

"He shall be called Truce," cried Phyllis; "because he's all white and we're at peace."

"Truce is not peace; however, it's a jolly name," said Tom. "I called him Antiseptic Cotton, but I don't mind if you change the name. He looks precisely like the little packages of cotton we use in the hospital."

"Horrid!" said Bab, decidedly. "Truce is pretty. I think you might let some one else see just the tip of his tail, Phyl. We like kittens, too."

"He adds the very last touch to the hominess of everything," said Phyllis, generously handing the kitten over to Bab. "Bless you, Tom, for getting him!"

CHAPTER IX

HOME-KEEPING HEARTS

[140]

THE Wyndhams had been "out of Egypt," as Phyllis called it, a month. Tom painted a highly decorative sign bearing the word "Canaan," in gold letters on a red ground, to be placed over the front door, because the Wyndhams were not only out of Egypt, but entered into the Land of Promise. Although it was not quite possible to hang the inscription in the front hall, Phyllis would not discard it, but placed it between the dining-room windows. The flat was the land of promise to them all, and each realized it in her own way.

Mrs. Wyndham was almost entirely well; her improvement had been rapid from the first, and she was far happier than she had been since the fatal day when Mr. Hurd had come to tell her of her loss, almost a year ago.

Phyllis was completely recovered; she was so happy there was no possibility of being less than well. Her hair was growing out in soft rings of curls, as Ruth had prophesied it would, and she had never been half as pretty in her life as now, with present joy and hope for the future shining [141] in her beautiful eyes. For Phyllis was dreaming and working; when household duties were done she spent certain hours of each day over her desk, and it was hard for her not to share Jessamy and Barbara's sincere conviction that her little stories were one day to see the light.

In the meantime, Phyllis had gravitated naturally into the position of chief cook in the scheme of domestic economy; she loved a kitchen, she took kindly to all that belonged to it, and her delight was to feed those she loved. "Phyllis is a real lady, there's no doubt of that," said Bab. "It is her nature to give bread to her dependents, and the term describes her in its dictionary meaning." With little white Truce on her shoulder, his favorite throne, Phyllis went about her tasks, singing from morning till night, happier than she had ever before been in all her short life.

Jessamy had found her proper place as the beautifier; she set every room in order daily, gave the touch only she could give to the table, planned, and went to market, and was no less happy than Phyllis. Barbara—what was her share? It would be hard to say, but she permeated the little home with her sunny lightheartedness, and never shirked any duty that came her way. "I'm general utility man and clown," she said herself, and, with proper modification of the latter word, perhaps that described her position.

She was growing older, Jessamy thought, watching her; there was a new note of womanliness in [142] her jesting sometimes. But little Barbara was eighteen; her birthday was the first festival celebrated in the new home.

The plan was working triumphantly; the girls were so afraid of the failure prophesied for them that they did not dare spend what they could honestly afford, and the first month's bills were under the estimate; yet they were flourishing, and needed for comfort and health no more than they had.

There were bad days, when everything went cross-ways from the beginning to the end of the day, as there will be in all households, even the best regulated. But when such days came the girls treated them politely, and pretended not to notice that they were crooked, as Phyllis suggested doing, and so they came less often than to people who dwelt on their deficiencies.

Jessamy and Bab were making beds one morning as usual, and Phyllis was out in the kitchen clearing away the breakfast things. Truce was on her shoulder; he was growing fast, but did not seem to think that was any reason why he should alter his custom. He was the most loving of small catkins, with golden eyes, and a preternaturally long, slender tail; he wore a scarlet ribbon to set off his pink-lined ears and pink nose, and the snowy coat his devoted mistress kept spotless by the simple method of sponging with soap and water. Truce never objected to anything Phyllis chose to do to him; indeed, he had "reversed hydrophobia," Bab said, for water had such an irresistible fascination for him that anything containing it was in danger from his meddlesome [143] little white paws, from the biggest water-pitcher to the most dainty vase.

Phyllis was singing, as usual. The two girls in the room near by heard her chanting, to a tune of her own:

> "Stay, stay at home, my heart, and rest;
> Home-keeping hearts are happiest,
> For those that wander they know not where
> Are full of trouble and full of care;
> To stay at home is best."

Then she apparently tired of Longfellow, for there were a few moments of silence and chatter to the kitten alternately. Suddenly she began singing to a swinging, not particularly tuneful tune, like those the little children use for the games they play in the street. This time it was a funny little song of her own:

> "Homy and happy, cheery and bright,
> New tins to left of me, new tins to right,
> A little white kitten to pet and to cuddle,

And purr back my peace when I get in a muddle;
A getting-well mother, three girls, and a cat—
My joys are so many they're crowding the flat!

Look out, Truchi-ki; you'll fall!" And Jessamy and Bab heard a saucepan cover drop, and guessed that Phyllis had put up her hand to steady Truce on her shoulder.

"Copyrighted, Phyl?" called Bab; but Phyllis, on her knees looking at her cake in the oven, did not hear her, and Jessamy put her hand over her sister's lips.

"Let her alone, Bab. Listen! She may improvise more," she said. "Now she's beginning to sweep, and that usually inspires her." [144]

Phyllis's broom flew, and Jessamy and Bab waited developments. Evidently Truce had dismounted, and was ready for the frolic sweeping always meant to him, for they heard Phyllis laugh, and cry: "Look out, Truchi-ki! How do you expect me to sweep if you hold my broom? I'll spank you, kitten; you've never had one tiny, least spanking in all your life." Phyllis always talked nonsense to Truce, whose name had developed through an Italian pronunciation of Truce, Truchi, into the Japanese-sounding Truchi-ki, which Phyllis said meant, "Trucie, ki-tten," but which Jessamy more correctly defined as meaning nonsensical affection. Luckily for them, however, all the Wyndhams loved nonsense.

To prove it, Phyllis began to sing once more, a long jumble of nonsense in one rhyme:

"Trouble found me where I sat,
But I didn't care for that,
Only learned my lesson pat.
Then I took a heavy bat,
And I hit old Trouble—spat!
And I gave him tit for tat.
Last, I drowned him in a vat.
Now I've learned to make a hat,
Wash a dish and sweep a mat,
And I think I'm getting fat
In this blessed little flat,
With my snowy Trucie-cat—
I'm so very, very happy that I don't know where I'm at!"

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[146]

"'LOOK OUT, TRUCHI-KI; YOU'LL FALL!' PHYLLIS SAID."

This was too much for the audience; two peals of laughter rang out from the bedroom, echoed by Mrs. Wyndham from the hall. [147]

"Going crazy, Phyl?" gasped Bab.

"I don't know, I'm sure, and I don't see that it matters," returned Phyllis. "I'm brushing up our own kitchen, and everything I've sung is true; I'd like to know what consequence a little more or less sanity is under these circumstances? Oh, dear peoplekins, do you think we shall ever get used to this niceness? You needn't laugh at my inspirations; they are real hymns of praise, in spirit, even if they sound crazy."

"I am the one to sing hymns of praise, dear little Phyllis," said Mrs. Wyndham, fondly. "No one was ever so blessed with three happy, contented, true-hearted props in misfortune as I have been."

"I'll tell you a secret, mama," said Jessamy, emerging from under Phyllis's desk, where she had been picking up scraps of torn paper. "I suspect it isn't misfortune. I have a deep-seated suspicion that it is just good luck that has come to us, and that if we had stayed rich we should have missed getting into the heart of things and the real fun of living."

"Now be honest, Jessamy," said Bab. "I have entire confidence in Phyllis and myself sincerely enjoying makeshifts, but I have a horrid doubt that you may be making the best of it. Don't you wish you could go about, and have all the pretty things you love, and do no housework, but merely be lovely all day and every day?"

Jessamy paused, her color heightened; she was too honest to answer equivocally. "Sometimes," [148]
she said slowly, "I remember that though we are rather simple girls, and like to stay girlish just as long as we can, still we are a little past nineteen, Phyl and I, and Babbie is eighteen, and I'd like to have just a little more girlish fun, because we can't be young long. The pretty things I don't miss much, because I have them, if I may be allowed a bull. So far we have had as nice things to wear as we used to have, because our old stock is not used up. And as to our flat, it is simple, but it has the right look, and beauty is not a matter of cost. I am very happy, and I am truly contented; your 'horrid doubt,' Bab, need not come again. I think this year has done more for us than we know, and I am honestly satisfied. But I do hope that we may be able to help ourselves; if only my illustrating turns out well, I ask nothing more—nothing better of fate."

"Why did you change that *more* into *better*, Jessamy?" asked Phyllis.

"Oh, because!" said Jessamy, smiling. "I'm not like you and Bab; I can't help looking ahead and wondering."

Barbara looked at her pretty face in Phyllis's glass, and the color mounted to her dark hair. She turned hastily to see if the others were watching her; Jessamy saw, and noted again that Babbie, like the white kitten, was growing up fast.

"Oh!" cried Bab, laughing a little self-consciously. "As to wondering, I wonder, wonder, all the [149]
time. It is rather like 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,' isn't it? When you're a three-feet snip you wonder what the little star is, and when you're a five-feet snippier you wonder less what is up above the world so high than what is down on your own level, headed toward you. I suppose even the most contented girls have to dream and get restless, don't they, Madrina—don't they, Trucie-pet?"

And she swung Truce to her shoulder, where he kissed her ear as she danced around, singing, "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star," in waltz time.

Her mother watched her, and sighed. She too saw that Bab was changing, and, mother-like, hated to have her baby less a child.

Tom—and Nixie, as a matter of course—were due at the apartment that afternoon. The big divan which had been constructed at his suggestion in the boarding days, was promoted to the rank of dining-room couch, and in this honorable position required a new cover. Tom claimed the right, as his part of coöperation, to help in all tasks needing masculine strength of hands; and both for his sake and their own the Wyndhams gladly admitted him to a share in The Experiment, as they called their housekeeping, which they thought of in capitals.

Tom was a little late, but he and Nixie appeared at last. The little dog and Truce were perfectly good friends, though Nixie had the lowest opinion of cats in general, and it is likely Truce held dogs in slight esteem, but his life in an apartment, secluded from the vulgar world, did not expose [150]
him to their acquaintance.

The dining-room was a medley of all the contents of the divan, ready emptied for operations, and Tom lost no time in getting to work in the three hours of light remaining.

"Pull the stuff out straight, and let me mark where it is to be cut," said Tom to his three assistants. Mrs. Wyndham sat in the arm-chair to watch the performance and offer advice. The new cover was a beautiful dark red, with the colors of the tapestry paper on the wall suggested and emphasized in the pattern.

"Make a notch here, Bab," ordered Tom, "and cut it off straight across. Then, Jessamy, you and Phyllis can take the piece that comes off and be sewing the pillow-covers, if you like."

"Yes, my lord," said Phyllis, rescuing her cushion full of needles from Truce, who was beside himself with delight at so much going on.

Tom stretched the tapestry over the top of the couch, and held it with a few tacks while he made sure the figure ran straight. Then he sat down on the floor and began tacking the covering on across the front.

"I've something to decide," he said, as well as he could with his mouth full of tacks. "I want advice."

"If we can give it, my dear, you shall have it," said Mrs. Wyndham.

"You know I am to graduate this summer—" Tom began.

"I advise you to do that, if that is what you have to decide," said Bab, saucily. [151]

"Barbara, my dear, pray let Tom speak," said her mother.

"Yes, Miss Impudence, I intend to," said Tom. "But it is the question of the next step I must decide. I think I never told you—please give me the scissors, Jessamy—but I have an uncle, my father's only brother, who had a son my age, and who was left a widower with the boy when we were both about eight years old. My cousin died; it was a dreadful blow to his father, whose whole life was wrapped up in his child. My uncle has a considerable fortune, and he said, when poor Ralph died, I was to be his heir. He has sent me to college, and now he says that if I want to be a specialist, he'll send me to Germany to study in some of those famous schools and under their first-class scientists as long as I please. And I don't know what to tell him."

"Is it a question of being a specialist or a general practitioner?" asked Mrs. Wyndham. "You ought not to consult us; we aren't competent to advise. Besides, isn't it chiefly a matter of vocation?"

"Yes, ma'am, it is a question of taking up general or special practice; and, no, ma'am, it is not a matter of vocation; it is a matter of expediency. I could never be anything but a physician; I never for a moment wanted to do anything but practise medicine, but I don't care which branch of it I practise," said Tom. "Specialists, if they succeed, are likely to make more money."

"But you say you are to inherit your uncle's fortune." "Surely you wouldn't look at your profession [152] merely from the money point of view?" said Jessamy and Barbara, speaking together and with the unworldliness of all good young girls.

"But if you went to Germany you would be gone ever so long," said Phyllis, slowly. "How can you expect us to offer you unselfish advice, when we should miss you so?"

Tom flushed with pleasure. "Then you would miss me?" he said. "That is the point that makes me hesitate; it seems to me I could hardly make the sacrifice."

"I don't think we ought to say one word to keep Tom from the course that is best for him, Phyllis," said Mrs. Wyndham. "You ought to ask some of your medical professors at college, and do what they suggest."

"I think he ought to consider what gives him most opportunity to do good," said Jessamy, "if he is not obliged to depend wholly on his profession for a living."

"And a general practice surely does that," said Barbara.

"Oh, I don't know; a doctor never lacks chances to help suffering in mind and body," said Tom. "It is a hard problem. Do you want this puffed or drawn tight over this edge?"

"The easier way, whichever that may be," said Mrs. Wyndham, smiling. "Either is pretty."

For a while Tom tacked industriously, calling upon the girls occasionally for a stitch taken in strong shoe thread. At last the divan was covered, and the four pairs of young hands packed it [153] again with the numerous bundles and bags of precious remnants taken from it.

Mrs. Wyndham went to her room, and Phyllis stood absent-mindedly gazing down on their neighbors' back yards, while Truce, from her shoulder, watched a cat on the fence with mild curiosity. Jessamy and Barbara put the pillows in place, and gave the last touches to their loops and ruffles.

Tom walked over to Phyllis, and stood beside her. "What do you say about me going to Germany, Phyllis? I would rather have your opinion than any one's, and you have not spoken." His tone was lower than usual, but rather as if the subject were serious than to exclude the other two.

Phyllis looked up at him, frankly smiling. "Mine?" she said. "Why, Tom, if I thought you would heed it I wouldn't dare give it, for I don't know anything about what is best, as you know quite well."

"But on general principles?" insisted Tom.

"On general principles, and if you really don't care which you do, then I think 'home-keeping hearts are happiest.' That little song has been haunting me all day," said Phyllis. "I hate to think of you so far away, alone, and for so long."

"You would rather I did not go? You would rather have me here, in New York, and near you?" asked Tom, eagerly.

Phyllis laughed, and pushed her hair, getting to an inconvenient length, back from her eyes to [154] see him better. "Why, Tom!" she said. "What a foolish question! Don't you know I would? Aren't you one of ourselves, and shouldn't we all be crippled if you left us? Unless it is much better for you, I should feel dreadfully to think of losing you for three or four years."

"Then I stay," said Tom, decidedly. "For general practice I can get all the training I need in our own hospitals, and I shall stay. You've settled it, Phyllis."

Tom repaired to the bath-room to get the black from the curled hair, tacks, and hammer off his hands, and the girls went out to get dinner.

Phyllis sang her own little rhyme of the morning as she peeled potatoes and dipped the cutlets in eggs and crumbs, but Jessamy was thoughtful, and, unlike herself, did queer things setting the table. Bab was silent; her cheeks were red, and her manner jerky. Once she ordered Nixie out

from under her feet sharply, and then sat down on the floor to hug him and beg the pardon he lavishly accorded.

At dinner Bab and Tom nearly fell out over nothing more likely than a difference of opinion as to a political candidate, though it turned out in the end that the man Bab denounced so fiercely was not the one of whom she thought she was speaking.

Tom went home early, and Mrs. Wyndham asked Phyllis to read to her and let the other two girls attend to the dishes. Every one seemed a trifle disturbed in mind except Phyllis, who was as happy and calm as—Phyllis Wyndham, and that means a very clear and peaceful calmness. [155]

Barbara washed the dishes and Jessamy wiped them in silence, each busy with her own thoughts. At last, when Barbara was putting the butter in the lower part of the refrigerator, and Jessamy was hanging her wet dish-towels on the line to dry, Jessamy said: "Bab, do tell me; did it occur to you this afternoon that Tom cared more for Phyllis's wishes in the matter of his going to Germany than for ours?"

"Yes," said Barbara, shortly.

"Have you thought he was beginning to like—care for Phyllis; I mean differently from the way he likes us—the old brotherly way?" said Jessamy.

"Yes," said Barbara again, her head still in the refrigerator.

"Lately? When did you begin to think so?" insisted Jessamy.

"Yes, lately; the last three or four times, perhaps," said Bab, not very lucidly.

"Phyl doesn't notice it, if it is so," remarked Jessamy, thoughtfully. "She is as unconscious as the new moon."

There was no remark from Bab in reply to this, but the cover of the earthen jar she was putting away was set in place with rather unnecessary violence.

"Well," said Jessamy, turning from the last refractory towel, into which she had forced a pin with difficulty, because she had not wrung the water out thoroughly, "well, maybe it is not so at all; we [156] mustn't get sentimental, contrary to our habit, and imagine things; but I really couldn't help thinking Tom was beginning to care for Phyllis. He's a dear boy, just as splendid and true as he can be; and if it were so, and she grew to care about him, it would be lovely, wouldn't it?" Bab withdrew from the refrigerator and stood up. Her cheeks were very red, but that might have been from long stooping.

"Lovely!" she said. "I don't see anything lovely about it! I think it is all horrid, horrid—likings, and changes, and growing up, and everything! For goodness sake, why can't we stay children forever?"

She spoke with such violence and excitement in her voice that Jessamy stared in amazement as she dashed through the dining-room to her own little room.

"Poor Babbie! I didn't know she cared," thought Jessamy, turning down the gas and setting the milk-bottles on the dumb-waiter. "She does love to be a little girl; and how nice it would be if we all could be little girls for years and years!"

CHAPTER X
DISCOVERIES

[157]

THERE were hints of spring in the air. The willows near the northern entrance to Central Park had a filmy, yellow-green effect in the distance, as if the coming leaves were foreshadowed in a mist of sap. The robins were full of importance, bustling over their spring arrangements, and the strawberry venders were adding their discordant voices to the necessary city sounds, yet adding, too, to the general cheerfulness with the scarlet-laden trays balanced on their heads.

The Wyndhams had prepared for a pleasant day. Ruth had come to spend it with them, and hem the ruffles of her new white dimity. Jessamy, Phyllis, and Barbara had sewing, and the new machine which they had added to their belongings stood ready, with its top invitingly laid back, in Phyllis's room, where the strongest and longest light came.

"If we had nothing to do but practise a little music, get through a little shopping, make and receive a few calls, we should miss all this sort of pleasantness," said Jessamy, touching up a bow [158] on a hat she was trimming, and holding it off to look at it with one eye shut in true artistic manner.

"Half the best things of life are not to be met on the highways; it's the byways which are loveliest, figuratively and literally," said Ruth, contentedly.

"That sounds like a poem condensed into prose," remarked Bab. "Are you going to drop into poetry?"

Ruth laughed. "All happy people must be more or less poetical, I fancy," she said. "I wonder if Silas Wegg meant more than he knew when he talked about dropping into poetry in the light of a friend? If you're friendly toward life and people, then you get happy, then poetical; it's a clear sequence in my mind, only I haven't expressed it clearly."

"Not very, Ruth, and that's undeniable," laughed Phyllis. "I am perfectly certain Mr. Wegg meant nothing so complex. However, your idea is all right; I know from experience one becomes a poet under pressure of happiness."

"*One* does; the rest don't," said Jessamy. "Phyllis sings yards of rhymes when she's jolly, but Bab and I remain prose copies."

"Won't you show me that story you wrote, and Jessamy's illustrations?" said Ruth. "I'll solemnly—and safely—promise not to go home and reproduce either."

Phyllis arose and took from her desk several sheets of foolscap, covered with painstaking writing. She also produced several squares of Bristol board, and gave it all into Ruth's hands. "You won't [159] appreciate the drawings unless you read the story," she said. "We think Jessamy has come out in an entirely new vein, and never has done anything to compare with this."

Ruth looked at the drawings with surprise and admiration growing greater every moment. "Why," she cried at last, "I should think she had come out and surpassed herself! Why, Jessamy, they're exquisite! Dainty, graceful, but strong, and—I can't say what I mean—original is a stupid word, yet I can't get hold of a better."

"Individual, Mrs. Van Alyn says, and she knows," said Barbara. "The story is good, too."

"I can't tell what has happened to me," said Jessamy, looking very glad. "But it is as though I had been groping my way with my eyes half-shut, and suddenly I saw, and felt as well as saw, just where I belonged and what I meant to express. I did those illustrations fast, and I really do not think I drew one line with uncertainty. It is the strangest thing, but I feel as though I had discovered myself, and could do what I wanted to do. Even when I am not at work I feel the same certainty of power. It is the most glorious feeling! It isn't one bit conceit, but I can't lose the impression of being equal to anything."

"Well, I don't know much about artistic matters, either writing or drawing, but I suppose that means just what you say: you've discovered yourself, and if you have, you're bound to succeed," [160] said Ruth. "What are you going to do with the story and pictures? Have you sent it anywhere?"

"Not yet—" began Jessamy, but Bab interrupted her. "She must take it herself, and show it to one of the magazine editors, we think," she said.

"They say it is just as well to send things—better, perhaps, since editors are such busy men," said Ruth. "But whatever you do, get it seen soon."

"We are going to collaborate, and grow tremendously rich and famous," laughed Phyllis, putting the work back in the desk. "There's our bell; oh, dear, I hope no one has come just when we are beginning such a lovely day!"

"It is Mrs. Van Alyn, girls, and she is coming in there," called Bab, from the hall.

"I have come to be disagreeable and spoil all your plans," said Mrs. Van Alyn, kissing Phyllis and Jessamy. "Don't get up, dears; the end of the bed is all I want, for I mean to hurry off, and take Jessamy with me." And she pushed one side the scattered breadths of an organdie Jessamy was cutting.

"Oh, don't sit on Trucie!" cried Bab. "He's somewhere there asleep, after bothering our lives out."

"Dear me!" cried Mrs. Van Alyn, jumping up hastily. "Why, Barbara, you scamp, why did you frighten me so? The kitten is rolled up in the pillow-sham!"

"Did you say you wanted me to go out with you, Mrs. Van Alyn?" asked Jessamy.

"Yes. Where is your mother?" asked their friend. [161]

"Mama went to market to-day, and said she should sit in the park awhile; she hasn't come in," answered Jessamy.

"Then I can speak in ordinary tones; the worst of these dear little apartments is that the rooms are so close together there is no chance for secrets," laughed Mrs. Van Alyn. "I would rather your mother should not know my errand, for very likely it amounts to nothing, and I don't want to set her dreaming. There is a young lawyer of my acquaintance—the son of very nice people I met in the Berkshires—who had a desk in one of Mr. Abbott's offices a year and a half ago—the winter before the trouble. He thinks it is possible that he may be able to help Mr. Hurd prove that Mr. Abbott put his property out of his hands too late for it to have been legal, or at least that a part of it was disposed of too late. He has seen Mr. Hurd, and he sent Mr. Robert Lane—the young lawyer—to me, asking me to let him meet your mother. But I prefer to save her possible disappointment, as I said, so I am going to carry Jessamy off to lunch with me, and Mr. Lane will call at half-past two to see her. You know enough of the matter to satisfy him, don't you, Jessamy?"

"I know more than I did at the time it happened," said Jessamy, "for then I knew nothing; I have tried to learn all about it from mama since. Of course, I will go, dear Mrs. Van Alyn; you are always so good to us!"

"Nonsense, my dear! There is not much goodness in stealing one of you for a few hours; you are [162] such busy bees nowadays I can hardly get a peep at you. Make haste, or as much as you can consistently with looking your prettiest. Old Peter is driving up and down, and I am dreadfully afraid of him; he looks unutterable things if I use the horses more than he approves. Show me all your pretty things while Jessamy is dressing, Phyllida and Babette. Little Miss Ruth Wells, you are the quickest needlewoman I ever saw. I wish you girls could keep me here all day, instead of the exigencies of the law driving Jessamy and me away. There are never bright spots like this room in my house." And Mrs. Van Alyn's sweet face clouded; her three little girls, who would have been just the age of the three Wyndhams, had slept in Greenwood for more than ten years, taken from her in one dreadful week by diphtheria.

"Ready, Jessamy sweet?" she asked, as Jessamy came back, looking lovely in her gray gown, with the blush roses nestling against her hair under the soft brim of her hat. "Come, then; good-by, Phyllida, Babette, little Ruth, who manages to glean so much that is worth having. Jessamy shall come back safely, but late; tell your mother only that I carried her off to spend the day."

"Wouldn't it be nice if we could get some of our money back?" said Barbara, tickling Truce's nose with the end of his long tail, when she had come back from seeing Mrs. Van Alyn and Jessamy safely off.

"Nice! It would be just fine," cried Ruth. "Though that doesn't seem quite consistent with what [163] we were saying as Mrs. Van Alyn came in."

"It is a good thing we have learned all we know now," said Phyllis, thoughtfully. "We can never forget it, and be the sort of girls we should have been if we had never seen the seamy side. Still, that doesn't make it inconsistent to be glad to have enough not to feel uncertain of how we are coming out. If we all had wealth—even great wealth—again, which we probably shall never have, we should use it better than we would have before we learned our lesson; we cannot forget some things gained in this year."

"*You* probably will not," said Ruth, smiling to herself, as if she knew something that amused her in that connection.

Phyllis and Bab looked up, the former wonderingly, the latter with a sharp look; her tone was a trifle sharp also as she asked: "What, for instance?"

"Making croquettes," laughed Ruth, with a teasing look. "I suspect some of you have gained more than you realize."

"Why this Guy Fawkes—only an amiable Guy Fawkes—manner, Ruth?" asked Phyllis. "One would think there were something funny about it, and we were talking quite seriously. Bab and I are out of the joke; what is it?"

"You have gained a kitten, haven't you?" hinted Ruth.

Barbara flushed quickly, but Phyllis smiled frankly, and said: "Yes, and a perfect one too, and we [164] have gained the friendship of Nixie and Nixie's master, and I suppose Tom is more than even Truce; at any rate, I owe Truce to him. All that is not mysteriously funny, though; what is amusing you?"

"Phyllis owns the kitten; that is her personal gain."

"Yes; so far, maybe, Phyllis has rather the heaviest score to her credit of all the family. The matter with me, Phyl, is that I am aching to tell you girls something, and I don't know whether I ought to or not. It wasn't told me; I found it out, and yet it is a secret, and perhaps you won't thank me for telling," said Ruth.

"Does it concern us, and what has happened to us in the past year?" asked Phyllis, mystified.

"Secrets are likely to make mischief; I am sure this is one that will upset things. Yet you might as well tell now, for we shall guess it; it is the kind that is likely to come out anyway, isn't it?" asked Bab, in a manner most unlike herself.

It was Ruth's turn to look surprised. "You must have some idea of what it is," she said.

"I could guess," said Barbara, briefly.

"Well, I do not think this is fair," said Phyllis. "I seem to be the only one in the dark. Tell the secret, Ruth, unless you really can't."

"Well, then—oh, I feel mean telling you, but girls can't keep secrets anyway, and this is such a lovely one! What did you do with your hair when it was cut off?" said Ruth, speaking very fast at the last.

"I? I didn't do anything with it; how could I, when I was so ill?" asked Phyllis. "If you mean what [165]
was done with it, I believe each of the family kept a lock and burned the rest."

"All of it?" asked Ruth, knowingly.

"What do you mean, Ruth; what are you getting at?" inquired Phyllis, impatiently.

"Tom came to see me the other night," said Ruth. "He wanted to show me something one of his sisters had written him, and he pulled a lot of papers out of his pocket, hunting for the letter. A great many fell on the floor, and though we thought he had gathered them all up, I spied a narrow one, quite worn in the folds, under the sofa some half an hour later. I picked it up, and was going to hand it to him when a long lock of hair slipped out. Then I didn't dare let him know I had seen it, so I made an excuse to get out of the room and popped it into his overcoat pocket. But before I did so I saw what was written on the outside of the paper, and the paper was worn and had been folded small, and the ends were wrinkled as if it had been in a bag; I believe he had worn it around his neck, Phyllis. And on the paper was written: 'Christmas Eve, 1901. "Nay, but you who do not love her, is she not pure gold"'—Browning, you know! And the initials 'P.'—"

"Stop, stop, Ruth!" cried Phyllis, her hands over her ears, her face crimson.

"What is the use of stopping her at one letter? You have heard the whole story," said Bab.

Phyllis's face was full of a strange light; shame, regret, joy, shyness—all were there; but, above [166]
all, wonder. "You ought not to have told me; I ought not to have listened," she said. "But even if—if it were mine—"

"It was," interrupted Ruth, with decision.

"Well, if it was, what of it? Surely there is nothing strange in carrying a friend's hair, and especially when you thought she was dying," stammered Phyllis.

"You haven't been dying all this time, miss; and what about the Browning line?" suggested Ruth.

"Perhaps boys are like girls, after all, and like to play at being sentimental," said Phyllis. "It is mean of us to spy on Tom; I suppose boys like to dream. Do you remember, Bab, that funny little peanut Italian boy we used to watch for when we were about eleven, and how we used to wear a peanut for a badge to show how we all three admired him? Weren't we funny little monkeys?"

"I have some recollection of the peanut Italian," said Bab, "though I am not sure we could find that quarter of Italy on the map. It strikes me some of us are rather funny monkeys still."

"Trying to change the subject, Phyl?" teased Ruth. "Did you think sensible Tom would be your first—"

"You must not, Ruth; I won't let you!" cried Phyllis, in sincere distress. "Please don't talk about it; please never jest about it. I would give the world not to have heard of it. It doesn't mean one thing; Tom is fond of us all, quite fond enough to carry all our hair in his pocket—"

"That *is* a proof of affection," said Bab, laughing. "All our hair! Dear me! Still, I agree with [167]
Phyllis; we ought all be spanked for our impertinence; let's change the subject. If we get silly and sentimental, we sha'n't be able to stand ourselves. I hate sentiment, and I hate a fool, like Mr. F.'s aunt in 'Little Dorrit'! What a dear old lady she was; so sensible! Don't tell Jessamy this trash. Ruth Wells, I dare you to try a griddle-cake race with me at luncheon. We'll make the yellow bowl full, and I dare you to race me eating them."

"Why, Barbara Wyndham, do you want to kill yourself? You know they always hurt you!" said Phyllis, horrified. "And a race eating! Ruth, don't do it!"

"Why should I want to kill myself just when we're all so happy, and everything is going beautifully?" cried Bab. "Come on, Ruth!" And she gathered up her skirts and danced toward the kitchen, singing cakewalk music, and swinging her body in the real plantation manner.

Ruth, always ready for anything, followed her, while Phyllis went to let in her aunt, who rang at that moment. Then she continued her way, and stood leaning her hot cheeks against the glass of the parlor window.

Tom! Her hair! She had not believed a word she had said of it being only boyish sentiment. Was she glad or sorry? She did not know; it spoiled all the old, unconscious friendliness, but then it was beautiful to feel that dear Tom cared for her all alone, and for herself, not as "one of the Wyndham girls." Whether she was fonder of him than she had guessed she could not tell in this [168]
first confused pleasure and regret; all she knew was that she could not let any one speak of it; it was something to keep all to herself and dream over, while she was pretending to Babbie and Ruth that she had forgotten all about it. Whether she was glad or sorry, it was a lovely thing to

have happen to a girl, and she hardly knew herself for little Phyllis in the new light it shed around her. She caught up Truce, and laid his purring little throat against her cheek; Truce was very fond of her, and he was part of Tom's kindness.

Phyllis went back to the kitchen, where she found Ruth in a gale of laughter and Bab as full of pranks as a monkey. She mimicked old black Sally, then scolded herself, impersonating Aunt Henrietta, till Phyllis had to sit down and gasp for breath, and Ruth was so weak from laughing that she could not stir the cake-batter.

All lunch-time Bab talked a stream of nonsense that made her mother shake her head between peals of laughter, and warn her that such high spirits usually preceded the other extreme with her mercurial little self. But Bab was irrepressible, and both Ruth and Phyllis begged for mercy, till Bab seated herself at her piano and played dance music and made them dance till they could no longer stand.

"Now, who says three girls can't have a jolly time, with nothing but themselves to make it jolly?" demanded Barbara. "Phyllis, when Ruth goes home, you are to go with her; you haven't been out to-day."

"Is that a hint?" asked Ruth. "You needn't send me home, Mistress Barbara, because I was going [169] anyway. I promised mother to get home early, so that she could go out. Will you come with me, Phyllis?"

"No; Babbie and I are going to sew longer," replied Phyllis.

"Babbie and you are going to do nothing of the sort. You must take your airing, and I shall rest; I am sure I have earned it," said Bab, decidedly.

Accordingly, Phyllis left the house with Ruth, but she was not in the mood for walking all the way home with her friend. She went but part way, then returned, and let herself in with her key half an hour later. The house was very still, and Phyllis, moving softly, saw that her aunt was asleep in her own room. Passing on down the narrow hall, she came to Bab's door, and stopped short at what she saw. There lay Barbara, flat on her face, which was buried in the pillow. Stifled moans came from the slender figure, which was shaking with sobs so violent that Phyllis's heart stood still with terror; the first thought that crossed her mind was that something awful had happened to Jessamy, or that her aunt was not sleeping, but had died, and Bab knew it.

"For heaven's sake, Bab, what is it; tell me," she whispered, laying her hand on the heaving shoulder.

Barbara started as though she had been shot. "You here?" she gasped. "Where did you come from?"

"What has happened? Is it Jessamy?" whispered Phyllis.

"Nothing has happened; do let me alone! I—I have a headache," said poor Bab. [170]

"Nothing happened?" repeated Phyllis, sitting down on the edge of the bed, and gathering her cousin into her arms. "Dear, darling Babbie, are you ill? Aren't you happy?"

"Happy!" echoed Bab, scornfully; then she seemed to recall herself, and said quickly: "It's just as Madrina said: I was too gay, that's all; this is the reaction."

"Bab, that is not true; you were gay because you were trying to hide something," said Phyllis, slowly. "What is wrong with you, dearie? Tell Phyllis; you know she will help you."

"What do you care?" asked Bab, bitterly, putting down her head on the pillow and withdrawing from Phyllis's arms. "You have everything a girl could ask; what do you care about me?"

"Why, Bab, how unjust you are! As though I could be happy if you weren't! And what have I that you have not—" Phyllis stopped suddenly. An idea crossed her mind that made her breath come in a swift sob. Oh, surely that was not it; Bab was a child—"Are you really in pain, Babbie? Are you ill? Let me send word to Tom; he will help you; he would do anything for you, you know," she said, with sudden cunning.

"Anything you asked him too," said Bab. "I have known about Tom for some time, Phyllis. That was not news to me to-day. Of course, I don't want his help, nor any medicine. And I wish you would let me alone, Phyllis; I don't want you to touch me, or bother with me. I have a headache; [171] you said those cakes would hurt me. Can't I have a headache or be blue without being bothered? You all think I never have a sober moment because I generally am cutting capers. I'll caper again, never fear. But, honestly, I don't want to see you now, Phyllis. I hope I'm not rude, but you're driving me mad. Do go! I hoped you were out of the house for an hour or so. Flats are horrid! A body can't cry a minute in one. Go, go, *go*, Phyllis; only go." Barbara was getting hysterical, and Phyllis rose without another word. Her own face was full of pain as she turned away, and her eyes looked big with dismayed surprise. She turned back and kissed Barbara. "You'll be better if you take a nap," she said. It cut her like a knife that Bab shrank from her lips.

Phyllis went to her own room, and sat down in her little rocking-chair without taking off her hat. Here was trouble indeed, and childhood's peaceful days looked very sweet and distant.

CHAPTER XI
LOYAL PHYLLIS

[172]

PHYLLIS sat looking, with unseeing eyes, out upon the small courtyard below her window for more than an hour. All day her brain had been full of sweet, indefinite girlish dreams from which Bab's grief had aroused her into most definitely unpleasant waking. She was a sensible little body, and she knew that she was not yet fond enough of Tom to make it tragic that she must find measures to break off his increasing affection for her; nor was she conceited enough to believe that it would be fatal to Tom's happiness for all time to drive him from her. It was as though a vision of vague and beautiful possibilities had arisen before her, from which she must turn away her eyes; it was not that she was rejecting a present good, but that which might grow into a very precious gift in the future. She shrank from the idea of a lover yet, feeling too young and too content in her girlhood to tolerate losing it, but Tom was a dear, good, splendid boy, and by and by, possibly, when she was older and ready to be a woman—then who could tell? Perhaps she would [173] grow fonder of him—so fond that—

And at that point Phyllis had shyly stopped, even in her thoughts; but it had been delicious to dream, thus vaguely, all day since Ruth had told the mischievous secret. Now Phyllis felt, without a moment's doubt, that she must dream no more.

If Bab already cared so much that Tom's preference for her cousin could cost her such bitter tears, their source but ill concealed, then Phyllis knew that her duty was to turn away from rose-colored visions and try to bring about Bab's happiness.

She had a sorrowful feeling that when she had closed the front door behind her, and walked in upon weeping Babbie, she had shut it upon her first careless youth, and was beginning to grow up and face a grown-up girl's puzzles. For in stories sometimes two friends were rivals, and all sorts of catastrophes came from the situation, and one or both of the heroines had a hard lot to bear. Well, she and Bab were never to be rivals, that was certain; how absurd it all was, and how sensible Tom would laugh if he could know her thoughts! But, after all, it was not absurd, but the beginning of what might prove a real sorrow if some one did not prevent it; and no one but she herself could remedy the matter, if it could be done at all. Yes, she felt sure it could be done, and that there was only one way to do it. If that way involved sacrifice for herself, that did not make it less her duty. She would rather die than stand in the way of Barbara's good, much rather die than [174] be the one to deprive either of her adopted sisters of anything essential to her happiness; for they were dearer and more to be considered that they were not her own sisters, but the children of the uncle and aunt to whom she owed so much. Phyllis thought and thought, and it seemed to her the only thing that she could do was to drop out of the little home which was dearer to her, if possible, than to either of the others, and go away for a while, until Tom should have grown sensible enough to see how much nicer Bab really was than she. When that happy day had come she would come back; she hoped it would not be long coming, for her heart sickened within her at the thought of herself alone from home. There was that dear old lady in Boston; she would write her, and ask her if the place as companion she had promised her whenever she claimed it were still open to her, and if it were she would pack her trunk and slip out, and the blessed "square of Wyndhams," as they called the happy four constituting their family, would be a four no longer.

Above all, Mrs. Wyndham must not guess the true reason of her going, for she would never consent to Phyllis going away for Barbara's sake. Jessamy? Yes, she would tell Jessamy, for she must have an assistant in furthering her plans, both in getting away and in seeing that Barbara was helped toward the happiness she might miss if let alone; for Phyllis had heard that girls in love sometimes did such dreadful things that they drove off the blessing they craved. She had known such cases, she thought, then remembered that her experience was confined to the book- [175] shelves, and that the only case in point she had encountered was Hetty Lambert's, in "The Virginians."

Phyllis had reached this stage of her meditations, and had wiped away some quiet tears which would come as she planned giving up everything she loved, even for a time, when the bell rang, and she rose to let in Jessamy, radiant, lovely, at the end of a very happy day.

"Bab has a headache, and auntie is lying down," said Phyllis. "Is there any news, Jessamy?"

"Mr. Lane thinks the prospect is good of our recovering something," said Jessamy, going into Phyllis's room to take off her hat. "He is the nicest person! Beautiful manners, and decidedly good-looking—well bred, you know," Jessamy added, as if she could say no more, as indeed she could not, being the sort of girl she was. "I had a lovely day; Mrs. Van Alyn is perfect. Why have you your hat on? Have you been out, or are you going? It is nearly dinner-time. When did Ruth go?"

"Ruth went rather early; I forgot my hat. I walked with her a little way, and have been sitting here, thinking, ever since," said Phyllis, taking out her hat-pins and tossing her hat on the bed with a gesture as though flowers and their getting tumbled were beneath her interest.

"Anything wrong, Phyl? You've been crying!" said Jessamy, turning from the glass with a sharp look at her cousin. "What ails Bab? She never has headaches."

"There's nothing very wrong, Jessamy; nothing we can't set right," said Phyllis. "It is a story too long to tell you now, but I'm going to tell you as soon as we can get off somewhere together. It is a solemn secret, mind, and you're not to tell a soul—not even auntie. Don't appear to see anything queer about Bab to-night, and to-morrow come with me into the park and we'll talk it out." [176]

"Then it is about Bab?" said Jessamy, looking puzzled. "Bab, of all people! She was all right when I went away; I don't see how I can wait until to-morrow to hear the secret, Phyllis. It can't be very trifling, when you show no interest in getting our money back."

"It is just a horrid little snarl, Amy, but nothing worse; you and I will unravel it. Hush! I hear auntie, and Bab is moving about in her room. Let's put the kettle on; there's nothing like the kitchen for troubled minds! Don't you dare look thoughtful this evening, nor try to guess what I've on my mind by studying me, or Bab will see. I am going to tell you as soon as I can. Better change your dress, Jessamy; I'll whisk on my apron, and get the water boiling," Phyllis added in a louder tone, as her aunt came down the hall.

In spite of Phyllis's warning, Jessamy found her eyes wandering from her face to Bab's all through dinner. One she saw was clouded, discontented, very unlike its usually bright self; the other, grave, but patient and sweet: neither helped her to a solution of the mystery in the air.

There was no possibility of waiting for the morrow to hear Phyllis's story. Curiosity made it more than easy for Jessamy to keep awake until her mother and Bab were asleep, and, creeping to Phyllis's door, she soon satisfied herself that her cousin was as wakeful as she was. "Get on your wrapper and come into the kitchen, Phyl; I'm wild to hear what you have to tell me," she said through a crack in the door. [177]

Phyllis opened it at once. "I'll come," she said. "Don't make a sound."

Jessamy went down the hall in the dark, and Phyllis followed her in a few moments, wrapped in her eiderdown wrapper, soundless knit slippers on her feet, and Truce in her arms, for the kitten was her bedfellow, and was so spoiled that he would have cried and aroused the household if he had wakened to find himself alone.

"Now," said Jessamy, carefully and noiselessly closing the door behind Phyllis, and taking the straight chair, having pulled the rocker forward for her cousin, "now, tell me." Phyllis seated herself, tucking her feet up on the round of the chair and pulling her wrapper down around them, for the floor was cold. Truce immediately took up the post under the tubs which he always assumed to look for the mice which never came.

"Well, Jessamy," Phyllis began, "it is not the sort of news you expect, no matter what you have guessed it to be. Babbie has fallen in love with Tom."

"Bab?" exclaimed Jessamy, so loudly that Phyllis had to warn her to be careful. "But that is impossible! Why, Tom is beginning to care for you."

"How did you know that?" demanded Phyllis, sitting up straight. "Bab said, too, she had thought so for some time. I never dreamed such a thing until Ruth told us something to-day. It is all horrid, Jessamy, and I wish we were back to our doll days." [178]

"What did Ruth tell you? What makes you fancy such nonsense about Bab?" asked Jessamy; but, as she spoke, the memory of Bab's curt manner when she had spoken of Tom's caring for Phyllis came back to her with a pang of foreboding.

Phyllis recounted, without interruption from Jessamy, the secret that Ruth had discovered, and Bab's subsequent behavior. Then, without waiting for comment from Jessamy, she said: "There's only one thing for me to do, Jessamy; I'm going to slip out and leave Tom to love the right girl, if he loves a Wyndham at all. I'm going to write to Boston to Mrs. Dean, and ask if she will take me, as she said she would. I shall stay there until the trouble blows over, and you will get a maid to do the work, which would be too much for you without me; we could afford it as it is, so we certainly can when I am earning money."

Jessamy rose and put her arms around Phyllis, kneeling at her side. "My dear, good, unselfish Phyllis," she said, "if you won't let me tell mama—and I think it is right not to, because it would worry her dreadfully to think there was no way of keeping pain from one or the other of her girls—you force me to act as I know she would if she were told. Bab is not the only one to be considered; you have just as much right to be happy as she. And there is Tom. It is you, not Bab, he has turned to; is it just to give him no thought? And are you sure you don't care a little bit for him, dear?" [179]

"I have tried to be very honest, Jessamy," said Phyllis, slowly. "I like Tom; I believe I could do more than like him by and by. Wait! But I don't love him; I never thought of loving any one until to-day. I liked to think of it—I'll confess that—but before the thought had a chance to do any harm I found out about Babbie; wasn't it lucky, Jessamy? As to Tom, it is only a boyish fancy, and he will get so much the better bargain in getting Bab that there is no reason to be sorry for him."

"Neither mama nor I would admit that, though Babbie is a splendid, true, loving girl," said Jessamy. "But there never was but one Phyllis, and you must know that if Bab is my own sister, you have always been even dearer to me than she. I won't have you sacrifice yourself, Phyllis, not for any, or all of us, so you may make up your mind this moment that I will not help your plan out till I have thought a long time. And how do you suppose we shall bear letting you go?"

"And how do you suppose I shall bear going?" retorted Phyllis. "Even Trucie is dear, and I can't bear to leave him. But it is the only way to bring things straight. As to sacrificing myself, if I were

to be happy at Bab's expense, I couldn't be happy—to make a fine bull. But don't let us get sentimental and exaggerate the case, Jessamy. I am just running away from a possibility; I might [180] have something beautiful in the end, if there were no reason why I should not have it; but again I might never find it beautiful. In the meantime here is Babbie, really unhappy, jealous of me, wanting positively what I might possibly have wanted, but never could want now. Do you realize how dreadful it was to have Bab, our own Bab, shrink away from me when I kissed her, and to feel that she was actually jealous of me? Why, I wouldn't have such a thing as that between our love, breaking up the fondest affection three girls ever felt for one another, for all the splendid boys in the world! So help me away, Jessamy; help me get auntie's consent, and help me keep up heart to leave home for the first time in my life; for, honestly, I am a coward at the thought of it. And, after I am gone, help Barbara be happy."

"Do you ever think, my darling old Loyalty," said Jessamy, with a hug, "that you may be throwing away a very precious thing—for I feel sure you could care for Tom, and he is not a man to be met with every day—throwing it away all for nothing? That you may wean him from you without turning him to Bab, and that Bab herself may be passing through a mere girlish fancy?"

Phyllis was silent a moment, then she said slowly: "I never once thought of that, but I mustn't think of it now. I must do what is right, and hope for the best. I don't think Babbie is the sort to take silly, trifling little fancies, and you don't think so, either. Tom must care for her, since he is [181] goose enough not to care for you, because he will never find any one to compare with you two. But if he didn't love Bab at last, at least she would not think I had robbed her, and I wouldn't have that thought to torture me, and we'd still have one another; and I always did say, having that, nothing else mattered."

Jessamy drew the pretty head, with its soft rings of hair, down on her shoulder, and kissed Phyllis with a tenderness that was almost motherly. "You are the best, the truest girl that ever lived, Phyllis, and I respect you even more than I love you. Bab ought to be thankful on her knees for such generous love as yours, if she never gets any other kind. You shall go, dear; I won't say one word against it, and I'll help you all I can. If mama could know this she would be quite overcome with your devotion to Bab. I only hope Bab will be worthy of your love and truth."

"I'd do just as much for you, Jessamy," said Phyllis, looking up slyly through the tears she was shedding on her cousin's blue jacket.

"Don't you imply I don't appreciate your love, miss," said Jessamy. "Go to bed, Phylkins; you are cold. And go to sleep; perhaps you have imagined more than the truth, and you won't go away, after all. To think of your giving up a lover to Bab! It's rather romantic and interesting, isn't it? This is the horrid penalty of being nineteen."

"Oh, dear me, yes; that's what I have been thinking all the afternoon. I wish we were nine, don't [182] you?" said Phyllis, fervently.

Jessamy hesitated. "There is something rather nice about growing up, though," she said meditatively. "To be quite honest, Phyl, I think it would be pleasant having lovers and admiration and all that, provided we did not all fancy the same youth."

"Have you been tasting that pleasure, Jessamy Wyndham?" demanded Phyllis, grown sharp in the experience of the past hours. "Was Mr. Lane quick to recognize our princess's charms?"

"Don't be a goose, Phyllis; he was very polite, of course," said Jessamy. "If we don't take care, we shall be as bad as the girls we always have despised, who see a possible admirer in every young man they meet. Go to bed, dearie, and go to sleep. It's a perfect shame Bab's notions have to shadow your blessed, unselfish little face—when you were going your ways so unconsciously and harmlessly, too! It isn't her fault, but I really believe I should enjoy shaking Babbie a little, especially if you go away."

"Poor, dear little Babbie! You don't know how bitterly she was crying when I found her," said Phyllis, unrolling herself from the folds of her wrapper. "It certainly isn't her fault, and I shall be happy if she is. Come, Truchi-ki; bedtime, and past it, my golden-eyed kitten! No mouselets here, so there's no use watching; they know too much to come where kittens watch. It's rather nice to be a little white catkin, and purr at a touch, isn't it, Jessamy?" she added, as she swung Truce to [183] her shoulder, where he immediately cuddled down to purr. "We used to be little white, purring things too, not long ago; it is such a pity not to stay so! Until the trouble came we never knew a care; and now, just when we are getting so cozy, the baby has to fall in love! Isn't it horrid? Good night; you're such a comfort, Amy-princess, with your common sense and your partial judgments of me! I wonder if this kitchen was ever the refuge of any other girl tenants in sentimental troubles?"

"Good night, loyal Phyllis; I can never love you nor thank you enough for Bab, who is not likely to realize fully what you have done. I'm not partial to you; I can't do you justice, but at least I know it," said Jessamy, taking Phyllis and the kitten into a comprehensive embrace and kissing her with her heart on her lips.

Tired out with their long talk, and chilled in the night air, Jessamy and Phyllis soon fell asleep, and forgot the troubles hanging over them in the dreamless rest of their years.

Phyllis wrote her letter to Mrs. Dean, and posted it without a word to any one save Jessamy. There was no use in getting her aunt's permission to go to Boston until she had found out whether the opportunity of going were still open to her.

It was difficult to wait the answer, keep the secret, and behave in the old way, as in the days when there were no secrets and, above all, no consciousness of changes that were far from [184]

pleasant in what Barbara had called "the squareness of the square." But though it was not an easy task, Jessamy and Phyllis accomplished it fairly well, and, fortunately, it did not require doing long. Mrs. Dean replied very quickly to Phyllis's note, with unmistakable pleasure bidding her welcome at the earliest possible time she could set out.

Mrs. Wyndham could not be brought to listen to the plan when it was first broached to her; there was not the slightest need, she said, of Phyllis's leaving home; indeed it was unwise for her to go until she and Jessamy had first tested their hope of working together for the magazines, for which Jessamy especially seemed suddenly so well prepared. But Phyllis begged very hard to be allowed to try her wings, pleading restlessness and a longing to see more of the world; especially, she reminded her aunt, because no one could hope to write well who lived in one narrow routine. Jessamy seconded her plea, and said they should work together quite as effectually with Phyllis in Boston, for she would send her stories home for Jessamy to illustrate, and nothing would be lost by separation.

Mrs. Wyndham was a little hurt at first by Phyllis's insistence, and then not a little suspicious; it was so improbable that a restless desire to roam should come suddenly upon home-loving Phyllis in the midst of her supreme content in their new housekeeping. Though she did not suspect that Barbara had any connection with the plan, she did surmise that Phyllis was running away from an [185] unwelcome lover, and so gave her consent reluctantly at last. Bab herself took the news with dumb amazement at first, then evidently with an irreconcilable mixture of emotions. It was past comprehending that Phyllis did not care for Tom, and yet this sudden change of spirit, following Ruth's disclosure, left no other solution. Bab did not believe that any one suspected what it was costing her to think that even Phyllis was first in Tom's esteem; she hoped that no one saw that Phyllis's going away was a relief to her, and she hated herself that it should be so.

So it was settled that Phyllis was to go out into the world to try her fortunes. She and Jessamy hunted up Violet, their former waitress, and discovered, as they had expected, that for the sake of coming back to the Wyndhams she would gladly undertake to do "gen'l house-woak, dough she mos' in gen'lly didn't cah 'bout it."

Getting Violet back simplified the domestic problem, and there were no more obstacles in Phyllis's path of duty, except its general thorniness, and this she tried to keep to herself.

Tom had been in and out as usual during these days when Jessamy and Phyllis were plotting against him, but of course was not told of Phyllis's plans till they were complete.

Phyllis was in the park late one afternoon, when all her arrangements had been settled, and even the day of her departure fixed upon as the coming Monday. Only three days at home left her, she was thinking sadly; but if she must go, delay could make it no easier, and, as she looked up, she [186] saw Tom coming toward her.

It was difficult to talk to Tom now, with her guilty consciousness of so many complex feelings connected with him, but Phyllis managed to smile with almost her old frankness, and say at once: "Oh, Tom, I'm glad to see you and tell you myself my great news; I'm going away."

"Away! Where? For how long?" asked Tom, his face falling.

"To Boston, and 'it may be for years and it may be forever.' I'm going to be independent, and live a little solitary life of my own," laughed Phyllis, with affected gaiety.

"Phyllis!" exclaimed Tom, in such a shocked, grieved tone that Phyllis hastily rattled on: "It may be spring fever, but I think it will last longer than spring. I am not going to be tied down to pots and pans all my life."

"That does not sound like you," said Tom. "How do you think the others—how do you think I shall get on without you?"

"The others have one another; you have them. Frankly, Tom, I am so much occupied in my own affairs I can't consider any one," said Phyllis.

"Why do you want to misrepresent yourself so?" demanded Tom, indignantly. "I have known you long enough to know what a good friend you are, and how much better—"

"I am not a very good friend; Jessamy and Bab—Bab especially—are much more devoted to [187] friends than I am," said Phyllis, who was new to this sort of thing, and rather overdid trying to drive Tom from her. "I hope that isn't rude, Tom, when you've been so good to me, but you've the truest Wyndhams left."

"Are you going to write me?" asked Tom, swallowing as well as he could this awkward implication that, after all, Phyllis had very little interest in him.

"You won't be offended if I don't, will you? That is, not to you personally; you will hear the letters I write home, and I shall want messages from you, but I mean to work very hard, and there are three people at home to write—and Ruth and Mrs. Van Alyn—and I must do my duty by Aunt Henrietta, I suppose, so you won't think it strange if I satisfy myself with messages to you. You know I shall think of you," added Phyllis, breaking down a little as she saw Tom's hurt and puzzled face; it was rather hard to put him so far below all these others.

"I cannot think anything later half as strange as this sudden announcement that you are going away, and your snubbing me," said Tom. "I have no right to complain of what you choose to do, but it is not easy to understand you, Phyllis; you were never like this before, and I hoped you knew how much more than either of the other girls—"

"I am not snubbing you, Tom," said Phyllis, hastily. "I should be sorry to lose your regard, but the

whole truth—that is—you see—why, my family and my hopes of doing something good in work—that's all I care about. Don't you understand, Tom?" [188]

"I think I do," said poor Tom, rather huskily. "You aren't very good at making believe, and there's no kind of use in trying to make me think less well of you. You don't want me to tell you how I feel about your going away, but it is hard—" He stopped, and stooped to pat Nixie. Tom was only a big boy after all, and he was dangerously near tears.

"Dear Tom, you make me feel a selfish brute, but indeed I like you, and I wish we could all be together as before, and yet that I could do what I want to do; but as that can't be, I must choose what I care most for, so don't think much about me, since I am having my own way," said Phyllis, holding to her purpose, though her own eyes were dim. "And to prove how much I trust you, I am going to put dear Babbie in your hands. She isn't quite well lately, though she is so brave and tries so hard to make us all happy that she doesn't talk about herself. Won't you take care of her for me, study her as a doctor, and cheer her up as a friend? Babbie is the most loving, faithful soul in the world; I am afraid she will miss me dreadfully. If you can get her all right again, I'll be your friend fast enough; you'll have no occasion to complain of me."

"I'll look after her," said Tom, "though I don't think there is anything wrong with her. She shall not be lonely if I can help it. By Jove, Phyllis, I wish you weren't quite so wrapped up in your family!"

"But I am; in comparison, there is no one in the world for me. Here we are at home; are you not coming up?" said Phyllis. [189]

"Not to-night. I'll be in to-morrow," said Tom, wringing the hand she extended. "Good luck, Phyllis, and I'm just as much your friend, if you don't feel interested in me."

And Phyllis, having succeeded in her efforts, toiled painfully up-stairs, with the regret of her success.

CHAPTER XII [190]

THE SQUARE BECOMES A TRIANGLE

MRS. WYNDHAM, Jessamy, and Barbara, with Tom as escort, returned heavy-heartedly from the Warren Street pier, where they had been seeing off Phyllis at the beginning of her first venture into the world. The big *Puritan*, with her colors flying and her band playing, steamed out into the river looking bright and festive, but to those from whom she was bearing one fourth of themselves she seemed a kind of monster.

Violet opened the door to them when they reached home, and Truce arched his back into a furry croquet-wicket in his pleasure on seeing them once more; but Jessamy's tears sprang to her eyes again, remembering that the kitten's dear mistress was sailing away; if Phyllis had gone to Darkest Africa, it could hardly have been more dismally tragic than the short journey to Boston seemed to the two girls who loved her.

"We are a square no more," said Bab, drearily, as they seated themselves at the dinner-table.

"Still we are four," suggested Mrs. Wyndham, with a kindly smile for Tom, toward whom [191] Barbara's manner was distinctly forbidding.

"Oh, I can't take Phyllis's place," said Tom, cheerily; "but I should say you were still as square as ever, since she is bound to be here, no matter where else she is. That sounds slightly occult," he added, laughing. "What I mean is—"

"You mean her heart's in the Highlands wherever she roams," said Barbara. "But that is worse for us all; it makes her homesick, and we miss her just the same. No, we are no longer a square; we are a triangle, and I feel as though we were not even a triangle standing on one of its sides—or whatever you call them—but a triangle standing up on one of its points, and very wobbly."

"We will hope it will not be long before we are squared again," said her mother. "We must not take Phyllis's flight too seriously; we are so unused to separations we cannot realize how trifling this little trip would be to less spoiled people. We shall have a telegram in the morning and such nice letters every day from our dear little girl that perhaps we shall never be willing to let her come home again."

"I don't believe Horace Walpole and Madame Sévigné, melted down and poured out on the tip of Phyl's pen, could bring us to that state of mind," said Jessamy, giving Truce an extra fine bit of lamb for his mistress's sake.

The telegram announcing Phyllis's safe arrival came before luncheon the next morning, and the [192] following day brought her first letter.

"Dearest Auntie, Girls, and Truchi-ki," it began: "Behold me of an arrival—you see, I am inclined to French forms. I had the nicest kind of a journey—so nice that I should be delighted to repeat it to-night—with the steamer's bow headed the other way!"

"Dear old Phyl; telegraph her to do it!" cried Barbara.

"But I am here to stay, and not so homesick as you might think I would be. Mrs. Dean is a dear, and Boston reserve may be as icy as the comic newspapers say, but when it makes up its mind to thaw it really is as warming as port wine, with much of the same rich, dignified quality. Mrs. Dean treats me with what I should call respectful affection, and that is the kind of treatment that makes a snip of a girl, away from home for the first time, feel self-reliant; it puts her on her mettle to be as womanly, contented, and generally pretty-behaved as she is expected to be. Mrs. Dean evidently intends to watch over me, and make me happy if she can, and the least I can do under such goodness is to be happy. She is going to save my self-respect by letting me feel she did not take me for charity, but that she really wanted me for service. My duties are to read to her, attend to her correspondence, and bear her company from her breakfast, at half-past eight, till luncheon, at one. After luncheon she drives for an hour, when I accompany her, after which drive she lies down, and I am free till the seven o'clock dinner. In the evening I sit with her, [193] reading or playing backgammon or cribbage, until nine, except those evenings when her nephews and nieces call, or, as she says with a significant twinkle, when she feels minded to go to a concert or play, as she will sometimes, now that she has a youthful companion to enjoy frivolity as much as she does.

"She is interested in my account of my little hopes, and says I must continue writing while with her, and she will see to it that I have time to do so for hours in the splendid great library. Oh, dear folkses, do you suppose our library at Fortieth Street will be as glorious as this beautiful Greek temple here? Of course, I maintain to Mrs. Dean that it is to be surpassed by the New York library when it is done, but in my heart of hearts I wonder if ours can equal the Boston one.

"I have not seen much more of the city than the library; not that from the inside. The coachman brought me through Copley Square this morning when I arrived, and this afternoon I went down among the shops with Mrs. Dean. The shops look rather serious after our beauties; indeed, though Boston is handsomer than New York—that is, Commonwealth Avenue and around it, where Mrs. Dean lives, is fine—it is not cheerful and bright like our own queer, big jumble of a city, but looks as though it wore gray, and wore it on principle. We went down in the subway, and I felt dreadfully mortified not to have a hand-bag. Every woman, young and old, except myself,

carried a little cloth bag, most of them shaped like school satchels held together by their leather handles. I felt as though I were out without some necessary article of clothing, not a hat or anything that might ever be superfluous, but something as dreadful to want as the waist of my dress, for instance. I certainly must get a bag, if I want to be respectable—I wonder if Boston policemen arrest girls who go out without bags, if they are alone? Mrs. Dean had one, so that may have saved me. Dearest, darlingest family, I hope you miss me—not too much, but a little. And I hope Violet will keep the kitchen and all my dear tins in apple-pie order; tell her I said so. And don't let Trucie miss me, yet don't let him forget me. And I am glad I came away, yet I would give anything to drop down among you as I shall drop this letter into the box. Altogether, I am a bundle of contradictions, you see; but I am doing as well as one could expect me to, and am going to be busy and contented. Write me, one of you, every day; for I love you more than you know, and it is a wee bit hard to be a wandering, prodigal daughter. Especially to such a home body as your spoiled, but loving Phyllis." [194]

"She is homesick, but she doesn't mean to let herself find it out," said Jessamy.

"Dear little Phyllis! It won't hurt her to test herself under new conditions, but I hope she will feel that she can come back to us soon," said Mrs. Wyndham. "Now, your note, Jessamy? From Mrs. Van Alyn, isn't it?"

"I think so," said Jessamy, examining the envelop, with that peculiar carefulness every one bestows on the outside of a letter, instead of opening it and looking at the signature. "Yes, it is, and she wants Bab and me to plunge into society; just listen!" she added, when she finally had opened the note and glanced at its contents. [195]

> "'My dear Jessamy: We are going to have an entertainment, in aid of the Baby's Hospital, that promises to be quite charming. It is to be a Masque of Shakspere. The Mr. Lane whom you met at my house has written or constructed for us a Masque on the lines of those used in the Elizabethan period, in which many of Shakspere's characters, culled from all the plays, are introduced. He has used the Shaksperian text as far as possible, connecting it with original matter to bring out the very simple plot—it is practically but a meeting between all the dear characters whom we know, but who have hitherto never known one another. I beg you to help in this merrymaking, you and Barbara, and implore your mother to allow you to do so. First of all, I need you; secondly, you have been too long recluses from your old acquaintances, from whom mere change of circumstances should not wholly debar you. Jessamy is to be *Miranda*, for good and sufficient reasons, and Babbie will be, if she will, *Beatrice*. She is not quite large enough to realize exactly one's conception of "dear Lady Disdain," but she is admirably adapted for her otherwise, having by nature much of that young woman's ready wit and her loving heart, imperfectly concealed by the saucy tongue. I have asked your Doctor Tom to be *Benedick*—an added reason for our *Beatrice* to be a success, if my observations the last few times that I have seen Bab with him and marked her snubbing of him are correct. It will be a delightful frolic, for we all love play-acting, and it will be a remarkably pretty affair if it goes well. So don't refuse me, dear Jessamy and Barbara, and tell your mother I say that it is as wrong to hide her daughters in a Harlem flat as to hide her light under a bushel. Say yes at once, and oblige your friend, Mary Van Alyn.'" [196]

"It sounds beautiful, doesn't it, mama?" said Jessamy. "Do you think it would be wise for us to begin to nibble at forbidden fruit? You know we can't afford the time nor money to be gay very often."

Barbara's cheeks had been rosy red since Jessamy had read the allusion to Tom, which showed that her desire to treat him indifferently had overshot the mark. "It might be rather stupid," she said. "We don't know who will be with us."

"Mrs. Van Alyn will not ask any but acceptable young people, and it seems to me we can hardly refuse anything she suggests for you," said Mrs. Wyndham. "She has been your best friend all your lives—heavenly kind since the trouble came. You will enjoy it, and she is right to draw you into something bright and youthful. I certainly consent, and urge you to take part in the masque. Write your acceptance before you go out."

"I'm only too delighted, if you think it won't upset us, mama," said Jessamy, with a beaming face, as she opened her desk. "I should love to try to act a little, and Mrs. Van Alyn has given us the dearest parts! Bab will be a splendid *Beatrice*, though she is small." [197]

The note of acceptance was despatched, and from that moment the little home was a whirl of excitement. Fortunately, Violet had the talent of her race for cooking, else the Wyndham family might have died of starvation, for neither Jessamy nor Barbara could get her mind down to practical things.

Rehearsals began at once. The masque proved to be very clever and pretty, the plot a dream, in which most of the best-beloved people in Shakspere's plays met, talked, told the story of their lives subsequent to the ending of the play in which they had moved, straightened out tangles, showed that sorrowful events were all a mistake and had never happened, and ended at the last in a beautiful old English dance, which faded away into a background of shadow, in which finally all were lost to sight and were understood to have gone back into the 1623 folio whence they had emerged.

The return of Jessamy and Barbara to the set which had been theirs was hailed by most of their

friends with pleasure. Many of them had called on the Wyndhams when misfortune first befell them, but finding them boarding, with no satisfactory place in which to receive their friends, and meeting them no more in the houses and places of amusement they frequented, had ceased [198] making efforts to hunt them up. Many of the girls came out during the winter spent by the Wyndhams at the "Blackboard," and the life of a débutante leaves little time for extra pursuits, even the pursuit of former acquaintances, so the Wyndhams had been suffered to drop out of mind rather through indifference and pressure of interests than from unkindness.

One girl there was—Grace Hammond—who hailed their reappearance with anything but rapture. Grace Hammond's father was an old friend of Mrs. Van Alyn and of her brothers, who had made the fatal mistake of marrying an entirely worldly woman, with a thoroughly vulgar love of mere wealth, and Grace, unfortunately, had inherited her mother's nature, not her father's—a nature carefully fostered by that mother's training. Mr. Hammond's fortune had been swallowed up in a Wall Street venture; he had not been able to get beyond a sufficient income in his efforts to make another, efforts seriously hampered by his wife's extravagance. It was the intention of both Grace and her mother that Mrs. Van Alyn's beautiful house, wealth, social standing, and exquisite breeding should be Grace's backing in her presentation to the world, counting on the claim of old friendship for Grace's father. Under these circumstances, the advent of the Wyndhams was especially provoking, the more so that Grace could not compete with Barbara for prettiness, wit, and charm, while Jessamy was an avowed beauty.

It would not do to betray the envy and bitterness she felt, so Grace did what people of her type [199] generally do—smiled sweetly in public and bided her time to oust or mortify those whom she chose to consider her rivals.

Jessamy and Barbara were not long in discovering that Grace hated them, but Mrs. Van Alyn was blissfully unconscious that one of the young people she loved to have about her was consumed with jealous spitefulness.

The great night came at last; it was the middle of May, and warm. Mrs. Van Alyn's long parlors, where first the play was to have been given, were found inadequate to the guests who applied for tickets, and a small theater, closed for the season, had been secured without cost, as the masque was given for charity; only the lighting and similar expenses were incurred in its use. The prospect of appearing, as Bab said, "really on the boards, and not on carpet politely called the boards," was tremendously exciting. It seemed to change the whole affair, solemnizing it into something little short of professional. All the actors had to have hasty training in speaking and walking on a real stage, given at the last moment by a real actor and actress, who had taken up the masque with enthusiasm, and had done all in their power to perfect the young Shaksperians.

Jessamy and Barbara were wild with excitement. If it had not been for their mother, Phyllis's home bulletins would have been meager and delirious during these thrilling weeks, but Mrs. Wyndham kept "the stray unit of their four times one are four," as she called Phyllis, informed of [200] the progress of the housekeeping and the revels.

Jessamy and Barbara set out dinnerless on the night of their "first appearance on any stage," as Jessamy reminded her mother it was, appetite lost in excitement.

She and Bab shared their dressing-room—what a delicious feeling of importance it gave them to know it was a dressing-room used by a real actress during the season!

Jessamy's *Miranda* costume was most beautiful; perhaps none of the others quite equaled it in poetic beauty, though most of the other costumes were more splendid. It was sea-green and white, hung with pearls and shells and narrow ribbon made to represent seaweed. A gauzy veil, white and filmy as sea-foam, floated from her beautiful hair, which hung, half loose, half confined with pearls, about her shoulders. Little Barbara looked her best in white and gold, with devices for increasing her height, and her hair piled high on her saucy head, held tilted scornfully as became both her actual self and *Beatrice*.

Grace Hammond was *Viola*, not in doublets, but in a short skirt, with sword at side and a rakish cap set boyishly on her dark hair. *Ophelia*—come to life, as the lines explained, for she had not been drowned, but had revived when they laid her in the grave—and *Juliet* and *Desdemona*, both happily resuscitated after the curtain had fallen on the play, and now come forth to prove it to those who loved and mourned them, *Hermione*, *Rosalind*, *Cordelia*, *Portia*, *Katherine* the Shrew, and *Katherine* the Queen, *Queen Constance*, *Titania*, *Hero*, and a few of the lesser known of [201] Shakspere's lovable women, shyly opened their dressing-room doors one by one, and went to the wings to join *Ferdinand*, *Benedick*, *Romeo*, *Bassanio*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Laertes*, *Orlando*, and all the other gallants in velvets, satins, laces, and ribbons, with *Malvolio*, gartered and bedizened, to lead the opening march.

The masque was but half an hour late in beginning, a wonderful feat of promptness for an amateur charitable entertainment. The curtain rose upon the pretty setting and a picturesque grouping of all the characters, which, immediately after the applause greeting it had begun to die away, broke up into a march to display the individual beauty concealed in the whole.

Then the masque proper began. There was, naturally, considerable difference in the talents of the actors, but their training had been good, and none was conspicuously bad. Grace Hammond acted with real ability, although she did not understand the character of *Viola*, construing her by her boyish costume rather after the spirit of *Katherine*. Jessamy's *Miranda* was the admiration of all beholders—sweet, innocent, alluring—all that a sea princess should be—while Bab charmed the most fastidious with her *Beatrice*, burred like a chestnut exteriorly, but womanly sweet and true of heart within.

Murmurs from the wings, plaudits from the audience, showed Grace that the Wyndhams, and more especially Barbara, whom she disliked more than Jessamy, were carrying off the honors of the evening, and her petty soul was filled with rage and bitterness. [202]

There came a moment when Barbara had her most effective bit of acting. It was *Ophelia's* entrance, and *Beatrice* was to rush to her with a glad cry at seeing her return from the grave. Grace, as *Viola*, stood directly in the center. Barbara, from the left of the stage, saw *Ophelia* crossing from the right, and sprang forward. Grace made a motion as if to free herself from something interfering with her skirt, short though it was, and stepped slightly forward, as she did so contriving to extend the point of her sword toward the swift feet of *Beatrice*. Barbara did not see—indeed, there was no time to see—the malicious act. She bounded forward, and fell headlong, face downward, on the stage. Mr. Lane, in the wings, directing and watching his play with all the nervousness of a young author, said something vigorous and excusable under the circumstances, turning whiter than he was before at the sight of the accident.

"The miserable girl!" he muttered. "She has spoiled the play!"

Tom, as *Benedick*, was not far off; standing near Grace, he saw plainly the entire action. With great presence of mind, he leaped to Barbara's assistance. Stooping, he raised her, helped her free her feet from her entangling skirt, and whispered: "Are you hurt, Bab? For goodness sake, pull yourself together and go on!"

Barbara was shaken by the force of her fall, and mortified almost beyond bearing. Tom's voice steadied her a little, and she managed to whisper: "Not seriously, Tom; but what shall I do?" [203]

"Don't let that beast of a girl down you," he whispered back. "Say something in reply to me." Then, aloud, he said, laughing: "'Tis the first time, dear Lady Disdain, I have caught you tripping. That I should live to see the day that proud *Beatrice* throws herself at my feet! But, faith, dear lady, I have long guessed you liked me well."

Barbara tossed her head in approved *Beatrician* fashion. "'Tis my feet, and not my head, hath tripped, good my lord. 'Twas joy at sight of sweet *Ophelia* there somewhat overcame me, and at her feet, not yours, I lie prostrate. *Ophelia, Ophelia*, and are you really among the living?" And from this point the dialogue continued as in the manuscript.

There were many among the audience who understood what had happened, and the rest guessed; everybody recognized and admired the pluck that carried Barbara through a humiliating situation. The entire house rose and shouted, and from the wings came applause no less hearty. Mr. Lane was beside himself with delight. "Such a girl!" he cried rapturously to the world in general. "I never saw such grit! And she saved my play—she and Leighton, bless 'em! Her voice was shaking when she spoke, yet she got herself in hand and went on! I tell you, I never *saw* such grit."

At the end of the play, Barbara and Tom had to reply to a separate recall, an honor that made Grace set her teeth hard. Her spite had turned against herself; she was furious, humiliated, for many knew that she had acted as she had done purposely, and she felt sure that her chance of Mrs. Van Alyn's favor had gone forever. [204]

A little supper served later to the actors at Mrs. Van Alyn's gave Bab her opportunity for revenge, and perhaps won for her more than the plaudits of the evening, delightful though they had been. In a few moments' talk snatched with Jessamy, she had decided that it would be both kind and finer to shelter Grace from the consequences of her own meanness. Not one of the actors but stood aloof from the girl after the fatal moment when she had thrust out her sword to trip Barbara and had upset her own reputation. At the supper, looking at Grace's crimson, sullen face, Barbara began actually to pity her, fortified in Christian sentiments by the petting she herself was receiving on all hands, and the way Grace was shunned.

As they rose from the table, Bab slipped around to Grace's chair. "I'm sorry you hate me, Grace," she said. "I think I never harmed you; but if we are not friends, at least on the surface, all these people will imagine you put out that sword purposely, and you will be dropped by every one you care to know. Be friends with me, Grace; I will help you, and you will be glad later that the little slip of temper was covered up."

Grace looked up, and Grace looked down. It had not seemed possible that she could be redder than before, but a fresh wave of color spread to her hair, then receded, leaving her deadly white. Something good there was in the girl, and Barbara had touched it. She turned and kissed Bab, then burst out crying before them all. "Barbara Wyndham is a saint and a trump," she sobbed. "I was jealous of her—" [205]

"There, never mind," interrupted Bab, this time with no need of effort in her kindness, for her warm little heart was melted. "Grace and I are friends, so if I am satisfied, surely no one else need ask what happened, nor imagine she meant to harm me. You are all her friends too, aren't you; and we all think she was a great *Viola*, don't we?"

"Splendid! Fine! Lovely!" murmured the guests, and Barbara kissed Grace before them all.

Tom took Barbara home that night, while Mr. Lane was the escort of the *Miranda*, whom he seemed to think embodied the charms of land and sea sprites. The girls begged to be allowed to walk a little way toward home, longing for fresh air after the exciting evening, and Mrs. Van Alyn made an exception for once to her rule of allowing no young guest to leave her house late except in her carriage.

"I can't tell you how I respect and admire you to-night, Bab," said Tom, earnestly, as he shook her

hot little hand in parting. "You are a first-rate actress, but you're more—a first-rate lady."

"Don't praise me, Tom," said Bab, gently; she seemed to have played out her rôle of "dear Lady Disdain" for the time. "It was less goodness than a desire to be above all such meanness, I am afraid. I'm rather proud, Tom, and that is not creditable." [206]

CHAPTER XIII
THE STRAY UNIT

[207]

WHILE Jessamy and Barbara were tasting the joys of glory and the applause of the public,—at least, a little section of it,—the "Stray Unit," as her aunt called her, was having rather a harder time than even her family suspected. It was not easy to continue in exile, fighting homesickness and longing for all she loved, and know all the while that she had but so to determine to return into the little flat, which looked to her from that distance not only like the Canaan they had jestingly called it, but like Eden itself. Perhaps, however, the knowledge that she was free to turn back from what she had undertaken helped Phyllis stand to her guns; it was not only cowardly but ignoble to relinquish a task set her by her own generosity alone.

Phyllis was so fully occupied all day that there was no time for moping; but at night, when the door to her room was closed and locked, the loneliness became almost unbearable, and the time when Tom's misguided fancy should veer straight and allow her to return looked dubiously [208] uncertain and far off. But Phyllis had the gift of sleep common to healthy youth, and though her pillow was often wet, she slept sweetly on it, and arose refreshed to meet the new day.

Mrs. Dean was as kind as Phyllis's first letter reported her, but she was an old lady of many interests, and after her little companion was fairly installed in her household she gradually ceased to feel responsible for her entertainment. This was rather a matter for congratulation, for Phyllis was fired with ambition to accomplish something worth the doing while she was away, and welcomed the afternoons, which included two or three hours in that glorious library which was to be the center and crown of the city. Nothing less than a historical story, dealing with New York in the Dutch days, was the work the would-be young author aimed to produce, and she devoured everything relating to her subject which the obliging assistants in the library could furnish. The story, which never saw the light of day served its end in helping Phyllis through her exile, and incidentally in teaching her much that she had not known of her own city, for whose noise and cheery bustle she hungered.

One afternoon, when Mrs. Dean omitted her usual after-luncheon drive in favor of the board meeting of a society of which she was president, Phyllis slipped away early to the classic hall, where she had an appointment with Peter Stuyvesant and her beloved Dutch burghers. The first [209] two volumes of the "Memorial History of New York" were brought for her use, and she seated herself to search for material, happy for the time in that delightful feeling of importance born of the consciousness of great plans and the business-like preparations for their fulfilment.

After nearly an hour of reading, she decided that the "Memorial History" was not what she needed just then, but the "Documentary History of New York State," and she started to her feet to get it. Phyllis at home and about domestic things was one person, and Phyllis among books was another. The latter Phyllis was a young person of the greatest impetuosity, acting first, and thinking fully five minutes afterward. It was this Phyllis who gathered up her two large volumes and started toward the desk to exchange them, without waiting for an attendant, in the greatest possible hurry, as if the slow old Dutch of two centuries ago were likely to race off before she could capture the volumes in which they were reposing.

The result of her haste was that she did not see a young man approaching from the opposite direction as slowly as she was hurrying forward. His nose was buried in a volume that looked like Browning, and he did not see the slender girl in gray, laden with her heavy books, bearing down on him like a runaway pack-pony. The collision was tremendous. Phyllis dropped both volumes of Mr. Grant Wilson's careful editing on the unoffending feet of the stranger, who uttered a loud exclamation of mingled surprise and pain, and leaped aside with a vehemence contrary to all [210] traditions of Bates Hall. But Phyllis did worse: she sat down with marked emphasis, and without loss of a moment, on the stone pavement, her hat rolling merrily away, and her pocket-book leaping under a chair, as though it, as well as the money it was made to contain, had wings.

Some school children, reading as decorously as the Boston youngsters of the comic papers, yielded to the irresistible, and laughed aloud, even boisterously. An old gentleman of Teutonic build looked up from a black volume that suggested magic, and exclaimed: "Mein Gott im Himmel! Was für eine Backfisch ist das!" And a lady of that too certain age which is politely called uncertain, dropped several valuable starred pamphlets which she had been consulting, to hasten forward with offers of sal volatile and court-plaster, while four attendants ran from as many directions to rescue the library property which the accident had scattered broadcast.

The young man whom she had so unwarrantably assaulted helped Phyllis to her feet, the gingerly manner in which he held up his own right foot meanwhile suggesting that his instep had found the "Memorial History" a solid work in more senses than one.

Phyllis's face was crimson with mortification, and she stammered incoherent apologies as she accepted the hat her victim handed her, and smartened the disheartened ribbons as well as she could. The young man went on all fours, and fished out the truant pocket-book from beneath the [211] chair, at the same time gathering up a handful of papers which had escaped from its outer compartment. Among them was a visiting-card; perhaps the impulse that made him glance at the card before returning it was not altogether proper, but it was excusably natural under the circumstances. As he read the name and address, the expression of mingled annoyance and pain

his face had worn since the encounter gave way to surprise and amusement.

"Mrs. Dean!" he said, and his voice was cultivated and agreeable, even in the low tone necessary to library intercourse. "Let me congratulate you, ma'am; you have found the Fountain of Youth. When I last saw you, you were forty years older than you are now."

Phyllis laughed in spite of herself, but she did not see fit to reveal her identity.

"Thank you, and please try to forgive me for my awkwardness," she said instead.

"The awkwardness was entirely mine," said her victim, fibbing politely, ignoring his aching instep, like the hero and squire of dames he was. "It was unpardonable of me to dash along, with my head buried in 'The Ring and the Book,' though it really does swamp most heads. I cannot forgive myself for knocking you down."

There was a merry twinkle in the big blue eyes looking out of the decidedly handsome face, which was preternaturally grave, and, this time, Phyllis did not try not to laugh. [212]

"Well, if you call that rushing!" she said, remembering her own pace, and how her victim had been sauntering as she steamed down on him. "You are very good, and I am as grateful as I am mortified; I can't say more."

Having had enough of study for the day, and not desiring to loiter on the scene of her discomfiture, Phyllis bowed, and passed out of the library. Her victim gazed after her, thoughtfully. "She's a pretty girl, and a nice one, I'll bet golden guineas to brass buttons," he thought. "Knows Mrs. Dean! I'll consult Rick Dean; he may know who she is." Rick Dean was Mrs. Dean's nephew. When Alan Armstrong, Phyllis's victim, consulted him as to the possible identity of the girl who "caromed on him, and went into a pocket herself like mad," as he described the disaster, in billiard terms, Rick laughed till his eyes were moist. "By Jove, it's my aunt's little companion from New York, Miss Phyllis Wyndham," he said. "She's tremendously nice—pretty, thoroughbred, and all that. They lost their money about a year ago, and she is earning her little living, while preparing to be a second George Eliot, or something. She goes to the library every chance she gets. I don't believe she thinks anything else here is worth wasting time on."

"I haven't been to see your aunt for ages, Rick; don't you think the dear old lady must feel hurt, and want me?" blandly inquired Alan, with a broad wink.

"I'll take you, but there's no use trying to know Miss Phyllis very well; she's as friendly as pie, but she doesn't care a snap about one," said Rick, with profound conviction. [213]

"About the wrong one! She'll welcome the acquaintance of a truly charming fellow, with literary talents of his own," said Alan.

"Literary talents! Newspaper reporting!" said Rick, scornfully. "Hang your conceit, you blue-eyed Christmas-card! But I'll take you to see my aunt whenever you like, and if Miss Phyllis doesn't knock the vanity out of you, then I'm mistaken."

"She is good at knocking, I'm ready to admit that," said Alan, dodging the sofa pillow Rick aimed at him.

Two evenings later Rick came dutifully to call on his aunt, and brought with him Alan, whose solemnity of expression was a study as he made his best bow to Phyllis Wyndham. "I'm thinking of studying law, ma'am," he replied to Mrs. Dean's inquiry as to his future plans. "I want to defend my own suits when I am assaulted and battered, in case it should happen."

"No slurs, if you please," laughed Phyllis, seeing Mrs. Dean looked puzzled. "I told Mrs. Dean about my mishap in the library, and she thought it rather funny. Mrs. Dean, this is the young man I pelted with New York history."

"Is it possible! Why, he's Rick's dearest chum. I am glad you did not destroy him," said Mrs. Dean.

"We used to call Rick the 'Prince of Wales' at school, Miss Wyndham, because Rick Dean sounded so much like 'Ich dien.' That's a school-boy joke that needs considering to appreciate. Have you seen much of Rick's sisters?" asked Alan. [214]

"They come here occasionally," replied Mrs. Dean for her; "but Miss Phyllis is such a busy little creature they haven't progressed far in intimacy. I want them to be much together this summer when we are at Hingham."

"Still clinging to the south shore, Mrs. Dean?" asked Alan. "Doesn't that little cold Boston, as Tom Appleton called Nahant, attract you?"

"I shall always cling to dear old Hingham while I am able to get there," replied Mrs. Dean. "I despise fashionable summer places. You would do well to visit us often this year, young man. I intend making it pleasant for this little girl, and she is well worth knowing."

"One of the most striking young ladies I ever had the pleasure of meeting," said Alan, with a deep bow; adding, as though he feared he was impertinent in jesting on such short acquaintance: "Miss Wyndham's the sort of girl that needs no recommending; she's the good wine that needs no bush."

It was a curiously open compliment, but the boyish sincerity with which it was uttered deprived it of offense. Mrs. Dean looked pleased, and glanced at Rick as if to suggest that he was missing something. She was too good a woman not to love match-making, and she had hoped that her favorite nephew and Phyllis might become something more than friends, for he had money enough for both, and Phyllis was going to be the woman of Proverbs whose price is above rubies. [215]

But so far Rick and Phyllis were not even friends; and Rick wondered to see his chum making speedy progress into favor by the simple method of frank friendliness.

The transference of Mrs. Dean's household, including Dundee, the collie, and Phyllis, to Hingham, took place in June; and a pleasant life, that made exile far easier than it had been in town, began for the "Stray Unit." Her duties as reader and amanuensis continued regularly each morning; but the house was full of young people coming and going, and though no one could take Jessamy's and Bab's place, it was natural for Phyllis to be happier for their companionship. Mrs. Dean's nieces were, on the whole, pleasant girls, and their friends frank and jolly. Only one or two looked askance at Phyllis as Mrs. Dean's companion and their social inferior; but they were obliged to veil their prejudices in deference to Mrs. Dean's affection and the boys' admiration for her.

For quiet Phyllis, to her own unbounded surprise, was turning out rather a belle. Young men may be silly, and undoubtedly do not always show supreme wisdom in the sort of girls they select for temporary amusement, but, as Rick remarked, they "generally know a good thing when they see it," and the girl who is lively, pretty, and bright, yet never forgets for a moment her maidenly ideals, is sure to have plenty of admiration of a sort to be coveted. [216]

Phyllis was full of fun, obliging, and gay; yet in the frolic and freedom of summer-time, when the best regulated families relax much of their vigilance over their younger members, Rick and his comrades realized that, to quote Alan's expressive figure of speech, "Phyllis stayed on her own side of her fence, though she posted no notices to trespassers."

Driving parties to Nantasket, Cohasset, and along the beautiful "Jerusalem Road" made those afternoons lively which were not still more pleasantly spent on the yacht which the young Deans had brought down for the summer. Phyllis had been taken to the sea from her earliest summers, but it chanced that this one was the first in which she tasted the joys of sailing, and, as she wrote home, she "discovered that she had been born web-footed." There were long, beautiful days, in which Mrs. Dean excused her from all her duties, and a party of ten to fifteen young folk would start off in the morning, with the younger Mrs. Dean for chaperon, and sail to some definite point, fish, make their chowder on board, and come back on the afternoon tide, burned, sticky, salted by the wind and spray, but happy as robins, and sleepy with a peculiarly delicious sleepiness that made cool linen sheets inexpressibly refreshing.

Phyllis was the kind of sailor that a skipper loves—never afraid, happiest when the boat was "on her ear" and the waves breaking over the deck, but contented and cheerful in a calm, and not getting hysterical in thundershowers, and, above all, proof against seasickness, even in the long "ground swell" and the broiling sun. [217]

One day, Rick and his sisters, three girls ranging from fifteen to nineteen, Alan Armstrong, Phyllis, Rick's mother, a young Scotchman named David Campbell, and two more of Rick's and Alan's college chums, with three girl friends of the Deans, started out on the *Saxon* for a day's sailing. The plan was to sail down to the Lower Light, fish off the Brewsters during the turn of the tide, make a chowder of the perch and small cod caught there, and return, with a favorable breeze, just late enough to catch the young moon not yet ending its first quarter.

David Campbell was a new element in the party, and one dreaded by all the rest. First of all, he was but just over from the "land of bannocks," and his speech was not as intelligible as English speech might be expected to be. Then he was lame, and there were many subjects engrossing to gay young people, such as sports of all kinds, which must be avoided out of consideration for one debarred from them. And, above all, nobody had the faintest idea what he cared most about; which, added to his burry speech, made conversation formidable. But he had been committed to the elder Mrs. Dean by an old friend who had been good to her when she was in Scotland, and she had laid the strictest injunctions on her kindred to honor to their utmost the draft made upon her.

There was a strong, southwesterly breeze in starting out, and the *Saxon* lay over in fine style, the waves curling around her bow, and occasionally shipping over the fore deck in the way that always made Phyllis long to shout with Viking happiness. [218]

She begged the privilege of sitting up by the mast—the *Saxon* was a sloop—and Captain Rick gladly accorded it; for Phyllis grew so radiant when her blue flannel frock was soaked, and her cheeks got so red, and her hair so curly, that it was a pleasure to look on her. All the party chattered behind her back, but she paid no attention to them till, after a time, she noted that David's long-drawn "Aye" of assent to some proposition was growing less frequent, and she turned to see if the stranger were neglected. Yes, there he sat, rather apart from the rest, a look of loneliness in his blue eyes, gazing eastward.

"This won't do," she thought, and heroically resigned her glorious perch to come aft and brave the perils of a Scotch accent so different in reality from reading Barrie, with the privilege of skipping.

"I wish we were going to sail all the way over, don't you?" she asked, seating herself beside the stranger, and bringing with her at once an atmosphere of dampness and cordiality.

"Aye," said David, somewhat startled, but smiling in spite of himself into the sweet face surrounded by its halo of curling wet hair.

"I long for England and Scotland," continued artful Phyllis. "Of course I want to see Italy and its art; but England and Scotland are home. Long ago my father's family came from England, and a little more recently my mother's ancestors came from Scotland." [219]

"It's fine," said David, cautiously.

"I'm sure it is," cried Phyllis, with honest warmth. "My dearest friends are Scotch and English—in Scott and Thackeray, and our beloved books, you know. Are you a true Scot, and think Burns the greatest of poets?"

"Burns is a great poet," said David, cannily.

"If you are a Campbell I suppose you would throw me overboard if I quoted 'The Bonnie House o' Airlie,' would you?" asked Phyllis.

"The uprooted spray of heather," as Alan called him, looked surprised and pleased; he even ventured into a question on his own part. "How comes it you have heard that tale over here?" he asked; only he pronounced "heard" as if it were "hard," as indeed it was to his companion.

"Oh, that's owing to Barrie," she said. "I might never have paid any attention to the note to the ballad in my 'Border Ballads,' but I laughed till I cried at the story of the piper who went piping out of town in a fury because he was a Campbell and some one had sung 'The Bonnie House o' Airlie' in his presence. Do you remember, in the 'Little Minister'?"

"Aye, Barrie is humorous," assented David, with an expression so at variance with the word that Phyllis had to turn her head away to keep from laughing. Fearing he had seen her amusement, [220] she hastily asked: "Would you like to be a writer? They say all Scotch—or Scotsmen, as you would say—love learning. What are you to be?"

"A merchant. My father sent me over here to get into a New York firm; I hate it," said David. "I was to have gone into the army."

"And have you given it up?" asked Phyllis, absent-mindedly, and could have bitten her tongue out the moment she had spoken, remembering his misfortune.

"Can a cripple enter the army?" demanded David, a dark-red color rushing up under the freckles his recent sea-voyage had deposited on his handsome face.

"Oh, you are so little lame I quite forgot you might be disqualified to serve the queen—no, the king. How can you speak of yourself as a cripple when you are so strong and vigorous?" said Phyllis, reproachfully; though the reproach was for herself.

"Would you like to be a man who could do nothing but stand in a counting-house?" asked David.

"I'd like to be a man with your breadth of shoulders and splendid vigor," said Phyllis. "Then, we Americans consider a successful merchant a very fortunate and honorable man."

"Vera likely; but it's no the career for me," said David, getting more Scotch in the vehemence of his feelings. "Consider, if you were to fall overboard the day, I'd have to sit here, while some of these smart youngsters went after you—I, who could swim with the best of them when I was a lad."

"But I promise not to fall overboard," said Phyllis, gently; "and if I did, and you were disqualified [221] from fishing me out, would that prove you unmanly? Surely there is more need of saving people on dry land, so to speak; it's the other sort of strength, not physical strength, that is most needed. Any one would turn to you for help if she had fallen overboard, in a figurative, not literal sense; there is something so reliable in all of you Scotch. You're a wee bit strange to us all at first, but you will like us when you know us; and if I were you, I should forget the trifling misfortune to your foot—it is such a very little thing. Try to be at home; we Americans are rather kindly, 'not a bad sort,' as your English neighbors would say."

David Campbell looked into Phyllis's smiling eyes, honest and clear as one of his Highland lakes; her sympathy, unspoken, had penetrated his Scotch reserve finding him lonely, and he had spoken to her as he would not have spoken to his own sister. Now gratitude, and a kindling sense that she had uttered the truth, and that fine opportunities for his strong brain and will were left him, lame though he was, sent a thrill over him, and made his voice vibrate as he said: "One of them is. You've been kind enough; you're not like our notions of the reckless American girl. I am certain to like you—Americans." There was a touch of roguery in his tiny pause. "And if ever you want a friend, and I can be of use to you, on dry land, as you say, count on David Campbell, and you will find one Scotsman reliable, I'm hoping."

"Thank you, I will remember, and I'm sure I shall," said Phyllis, heartily; and they shook hands on [222] the bargain.

"That was fine of you, Miss Phyllis," said Alan Armstrong that night, as the *Saxon* crept up the bay, sails free of the light easterly breeze, and the young moon shedding a short track on the ocean. "You were mighty good to our friend from the Tweed-side. I couldn't help hearing what you said to him; I was surprised that he spoke out that way, but it was lucky he did, for he must have been feeling lonely to have done it, and probably thought we were guying him. You handled him like an angel, and hasn't he been different ever since? Only look at him now!"

Sure enough, David was chatting with Rick and Annie Dean, giving them bits of Scottish lore and Scottish songs, not minding that they did not always understand the speech, which was correct English in form, but very much like the New England country roads with the raised places across them at intervals, which the natives call "thank-you-marms," and which are so very bumpy that smooth driving is impossible.

"Yes, he has decided to trust us, hasn't he?" said Phyllis. "He is a fine fellow, and I am glad he is beginning to feel at home. It must be dreadful to get among a lot of hard-hearted young folks,

who see only the funny side of a new-comer's peculiarities."

"Do you know, you smooth out all the wrinkles where-ever you go?" asked Alan. "The Heather is not the only blossom that would be proud to be worn as a friend in your buttonhole." [223]

"And it shall not be the only blossom I gladly claim," smiled Phyllis. "The 'Stray Unit,' as they call me at home, is in a fair way to be spoiled, and you are all making her a happy unit, in spite of her longing to see the nicest family a girl ever had."

"I bet anything you like they are all ciphers by comparison," said Alan, with profound conviction; "and that you were the unit that made them a numeral."

Phyllis laughed, and shook her head. "Wait till I go home, and you all come to see me," she said. "Barbara is the brightest, most attractive, dear little scamp you ever knew; and Jessamy—Jessamy is too beautiful to be real, and all pure gold. If you knew them, you would see who was the cipher, if ciphers there are."

The *Saxon* made her mooring in Hingham harbor rather later than usual, for the breeze was very light; but no day on the yacht was ever too long for Phyllis.

David Campbell took a pair of oars, and he and Rick raced to the wharf the two small boats in which the *Saxon's* passengers were landed. Phyllis was glad that the big young Scotsman's strong arms out-pulled slender Rick, with his university training, and that David won the race. It had been a beautiful day, and the little "Stray Unit" went happily to bed, glad in her own pleasure, glad at having made another happy. But she did not know that her sympathy and tactful kindness had won her a friend who was to be a gain to her entire life.

CHAPTER XIV

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THE LITTLE BLIND GOD OPENS HIS EYES

HILE Phyllis was having, as she said in her letters, a pleasant amphibious summer, the rest of the Wyndhams were staying in town for the first time in their lives. New York is not as bad a place during the heated months as people think it who fly from the first touch of the mounting sun. Except for the noise, even Mrs. Wyndham did not find it uncomfortable, and the noises could be forgotten while she rested and read in their little dining-room, the depth of the apartment away from them.

Jessamy and Barbara discovered that there was much to be enjoyed in early rising for walks in the park; still more, in trips for which they had started betimes to take a car at the Bridge and go down to the sea, bowling along at a tremendous rate after they had passed the crowded Brooklyn streets, and getting cool and invigorated as the swift flight of the car blew their hair back from their faces with a wind salt from the ocean.

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Nor were the long sails up the wonderful Hudson less than a revelation of delight, especially to artistic Jessamy, whose soul reveled in beauty such as the whole world can hardly equal—beauty they had heretofore missed, because it lay so near to them and they had wandered away in summer to fashionable resorts.

Ruth took her vacation like a dissecting-map, she said, in little bits, which, fitted together, would make a whole of more than two weeks;—she filled the place that would have been Phyllis's in the excursions of that summer. And Tom, graduated now into a full-fledged Doctor of Medicine, with a degree and a diploma, and everything ready for a large practice, except his contract with an undertaker, as he himself declared—Tom was the escort and cicerone on every trip, with Nixie, his hair clipped for the summer, to complete the party when its destination was one that allowed the presence of little dogs. Jessamy, watching the course of affairs, with double eagerness for Bab's happiness and Phyllis's return, sometimes was almost completely discouraged by the behavior of her trying sister. Since the theatricals Tom had been turning with constantly increasing evidences of liking to Babbie, and Jessamy began to feel quite certain that his dawning fancy for Phyllis, nipped timely in the bud, would blossom into real love for wayward Bab, if that young person would allow it to do so. But Barbara behaved in such a way that Jessamy wondered that Tom could be patient with her, and, much more, that he could find attraction in her thorniness.

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"She is Barbie, not Babbie, mama," Jessamy said, with tears of impatience in her eyes, one night when the four young people had returned from an afternoon at Glen Island. Now that Phyllis was writing so cheerfully, and the choice she had made seemed to be turning out well, for her at least, Jessamy had told her mother Phyllis's motive in going, for she longed to have her unselfish little cousin held at her true worth by all who were dearest to her.

"You have not the slightest idea of how Bab behaved to Tom to-day, and he was a perfect saint in patience and kindness," Jessamy continued. "She is driving away her own happiness in spite of Phyllis's sacrifice for her. You know it would have been lovely for Tom and Phyllis to have cared for each other, and now Bab is going to offend him beyond pardon, and we shall lose the dear boy altogether. I feel so sorry for Tom I can hardly keep from saying: 'Oh, Tom dear, just please marry me, and let that naughty girl go!'"

"That would be a singular performance on the part of my dignified elder daughter," laughed her mother, "and rather a useless one, because, you see, Tom doesn't want to marry you. Perhaps he will never want to marry Babbie, so try not to worry, Jessamy. I should be glad when the day comes that I must give one of you up, if it could be into the hands of as trustworthy a man as Tom; but I am in no hurry to meet the day, so let matters take their course, Jessamy, my dear."

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"They aren't taking their course," sighed Jessamy. "And you are forgetting, mama, that Bab is so dreadful because she really likes Tom so very much. Of course he may never want to marry her; that is what bothers me. I should think it would be a miracle if he did. She has made up her mind to be true to her name, and has put a barbed wire fence all around herself. I wish I could get her straightened out, and bring Phyllis home, and all be happy again."

"Let matters take their course, Jessamy," said her mother again. "Barbara is very young; I really believe, on the whole, I am glad not to see my baby with a lover—even Tom."

Jessamy had not exaggerated Barbara's freakishness toward unoffending Tom. There were days when she treated him quite tolerantly, sometimes even let him get glimpses of the sweet, sunny Barbara he had first known; but most of the time she was sharp of tongue, uncertain in disposition, unjust, and actually pert. The receipt of a small service from Tom was enough to plunge her into saucy, school-girl sarcasm that was so unlike herself, so unworthy of her, that Jessamy held her breath lest she not only offended, but, worst of all, disgusted Tom; and for disgust Jessamy had heard there was no cure.

The pitiable part of it was that poor little Babbie evidently hated herself for being so wayward and naughty, and Jessamy often saw her turn away to hide her tears after an especially vicious attack on Tom, to which she was apparently impelled by a force stronger than her will and judgment.

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For a long time Tom bore this treatment with dignified patience, struggling hard to keep his

promise to Phyllis and regain the little Bab he knew and cared for. Then Jessamy saw that he was letting Babbie severely alone, studying her with pained surprise in his honest eyes, and she hoped that the study might give him a clue to the cause of Bab's transformation. For, she thought, she is exactly like *Beatrice* herself; and when *Benedick* suspected that she snubbed him because she cared for him, he began to care for her. But Tom was far too modest and inexperienced to construe the little active verb, with its moods, which he was studying, by any such rule. He decided that Barbara had found him a nuisance, and wanted to drop his acquaintance; so, hurt to the core, he silently acquiesced in her decision, and the Wyndhams knew him and Nixie but rarely.

As weeks went by, and Tom's sole visit had been to herself when Jessamy and Barbara were known to be out at lectures which they were attending, Mrs. Wyndham began to share Jessamy's feeling that if something were not done a possession more precious than the wealth they had lost might drift away from her girls forever. Mrs. Wyndham was thoroughly unworldly; it would be horrible to her even to think of making a marriage for her children from ambitious motives; but she realized how rarely in a long life one finds a true friend; and she began to feel that it would not do to sit passive while Babbie drove Tom away. Besides, it was dreadful to know that the poor boy was feeling that his friends were changed to him, who had never been less than devoted to [229] all of them in the hard days at the "Blackboard," and ever since.

That night Mrs. Wyndham went into Bab's room in the dark to find her crouching, a forlorn little heap of misery, in her chair, sobbing under her breath lest Jessamy hear in the next room. Her mother gathered her up in her arms, and sat down in the rocking-chair, Babbie half in, half off her lap, and rocked and cuddled her without a word. For a while Bab cried tempestuously, but after a time the clasp of the arms which had always soothed her childish griefs quieted her; indeed, Babbie's grief might be of a sentimental nature, but she was a child still.

When she was calm enough to listen Mrs. Wyndham said: "Now, my little Babbie, you are unhappy because you have been a saucy little Bab, and have driven away with cruel injustice the best friend you and Jessamy and Phyllis have, except one another. It is a pity, but it is something to set right, not to cry over. We will send a note of apology to Tom, and we will tell him—I will write it—that Babbie is dreadfully contrite over her whimsies of the summer, but that they arose from little private worries of her own, which she was unjust enough to visit upon him. And Tom will come, and Barbara will be kind and cordial, first because she has absolutely no right to treat Tom rudely; secondly, because she will have too much regard for her dignity as a young woman, not a capricious child, to give way to her impulses."

"It's too late, mama," moaned Bab. "Tom asked me what was wrong, and I told him nothing, but [230] that I was tired of seeing the same faces all the time. And then he stopped coming. And, Madrina," she added, starting up with sudden resolution to be honest, "I have acted as I have just because he liked Phyllis, and I was afraid—oh, I was afraid he would think she thought I liked him —too much, you know, and so had gone away!"

"What a foolish Babbie!" said her mother, stroking her hair. "Tom does not care more for Phyllis than for you. He was beginning to turn to her, but she slipped away in the beginning, and Tom has found my little Babbie more than he realized, now that he has been thrown with her more. Tom would never dream Phyllis, or any one else, suspected you of liking him too well; he is not a coxcomb, but a straightforward, honest young fellow, who loved us all. He is hurt and angry that one of us could be so capriciously unjust to him. You have no right—no moral right, Barbara—to let this go on another day. And if our dearest Phyllis hoped to further your happiness in going away, you surely can do no less than love her better than ever, and return her goodness to Tom."

"I'll do my best to behave better, Madrina, if you can get Tom back; but I'm afraid I shall be bad again when I see him," said Barbara, contritely.

Mrs. Wyndham smiled in the security of the darkness. "You must behave well for your own sake, Babbie. You know what every one will say if they see you treating Tom abominably, without [231] cause. And if we apologize successfully to him this time, we can never do so again."

Mrs. Wyndham wrote a most affectionate note to injured Tom, and Barbara inclosed a note of three lines of her own in brief, but humbly contrite apology. It was probably the latter which produced the desired result, for Tom and Nixie appeared that evening, and Bab sang and played his favorite airs, and peace once more reigned on the banks of the Hudson. But the old, free, unconscious days seemed gone forever; and Jessamy, and even her mother, saw with regret that it was only by a mighty effort that Bab kept up the cool politeness into which her good intentions had degenerated. Tom came much less often. It looked as though matters were settling into the frigid decorum hardest to break up, and more hopeless than quarrels. Thanksgiving came and passed with Phyllis's sacrifice no nearer its reward than at first.

On the top floor of the house where "The Land of Canaan" apartment made the third, lived a family whose youngest member, a girl of eleven, frequently held what Bab called "overflow meetings" with her dolls on the steps; for the family was large—as was the doll family, for that matter—and little Margery was forced to the street, the playground of city children, by lack of space.

A friendship had sprung up between her and the Wyndhams, especially Bab, born of mutual admiration for Jumeau babies with spasmodic joints, and the little girl's unspeakable worship for an older one. Tom was included in Margery's favor, both for his own and Nixie's sake; once, [232] indeed, when the child had a sore throat, Tom cured her, and henceforth he was brevetted "my doctor," a distinction he valued. Margery was a quaint child, given to the companionship of books

and people beyond her age, and with the contradicting childishness and maturity of an only child in a family of adults. She was a welcome and frequent visitor to the Wyndhams', petted and read to by Jessamy and her mother, spoiled and played with by Bab, for whom she cherished a dumb devotion not unlike Nixie's own.

As weeks went on, Margery's sharp eyes discovered the estrangement and increasing coolness between "her doctor" and her dearest Bab; and after long puzzling over it, and tentative attempts to sift the matter, she set her nimble wits to work to remedy it.

Simple methods did not appeal to the queer little girl; but at last she hit upon a plan that suited her childish love for melodrama and latent longing to be a heroine. It was a gray December day, and Margery, left alone with the servant, recognized her opportunity. Bab—alone too, with Violet, as it chanced—was startled by a violent peal of the bell. Answering the summons herself, she faced the Hortons' maid, white under her Irish freckles, who stood wringing her hands on the door-mat, and who cried at the sight of her: "Oh, Miss Wyndham dear, come up for the love of hiven! I do be alone with Margery, an' she took that bad she'll be dead agen her mother comes back."

"Dead! Margery!" gasped Bab, and flew up the stairs, outstripping honest Norah in her alarm. [233] There was cause for alarm to the eyes of inexperienced Bab, as she looked at the little figure stretched on the bed, her face swollen out of all likeness to pretty Margery, or even to human features. A crimson face, with cheeks, eyelids, lips puffed and distorted, lay on the pillow, crimson hands as shapely as tomatoes picked the quilt, while hollow groans issued from the purpling mouth.

"Oh, dear, darling little Margery," cried Bab, in an agony of terror, "what has happened? What can be the matter? Run, run, Norah, for Doctor Gilbert; I'll stay with her. It must be poison; oh, what has she eaten?"

"Nothin', miss, but her lunch wid the rest of 'em," began Norah, while Margery moaned:

"Not Doctor Gilbert. I want my Doctor Tom."

"Oh, darling, Doctor Gilbert is so much older and wiser," Bab pleaded, kneeling by the bed; but Margery only burst into plaintive sobs. "I want my doctor; I shouldn't think you'd be cruel now," she sighed.

"Then call Doctor Leighton, Norah," said Bab, blushing at this betrayal of Margery's observation. "Only hurry, hurry!"

It seemed hours before Tom came, though Norah met him in the street and returned with him in half of one. Bab spent the minutes bathing the still swelling face, soothing the poor little patient, and trying to keep her own nerves under control. Margery grew every moment more ill. Would Tom never come?

At last he did come, and as he entered the room the relief was so great that Bab forgot to incase [234] herself in the disguise she had worn so long. Her eyes were so full of love and joy as she raised them to Tom that he stopped short in amazement at the revelation, and a great flood of happiness rushed over him, too great for any circumstances to check. "Oh, Tom, I'm so glad you have come; now it will be all right," she said, in a low voice of utter trust. "Dear little Margery is dreadfully ill, but you will save her. I have done nothing but bathe her, for fear of making some mistake."

Tom did not answer; he walked straight to the bed without looking at Barbara. His heart was throbbing so joyously that he had hard work to force his thoughts to duty.

"Margery, what have you eaten?" he demanded, having felt the child's pulse and looked closely under the almost closed eyelids.

"Nothing," murmured Margery.

"Margery, remember that I am a doctor, and know when I am told the truth. You must tell me what you have taken," said Tom, sternly.

Bab crept close to Tom, oblivious to everything else in hearing this hint, confirming her own fear of poison. Tom put one hand over the two little ones clasped imploringly on his shoulder, trying to remember only Margery, and to forget that this was Bab coming to him thus voluntarily.

"I always tell the truth," said Margery, replying to his question with all the indignation her [235] strength allowed. "I haven't eaten anything; but I didn't say I hadn't taken anything. I took quinine; but it's much worse than before. I wouldn't tell you if I wasn't dying."

"Quinine! Ah, that's it! And worse than before, you say? Have you suffered like this before from quinine?" asked Tom, comfortingly patting Bab's head, which had dropped on his shoulder at the word "dying."

"Once, but not so much. I didn't think it would be so awful when I took it, though I did think I'd feel very badly. The doctor said I had an idiotsinkersy in me about taking quinine," groaned Margery.

"Did you take it purposely?" asked Tom, amazed, as he handed a prescription to Norah and bade her hasten to get it filled. "That was certainly an 'idiotsinkersy.' Why have you done such a thing? Do you like to be ill, Margery?"

"No; but—oh, my mama won't like to find me dead!" And Margery burst into open wailing, in which Bab joined.

"You are not going to die," said Tom. "Bab dearest, don't feel so dreadfully; Margery will come

out all right. But why, in the name of all that's wonderful, have you deliberately taken what you knew would make you ill, little lass?"

"For your sake," said suffering Margery, as impressively as her swollen features permitted.

"For my sake!" echoed Tom, dumfounded.

"I knew if I was awfully ill Miss Bab would be nice to you, and so I took the quinine," murmured Margery. [236]

"You dreadful child!" cried Bab, indignantly, springing away from Tom's side.

Margery turned away without a word, hiding her swollen face, her tears, and her wounded heart in the pillow.

"Bab doesn't mean that, Margery," said Tom, gently. "You are giving her greater pain than her physical suffering, Bab; you know she adores you. Be just to the poor mite, and remember her motives were good, even if you don't like her methods," he whispered hastily.

Bab knelt contritely, and took the queer, forlorn little figure in her arms. "No, of course I didn't mean that," she said. "Forgive me, Margery. What made you think of such a very strange thing to do?"

"The Bible says you ought to lay down your life for your friends, doesn't it?" sobbed Margery, drying her eyes on the ruffle of her nightgown sleeve in default of a handkerchief.

"It says you can't prove greater love than by dying for them—yes," said Bab.

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"'I KNEW THAT IF I WAS AWFULLY ILL MISS BAB WOULD BE NICE TO YOU,' MURMURED MARGERY."

"Well, then, I thought I ought to be willing just to be sick for you, when all the books say how every one forgives every one else, and foes make up, around sickbeds, and things. I couldn't bear to see how you and my doctor were getting worse foes all the time, so I took the quinine, though I knew I had an idiotsinkersy in me that made it poison to me, and I'd be dreadfully sick. I thought [239] you'd make up around my bed, and love me, and say how I'd saved you, and how you'd never forget me. And you are friends around my bed, and I'm fearfully sick; but you only say I'm dreadful. Oh, why don't my mama come back and take care of me?" And Margery wailed anew over the ingratitude of humankind.

What could Bab say? Or how could she do less than express—even if Tom were there—her gratitude to this martyr to her welfare?

"Dear little Margery, you are not dreadful. I am dreadful to have called you so, even though I didn't mean it. I was annoyed for a moment; that was all. You are a dear, devoted little friend. Please forgive me, for you know I love you dearly," she said, kissing the wet, shapeless little face.

"And my doctor?" stipulated Margery, before according pardon.

"I think we shall be better friends. I won't be horrid any more," whispered Barbara.

And then Margery gave the kiss of peace.

Mrs. Wyndham had come in, and hearing from Violet whither Tom and Barbara had gone, and why, hastened up-stairs, hoping to be of use. In a few moments more Mrs. Horton returned, and Tom escorted Bab downstairs, leaving Margery, much better, to the competent care of the two mothers.

Barbara let herself into her own apartment with her key, and for a few moments an awkward silence prevailed, broken at last by Tom.

"I think I shall adopt a Margery rampant, with a quinine capsule in the quartering, for my coat of [240]

arms," he said. "I've an idea our queer little friend, with a constitutional idiosyncrasy against that drug, has done me a great service. She has proved that you do not quite hate me, do you, Babbie?"

"No, Tom; but you—you like Phyllis," stammered Bab.

"Like her! I love her—the unselfish, dear, good girl!" cried Tom. "Have you been jealous of Phyllis? Then you love me, Barbara. You couldn't be jealous unless you did! I did imagine once that of all the dear Wyndhams, Phyllis might be dearest; but it was a mistake. I saw straight after she was gone. I never loved her—not that way, Bab; I only fancied that I might. But I do love Phyllis so much that I want her for my cousin. Will you make her my cousin, Babbie?"

"She is much nicer than I," said Bab, very low, without raising her eyes, and clinging to her last moment of freedom.

"Bab, don't waste any more time; you have treated me badly enough, heaven knows, and I haven't enjoyed it. Tell me you love me, this instant," said Tom, in a tone which Barbara might have resented had not her recent fright and humiliation subdued her.

"I love you, Tom," she repeated meekly, and straightway forgot all doubt, all fear, in perfect happiness.

When Jessamy came home she nearly dropped in the doorway; for there was Bab throned in the window, looking radiantly pretty with the depth of joy and womanly sweetness the events of the afternoon had called into her face, and beside her, on a low stool, sat Tom, looking entirely blissful and unusually humble. [241]

He sprang up as he saw Jessamy. "Come to your brother, Jessamy!" he cried. "Bab has promised to marry me."

"I have promised not to marry him," said Bab. "I have told him I will not so much as hear it spoken of for ages. As though I wanted to marry yet!"

But Jessamy waited to hear no more. She threw herself at Bab in some mysterious way, and hugged and kissed her sister—with a kiss for Tom, too—in almost hysterical rapture.

"It was pretty rough on me to be treated as I have been lately," said Tom, as they tried to settle down to sanity. "But I ought to have known what it meant; for the very first time I ever saw Bab, she threw herself at my feet, for me to pick up, or leave, as I chose."

"Why, Thomas Leighton!" cried Bab, indignantly.

"Fact, and you know it," affirmed Tom. "Never mind, Babbie; 'some falls are means the happier to rise,' you know. That fall of yours on the 'Blackboard' steps was one of them; for, my heart, aren't we happy!"

CHAPTER XV [242]

WREATHING HOLLY AND TWINING BAY

TWO letters were despatched to Boston that night—one from Jessamy, one from Bab—like a duet chanted to Phyllis. The burden of one was, in brief, that the millennium had come upon earth, for Bab was so happy; and of the other: "Come home, come home!"

Phyllis read them at the breakfast-table, and her face lighted up with such joy that Mrs. Dean noticed it in spite of the preoccupation her morning mail usually involved.

"Dear little Bab is actually engaged to Tom. Oh, I am so thankful!" Phyllis said in reply to Mrs. Dean's inquiry as to the cause of her happiness. "I am afraid, Mrs. Dean, that this means that I shall have to go home as soon as you can get ready to let me."

"For the holidays—not longer?" said the old lady, sharply.

"For always," said Phyllis, gently.

"I should like to know why your cousin's engagement involves breaking yours to me," said Mrs. Dean, disappointment and regret shining even from her eye-glasses and gray curls. "I have tried [243] to make this a home to you, and I hoped to keep you until you should be ready to follow your exasperating 'Bab's' example."

"We had not a positive engagement to each other, dear Mrs. Dean. Please don't think I am breaking an agreement," said Phyllis, distressed. "You have been as good to me as you could be, and I love you gratefully for it; but they want me very much at home, and you won't blame me for liking to be there better than anywhere else, however dear the elsewhere may be."

"I suppose I can't blame you, but it is most disappointing and annoying. You sly little minx! I believe you only ran away to leave the field clear to this Babbie; and, now the danger is past, you are ready to throw me over," said Mrs. Dean, with sudden acumen.

Phyllis laughed, seeing her battle won. She had dreaded the day, and speculated as to the manner in which she should announce to her kind friend that her hour to leave her had come.

There were two weeks wanting to the arrival of Christmas day, and Phyllis was not to start homeward until the twenty-third. The time crawled by, in spite of the young friends who filled every spare moment with pleasure, trying to crowd into the unexpectedly brief time left them in which to enjoy Phyllis all the sight-seeing and visiting of a winter. She felt guilty, fond as she had grown of them all, to tell off each sunset, and count each moment by the beats of feverish pulses.

At last the twenty-third came, and the hour for starting to the station struck. [244]

Rick and his sisters and their friends, Alan Armstrong, and David the Scot, who had become Phyllis's devoted knight, all formed her body-guard, laden with flowers and candy enough to have done credit to a prima donna's farewell.

Mrs. Dean held Phyllis fast as she kissed her good-by. "I forgive you for leaving me, my dear, though I hardly know how I am going to get on without you. You have been all and more than I expected you to be to me; and though I do admit your family's claim to you, I dislike your aunt very deeply for being forced to admit it; and you may tell her so from me, with my best wishes for the coming year. But I won't take no for an answer to my invitation to Hingham next summer, if I live; so be prepared," she said, as the carriage drove up to carry Phyllis away from her.

At the station there were the usual repeated good-bys, when every one strains hard to think of something to say, original and worth remembering, and thus rise equal to the occasion, but succeeds only in repeating the promise and request to write often, and in giving invitations, and assurances of visits and remembrance, reiterated with a fervor that is intended to conceal the conviction that the speaker is falling far below ordinary intelligence. But hearty good will goes far to make up for lack of conversational brilliancy, and Phyllis was surprised to find how fond she and her new friends really were of one another, and that there were tears on her lashes, glad [245] as she was to turn her face toward Gotham. Alan and David wrung both her hands sore, bidding her not forget them, and assuring her that the very first thing they both did when they arrived in New York to seek their fortune—a plan to be carried out after the New Year—would be to come and see her, without which prospect their farewell would have been more dreary. The train moved out at last, past the smiling young faces lined up to nod good-by to Phyllis,—the girls, with tears in their eyes in spite of the smiles, waving wet handkerchiefs from the platform. Phyllis leaned forward to wave as long as the last of the row was in sight, then settled back in her seat with one long sigh for Boston and what it held that was dear to her, and a leap of the heart forward, for now she was really cut adrift from exile, and was homeward bound.

Winter though it was, Phyllis preferred the boat to the train for her journey, and in a short time was tucking away her belongings in her berth, taking supper in the gay dining-room, listening to the band for a little while, then lying down to slumber, which the thought that she was to waken in New York, and not the noise of the engines, rendered very light and fitful.

Far from waking in New York, she was up and dressed, with all her books, flowers, and candy strapped up ready to carry off, before the boat had sighted the upper end of Manhattan Island;

and she stood, shivering in the gray light of the December dawn, as one by one the islands of the river crept past, looking very picturesque, seen from that view-point, and with proper forgetfulness of the misery and sin they sheltered. [246]

Phyllis grew so excited she could not stand still as the boat crept down past the lower east side of the city, under the Brooklyn Bridge, swung around the Battery, and drew near her pier on the North River. How beautiful the spire of Trinity looked, and the new, high office buildings which dwarfed it! How beautiful were even the tall brick chimneys of the factories, for they were part of home! Phyllis could have put both arms around the square tower of the Produce Exchange and kissed the face of its clock, or hugged the Barge Office with enthusiasm, unattractive as it might be, ordinarily. She wondered if the immigrants crowded around it would have been as glad to see their distant homes again as she was to see hers. How painfully slow the boat's crew was in making her fast and getting out the gangway! How exasperating were the passengers—so many, too, though it was December—who were in advance of Phyllis, and moved like snails toward the pier! Phyllis was nearly suffocated with the flutterings of her heart, and she could hardly hold her packages, numerous enough to have warranted her dropping some overboard purposely.

At last, at last, she had surrendered her ticket, and was moving off the boat! And there, just at the gangway's end, concealed from her till this moment by the crowd—there was Jessamy, more lovely than ever, with her cheeks glowing, her eyes dancing; pretty Bab, all scintillating with joy; [247] Tom, proud as a whole flock of peacocks in his new dignity, with Nixie—yes, actually Nixie—on a leash, sitting up and behaving like a man and a brother. And her aunt! Phyllis could hardly believe her eyes that Mrs. Wyndham had braved the chill of the winter morning and reached the pier before seven o'clock to prove to the "Unit," who prayed to stray no more, how glad she was to get her back.

Just what happened when Phyllis's foot touched the pier no one could say. She recognized her aunt's veil, Jessamy's fur collar, Bab's nose, and even Tom's rough coat, in the indiscriminate, rapturous embracing she was getting; but everybody was hugging her and talking to her at once, and Phyllis only knew that it was rather like a blissful Tower of Babel.

The party walked up Warren Street, talking still, all at the same time, Bab walking backward and spinning around like Barney in "Martin Chuzzlewit" after the accident. It took all of Tom's ability to keep her and Nixie from under people's feet. Mrs. Wyndham and Jessamy tried to behave with dignity, but it was not a successful attempt; and those who met the party probably set them down as harmless lunatics under the convoy of one young keeper; though there was one ruddy-faced old gentleman who, seizing the spirit of the occasion and the season, wished Babbie "A merry Christmas, my dear," in return for her having run into his portly form, and trodden on his most sensitive corn.

Even Nixie's manners did not admit him to the elevated road, so they took the surface car, Tom remaining on the platform with the small dog and a conductor blinded in the most efficacious manner to his presence; and by the time they had made the long journey to Harlem much of the excitement had cooled down. [248]

It broke out afresh, however, as Phyllis ran from room to room through the little apartment, which looked more beautiful to her than Mrs. Dean's big house on Commonwealth Avenue could ever look, exclaiming over every change, and still more surprised over those things which had not altered. Truce was not one of these. The snowy kitten was a white cat now; but, as Phyllis said, "did not seem to know it," for he ran up her skirt to her shoulder, and sat there as he had done when he was not much bigger than a thistle-ball, proving that he recognized her, for this was a mark of affection he had always reserved for his mistress alone.

"Do you remember last Christmas eve?" asked Phyllis, after breakfast, as they all pushed back their coffee-cups with the involuntary movement of those who have satisfied hunger.

"Are we likely to forget it?" said Jessamy, with a shudder. "It did not mean anything to you, though; oh, Phyllis, this ought to be much more than merely a '*merry* Christmas' to us!"

"We are going to keep it in baronial style," said Tom. "There are tons, to speak comprehensively, of green stuff coming here to-day, and we are going to trim the Land of Canaan till Birnam Wood won't be a twig beside it. And to-morrow we're going to have a Christmas-tree, and invite our friends, preceded by a dinner to which we shall not invite any one, because the dining-room is too small, and the turkey fills all the spaces we do not require. He is to be offered up to you, Phyllis, in honor of your repentant return from your wild wanderings." [249]

"Isn't that a delightful program!" cried Phyllis, the joy in her eyes arising more from noting how thoroughly Tom had assumed his place as the son of the little family, than from the prospect of Christmas festivities, however blithe.

All day long the girls climbed step-ladders and wound ropes of evergreen till their hands were stiff, but their hearts so light that they hardly knew the discomfort. By night the little place was a bower of green, with red holly-berries shining in every available corner like cheery little lanterns signaling coming gladness.

Not one day had passed during the six months of Phyllis's absence without a letter from her crossing another going to her from home; and yet, though the three tongues had rattled as fast as they could move all day, Jessamy, Phyllis, and Bab talked till midnight, and fell asleep exhausted, wishing each other "Merry Christmas," not having told half the history of those eventful days of absence.

Christmas day was bright and sunny—not that it mattered with so much sunshine within doors.

Violet, who slept at home, "because," said Bab, "the bath-tub was not long enough for a bed, and there was no room for her anywhere else"—Violet arrived earlier than usual, her face beaming with anticipation of pleasure, for she was that rare servant to whom "company" was a delight. [250]

Mrs. Wyndham peered at Tom at the foot of the table, from her place at the head, over a barricade of turkey, and each heart throbbed with gratitude that it was their own turkey, served on their own table, and that the year that had passed had proved that a home and happiness might be theirs, although loss of money had made the maintenance of that home not without its difficulties.

Barbara sat at Tom's right hand, and Tom's youngest sister at Mrs. Wyndham's right. Phyllis, watching jealously for proofs of Tom's love for Bab, was more than satisfied. Tom and Babbie were not a sentimental pair, but there was a quiet certainty of affection and a perfect comradeship between them that guaranteed a love founded on the best and most enduring basis. And Alice Leighton was a girl after their own hearts. Bab was surely fortunate, and Phyllis rejoiced unselfishly.

Although the little parlor had seemed filled in every corner, one had been cleared for the tree, and a curtain hung across it that there might be something in the celebration that Phyllis had not seen, since the festivities had taken on this special form in honor of her return.

At a little after eight the bell tingled, and many feet echoed up the stairs.

"Open the door, Phyl," cried Bab from her room. Neither she nor Jessamy would allow Phyllis a glimpse of them dressing.

Phyllis did as she was bidden, and started back in amazement from a motley assemblage of characters from the four quarters of the globe, and all the realms of fairyland, as bewildered Phyllis at first thought. [251]

Santa Claus led the way—a small man, but only when measured perpendicularly; in diameter he was immense. After him came Cinderella and her godmother; then Aunt Henrietta, who disdained masking and costuming, and came in her own proper—most proper—person. Next followed Red Riding Hood, a Viking's Daughter, Old Mother Hubbard, Pocahontas, Little Nell with her grandfather, Bo-peep with a woolly lamb under one arm, and many other old friends, those known in the nursery predominating, since it was a Christmas-tree party, and childhood, human and divine, the ruling spirit of the feast.

For a moment Phyllis did not know how to act. She felt out of place, with her own face undisguised confronting the queer figures bowing and saluting her cordially by name, not one of whom she knew. But she rallied quickly, welcomed them politely, wishing that Jessamy and Bab would hasten to help her out. But Jessamy and Bab were not forthcoming. After a few moments Phyllis realized it was because they too were costumed and masked, mixing with the other mummers.

Old King Cole stepped out of the crowd as Phyllis was wondering what could be done with so many in such small space, and calling for his fiddlers three, demanded an old English dance. There is nothing like ignoring a difficulty when there is no way of doing away with it. The idea of dancing when she was fearful there would not be room for all the guests merely to stand rather took Phyllis's breath away; but everybody seemed to fold himself or herself up to make room, and the couples for the old country dance were on the floor in a twinkling. [252]

"It's because they are used to living in books, so can become quite flat," Bobby Shafto explained to her as he rose to lead out the Sleeping Beauty, who indicated her previous condition by poppies all over her costume and in her hair, but showed no sign of relapsing from decided wakefulness.

"Aren't there people outside of books who are flatter than those in them?" asked Phyllis; but she was not thinking of plays on words, but that the dancers of to-night were probably the actors in the theatricals of last May, who had then learned the old dance, and that if she watched she should discover which were Jessamy and Bab, and which Jessamy's friend, Mr. Lane, in regard to whom she felt considerable curiosity. It was not hard to distinguish Jessamy, who had a certain manner of using her hands all her own. She was the Sleeping Beauty, and Phyllis guessed that Bobby Shafto was Mr. Lane—or should it be the other way?

It was not long before she discovered Bab in the guise of Little Miss Muffet, and a tall Little Boy Blue, with a huge Japanese spider on a sort of small fishing-pole which he dangled before the nervous little person who lunched out of doors on curds and whey, was Tom.

"And who am I?" asked Cinderella's godmother, stopping before Phyllis, smiling behind her muslin mask at the girl's preoccupied face. [253]

"I know who the fairy godmother ought to be," said Phyllis. "If you aren't Mrs. Van Alyn, then it's your own character which is the disguise."

"Bravo! You have been getting clever over there in the land of Athena Junior," laughed the godmother, and her voice proved Phyllis right.

"And me?" cried Cinderella, impatiently. "Who am I?"

"I have no idea," Phyllis was slowly beginning, when Cinderella interrupted her.

"How can you be so dull?" she cried. "Who is always sitting in the ashes, and likes them?"

"Why, Ruth!" cried Phyllis, and hugged her friend until some of the realistic black spots on her

gown were transferred to her own.

It was not a very conventional party. The room was "so crowded there was no space for stiffness," said Bab, truly; but everybody seemed to be having the nicest time—even Aunt Henrietta. To be sure, Phyllis heard her suggesting to Mrs. Wyndham that parties were a great extravagance for people in straitened circumstances, but that was said rather as an oblation to her custom of fault-finding, and not heartily; and a moment later she added graciously that "the girls are improving daily. Even Phyllis is becoming more and more a Wyndham; they are all clear Wyndhams."

"Phyllis is just as much a Wyndham, certainly, as her cousins," laughed Mrs. Wyndham. [254]

"Ah, but she is not poor Henry's daughter," said Aunt Henrietta so decidedly that the remark became at once illuminative in effect, if not in matter.

"Ladies in the center, as for the quadrille figure," called Old King Cole, who acted as master of ceremonies. "Men join hands around them; ladies form line, hands raised, men dance through, come down outside, take places, a man beside each lady."

A quaint and merry air was played by a pretty young girl whom Phyllis had never seen, and King Cole's directions were carried out, almost without a mistake.

"Left hand to partner, right hand on mask," called that jovial person. "Ready!"

The little creature at the piano struck three chords, while the masqueraders took position. It really was very pretty, small as the space was.

Suddenly, obeying another chord, every voice poured out in the carol:

> "Christ was born on Christmas Day,
> Wreathe the holly, twine the bay,"

and sang it through to the end. Then a single chord was struck, and instantly every mask was swept off by the raised right hands, and the company made a deep bow, crying in unison: "Merry Christmas!"

It was charming; and while Phyllis and the few who were not a part of the figure applauded wildly, Santa Claus, who proved to be, of all unexpected persons, Lawyer Hurd, began to strip the tree. [255]

There were presents for every one. Phyllis had saved her own packages, tucked into her trunk by Mrs. Dean, to open now; and all the little trinkets she had made or got together for her family they had made her keep for the tree. Violet, shining and smiling in the background, was made happy; and Truce received a chicken wish-bone, with plenty of meat on it, and Nixie a French chop, that being the kind of comfit suited to their palates, each placed in a candy-box ornamented with a picture of a cat and a dog respectively. Bab opened a small case Santa Claus handed her, and flushed with pleasure. A little miniature of Tom smiled up at her, and on the back was engraved: "Years pass away; Love lasts alway." Since that morning a diamond, set as lightly as possible, shone on Barbara's little left hand like a drop of dew.

But Phyllis's surprise was so complete and delightful that no one was happier than she. She had written since she had been away and sent to Jessamy two or three short stories for her illustrating, and had wondered what had become of them, knowing that Jessamy had done the work and sent them to magazines. No one told her their fate, so she did not ask, being more sensitive about these little attempts than any one suspected. Now the explanation lay before her in the delightful shape of a crisp fifty-dollar bill.

The first story, written before she had left home, Jessamy had sent to several of the larger magazines, and received it back each time with a personal note of praise and encouragement. At last it had found its way to a magazine with a larger circulation and smaller subscription price than any of the others, and the editor had not only accepted the story, but told Jessamy he would take all she could give him of equal merit; and especially requested her to illustrate for him other work besides her cousin's. The second story Phyllis sent had been refused, but the third was accepted with praise; and now the money for both lay in her hand to complete the happiness of her home-coming. It was not a great sum—the magazine would have paid more to some one whose name was known; but Phyllis considered it tremendous, and felt as though her five right-hand fingers had suddenly been endowed with the Midas touch. [256]

Jessamy and she had a rapture after all their friends had gone. It had been a beautiful Christmas Day, and the very nicest evening the girls remembered to have spent; but it was best of all to bid the people good-night, dear as many of them were to them, and sit down alone, a "square" once more, at their "ain fireside," represented, as Babbie pointed out, by a gilded steam radiator.

Jessamy was paid ten to twenty dollars each for her illustrations. She and Phyllis hugged each other in speechless anticipation of the wealth that they were to pile up. Yet a vision of Bobby Shafto, and a look in his eyes that night as they rested on the Sleeping Beauty, as if he would dearly have liked the privilege of waking her in the manner of the prince in the story, filled Phyllis with foreboding that their collaboration might be short. But she was at home again, and everything smiled on their hopes. "A merry Christmas and a happy New Year!" Ah, yes, very, very happy. And with that thought in her grateful heart, Phyllis fell asleep, with Truce purring on her arm. [257]

CHAPTER XVI
SPOKES FROM THE HUB

[258]

OUR days after New Year's began a week of shut-in weather, the kind of days which drive one nearly frantic, or make one perfectly happy, according to the state of mind in which they find one. The Wyndhams, "squared" once more, with Phyllis back and their home life resumed with nothing to mar it, were in precisely the perfect contentment which hails with rapture weather shutting out the outside world and drawing closer together the inside one. The snow fell steadily for three days, intermittently for four more; the walking was as bad as it could be, and the city lay muffled in stillness that was hypnotic in effect, and helped keep people within doors who had not obligations to force them out.

Jessamy, Phyllis, and Barbara reveled in the pleasure of donning old gowns every morning and settling down to the achievement of odd tasks without fear of interruption, and also in the chance to get talked up to date after half a year of absence on Phyllis's part. There was an old chair [259] which had outlived its covering, though in a melancholy state of finish, which had been condemned to the tender mercies of the refuse gatherer by all but Bab. She, fired with economical zeal, had long declared that she would enamel it in black, re-cover it, and have practically a new chair at the trifling expense of a can of paint and three quarters of a yard of worsted and linen tapestry. This was precisely the time for which she had waited, when an old sheet could be spread on the parlor rug, and the chair allowed plenty of time to dry, with no danger of callers to be shocked by the sight and sickened by the odor of paint; so during this "spell of weather," as Violet called it, she began the transformation of the chair.

Jessamy had a dress to turn, which she too had been waiting to begin until such time as threads on the floor would not matter; and Phyllis brought out all the piece-boxes into the parlor to set them in order in the midst of the general festive disorder.

Jessamy could never be seriously disheveled, but she had put on her oldest gown to do her ripping, and Phyllis was "neat, but not gaudy," Tom said, in a faded pink shirt-waist and a skirt decidedly worse for wear; for boxes were dusty, and sorting scraps hard on skirt fronts. Of course Tom was not deterred by weather or bad walking from dropping in daily to keep his eye on his future family and his particular property in it. Bab said that the worst of being engaged to a young doctor was that, having office hours and few patients, he was obliged to be out at certain [260] times for appearances' sake, and had nowhere else to go except to see his betrothed, which gave her very little security of time to herself. But it was quite apparent to every one that Babbie did not object to an arrangement which allowed Tom to drop in daily at four to join them in their afternoon tea—which was usually chocolate.

"It really is too cozy and heavenly to be real!" cried Phyllis, suddenly, looking up from a shabby bit of ribbon she was turning every way in the gray light to determine whether it was to be discarded or retained. "It's the blessedest sort of thing to be busy, and a trifle shabby, and all shut in, with the world shut out."

"A good deal shabby, I should say," remarked Jessamy. "Not that it matters. It does seem like 'Myself and my wife; my son John and his wife; us four, and no more,' doesn't it?"

"I could purr like Trucie, and I know just how he feels when he cuddles down under the blanket on cold nights," said Phyllis. "Cats are the only things that can express the kind of contentment these days give me."

"I might purr if it weren't for this horrid chair," groaned Barbara. "I wish I'd never touched the thing! Girls, that paint isn't one minute more dry than it was the night before last!"

Bab was a sight to behold. A long muslin gown, far past its usefulness and beauty, hung over her loosely, betraying through certain rents the fact that she wore a black skirt under it. Black [261] enamel paint stood out in bold relief in great blotches on its faded groundwork, black paint decorated the knuckles and finger-tips of her grimy little hands. One finger was bound up where she had hammered it black and blue; for, her patience exhausted waiting for the paint to dry, she had attempted to cover the chair while it was yet wet. Her hair would have qualified her for Bloomingdale, for Bab had the sort of hair which comes down when its owner goes into any work in earnest, and she had stuck in the hair-pins, hit or miss fashion—chiefly miss—and black paint adorned her forehead where her knuckles had brushed it. But worst of all was the expression of rage and despair gradually transforming her face. The chair was undeniably a failure, and Bab did not like to fail.

"It's a shame, Babette. I wouldn't bother with the old thing another minute," said Jessamy, sympathetically. "I don't see why that paint doesn't dry, or even stick to the chair; but it doesn't, so I wouldn't get any more tired over it. It must be poor paint."

"It is fast enough anywhere but on the chair," said Barbara, surveying her painted hands, and not grateful for Jessamy's advice. "It dries on me, and sticks wherever it lights."

"Give it up, Bab; don't spoil this beautiful, closed-in day with anything that worries," said Phyllis. "Oh, catch Truchi-ki, Jessamy; if he rubs against that enamel paint, he and I will both have an awful time getting it off his fur! Isn't it nice that you've learned how to turn and make over your [262] dresses, Jessamy! It is such an economy!"

"Jessamy won't admit, even to herself, that she does it to economize," laughed Bab, the wrinkles smoothing out of her forehead as she sat back on the sheet covering the floor and clasped her knees with her hands. "She pretends she makes over her dresses because she likes to, and regards the dress when it is done as such a bit of elegance that she hypnotizes others into thinking it is elegant. If you notice, Phyl, Jessamy never does admit that we are scrabbling along; and that is the reason she appears so much more high-bred than you and I do. We rather more than merely admit that we consider a turned dress less desirable than a new one. But Jessamy ignores, even to herself, the fact that the goods have another side, and her dresses look cloth-of-goldy because she expects no less of them. We pretend to outsiders, but Jessamy pretends consistently, even to herself, and that's why it is so much better pretense."

"Pretense! Oh, Bab!" cried Jessamy, reproachfully; and at that instant the bell rang.

"It's the milkman with his bill," said Jessamy, easily. "I know his ring; besides, he is due to-day; Violet has the money ready."

It was the milkman; but as Violet, having paid him, was about to close the door, two tall figures bounded up the stairs, and a breezy masculine voice cried: "One moment, please. Is Miss Phyllis Wyndham at home?"

"Y-es, sah," stammered Violet, with an apprehensive glance over her shoulder at the disordered [263]
parlor, where Bab was sitting on the floor, horror-stricken at the question, and Phyllis was wildly scooping up an armful of bits from the sofa in a frantic effort to flee. But flight was impossible, for the only exit from the small parlor was into the hall, directly opposite the door which Violet was inhospitably holding partly closed.

"Please give her these cards," continued the voice, and two young men entered with the serene unconsciousness of their age and sex.

"How are you, Miss Phyllis!" cried one of the arrivals, catching sight of the object of his search in his line of vision, and utterly oblivious to the situation.

In spite of her chagrin, Phyllis was quite honest in the cry of pleasure with which she recognized him. "Alan Armstrong!" she exclaimed, "and Mr. Campbell! Well, I am glad, though you have caught us in a plight. Girls, these are my Boston friends. Miss Wyndham, Miss Barbara Wyndham —Mr. Armstrong and Mr. Campbell."

Jessamy arose with the grace of the princess they called her. It really did not matter whether Jessamy was in rags or velvets while she wore her beautiful manner.

"You can't imagine how glad we are to see those who made dear Phyllis happy while she was away from home," Jessamy said with simple graciousness. "It is so good of you to come all the way up-town in this bad weather! We felt sure no one would be kind enough to come to see us to- [264]
day, so we got out all sorts of disagreeable work; but you won't mind disorder, I'm sure."

"We can't see it," said Alan, thinking privately Jessamy was the loveliest girl he had ever seen, and that it was quite true that no one would waste a glance on a room when she was in it.

"If I had known you were coming I would have painted my face more artfully," said Bab, really very much embarrassed as she thought with horror of the muslin wrapper covering her gown, her fly-away hair, and her bedaubed hands and face.

"I should think it likely Alan or David Campbell could tell you why your chair won't dry, Babbie," said Phyllis, trying to help her out. "My cousin has been trying to repair this rocker, and she has hammered her finger sore covering it, and the paint sticks to everything but the wood; why is that?"

"I can't explain the hammering," said Alan, "but I suspect the trouble with the chair is that the wood was oily when you painted it. There is always a deposit of oil from hands on chair-arms. If you had washed it in an alkali before you began, it would have been all right."

"Perhaps I would better try your prescription on myself," said Barbara. "Though I am afraid nothing but a turpentine bath will do for me. It is too late to help the chair, isn't it? If you will forget you met me in this guise, I'll come back in a few moments and let you be introduced to Phyllis's respectable cousin Barbara."

"It is too late to do anything with the chair, I'm afraid, but we don't want to forget we have met [265]
you," said Alan, rising to open the door for Bab with such politeness that she said afterward he "made her feel as neat and nice as if he had been a paint-eraser."

"Call Violet to take away the chair; tell her to send it down to the janitor, and fold up this sheet on the floor, Bab," said Jessamy. "I always did suspect the women's corners in papers that tell one how to make toilet-tables and chairs out of old barrels or packing-cases. Bab has spent three days struggling with this chair, only to throw it away at last."

"One of the New York papers had a burlesque Household Department once," said Alan, as he closed the door behind Bab, and turned to help Phyllis tie up her boxes. "Among other things, it told the gentle reader never to throw away her cold buckwheat cakes—that they made a lovely dado glued at irregular intervals on blue denim, or, used in the same way, were most artistic as a portière border. I always think of it when I read these crazy directions for making furniture out of coal-hods and things. Look here; why do you all put away your work, Miss Phyllis? You'll make Heather and me feel ourselves nuisances."

"We were only doing these things for want of better interests," said Phyllis. "I'd like to show you my little home looking respectable. I've told you so much of how it came to be. Do you still call

David Heather? That was Rick's name for him. And you need not call me *Miss* Phyllis here, any more than in Boston. We are all going to be informal friends." [266]

"There's Tom!" exclaimed Jessamy, as the bell rang twice, and twice again, with a short pause between, and sprang to open the door for the doctor.

"How is everything to-day, Jessamy? Where's Bab? What is this—company?" added Tom, lowering his voice, but to a no less audible key.

"Mr. Armstrong, Mr. Campbell—Dr. Leighton," said Jessamy, ushering Tom into the room; "Phyllis's Boston friends, you know, Tom. And Nixie," she added, as the little dog followed, shaking off the snow.

"Glad to see you," said Tom, with cordial hand-grasps to each. "Here's my little lady," he added, turning joyfully to meet Bab transformed into her pretty self, though black paint still surmounted her knuckles. Jessamy took the opportunity to slip out for like improvements, and Tom cried: "Guess what's happened, Bab! I was called in for croup to the millionaire baby on the corner, and delighted the family by my skill; relieved the choking heir at once—that's not a pun; I didn't mean choking air! Only think! And there are five millionaire offspring in the family, not one of whom has had a single childish disease; the mother told me so! Suppose I should get that practice!"

"Hope you will, I'm sure. Phyllis told us about you, and your other prospects," said Alan, glancing at Barbara, who was gazing proudly at Tom.

"The door-bell again!" cried Phyllis, as it rang. "That's Ruth's ring." And she opened the door to their friend. [267]

"Such walking, Phyl! But I had to come. I have sat over my embroidery without a breath of air for five days, and I was nearly wild. Is it a party?" added Ruth, stopping suddenly as she caught a glimpse of the parlor.

"It is rather a good imitation of one for such weather," laughed Phyllis. "My friends from Boston, who, I told you, were to be in New York this winter, are come, and Tom is here; that is all. Here are Jessamy and auntie. I'm going to make myself presentable now; you go in with them."

"Your friends have consented to stay to tea, Phyllis; and Ruth will stay all night," said Mrs. Wyndham, as Phyllis came back, looking sweet and fresh in her gray crepon. "We are going to have a real stormy-night good time, though I've no idea of what we shall find for supper."

"Supper does not matter," said David Campbell, crossing to Phyllis's side. "I have been waiting to show you a bit of pebble my sister sent over to me. I asked her if she would let me have it for you. It came from the bank of Loch Leven."

"Oh, that was ever so kind of you!" cried Phyllis, gratefully, really pleased with the thought for her the lame lad showed. "I always loved poor Mary Stuart; I hope you don't think her bad?"

"Bad!" echoed David, with the emphasis of a Scotsman. "Her conduct may have been somewhat erroneous, but she was brought up in an evil court, and was but a young bit lassie when she came to her own, and too beautiful to be left to wicked counselors. But bad! She was never that, you know." [268]

"I am sure she wasn't, for I always was too sorry for her not to judge her partially; I shall prize this little stone, thinking her weary feet may have trodden it," said Phyllis.

"That's not, so to say, possible," said honest Davy; "for most like the pebbles that were on the surface three hun'er years ago are buried now. It's juist a memento, no mair."

"Ah, well; it will do no harm to dream about it," said Phyllis. "I shall want you to tell me all your plans after supper. Now we must all go to work. Alan, you are to make the coffee as you did on the yacht."

"I had an aunt," Ruth was saying to Alan at that moment, and Alan did not hear Phyllis as she spoke—"I had an aunt who married an Armstrong. That is, she was my mother's sister-in-law; her husband was Fordyce Armstrong, and he lived in Boston."

"He was my father's cousin," said Alan, surprised. "Isn't that odd! Your aunt-in-law married my second cousin. What relation are we then, Miss Wells? Phyllis, your friend and I are relations of some sort; come, unsnarl us. Oh, never mind, though; we are cousins too; that's a nice, elastic relationship, anyway."

Mrs. Wyndham brought out the chafing-dish, and Jessamy took it in charge. Jessamy was getting more and more into the way of slipping into vacancies and smoothing out possible complications in the tiny home. Bab was very occupied being engaged, and Phyllis was throwing herself increasingly into her hopes and work. [269]

The supper was a success. It was settled that no one should get anything from outside; but Welsh rabbit in the chafing-dish, toast, cold meat, coffee, Bab's fresh cake, preserves, the result of Jessamy's proud first effort in that very feminine, old-time accomplishment of "putting up" fruit—going out of fashion since women's exchanges and fancy groceries make canned goods so easily purchasable—all these things, brought forth from the little pantry, made a supper fit for a king, breaking up even David's silence into merriment.

When the feast was over, and the young people once more back in the little parlor, leaving Mrs. Wyndham with Violet to straighten matters in the kitchen, the bell rang again, stopping Barbara's accompaniment to a college song which they were all getting ready to sing.

"Isn't it funny how people keep coming when we felt so sure of a solitary day?" said Phyllis, as

she went unceremoniously to open the door herself. It was Robert Lane whom she ushered in with more constraint of manner than she had shown the other visitors. Only Jessamy felt well acquainted with the young lawyer.

Robert contrived to get Jessamy to himself for a brief but apparently earnest conversation under the cover of the singing; and the little party broke up early, after a few songs had been sung by what Tom called "the invested choir." [270]

Barbara bore off Ruth to share her bed. Jessamy called back Phyllis, who was following them, stopping herself to turn off the gas. "Phyl," she said, "do you know why Mr. Lane came here to-night?"

"Apparently to see you," returned Phyllis. "He hardly noticed any one else."

"Yes; but it was to tell me something particular," said Jessamy, with the suspicion of a blush in the dim light. "He thinks—oh, Phyl, he really thinks that the information he has in regard to Mr. Abbott's actions two years ago is going to get us back some of our money; and he says Mr. Hurd thinks so too. Isn't it fine?"

"Oh, Jessamy, wouldn't I be thankful! But not for my own sake," added Phyllis, hastily. "Mr. Lane seems to be very nice, Amy."

"So are both your friends very nice, Phyllis," returned Jessamy, turning out the gas, as she spoke, so Phyllis could not see her face.

CHAPTER XVII [271]
THE LADY OF THE SCALES

WHILE Phyllis was climbing the steep hill of fame by the path of her little stories, events in her home were not at a standstill.

The pleasantest and most tangible thing that had happened was that Jessamy had been asked by the editor of the magazine which had bought her illustrations and Phyllis's two stories, to illustrate for him other work besides that done by her cousin.

Jessamy was very busy and happy during these days. She was blossoming out into fuller, more perfect beauty; her eyes were alight as with a secret joy, her smile grew every day sweeter and more lingering; in a word, Jessamy was leaving the last shadow of that mysterious valley of young maidenhood, and passing into the full sunshine of womanhood. It was two years since the trouble, which was every day less of a regret to the Wyndhams, had come to them; or, it would be two years when May rolled around again, and it was then March. Jessamy and Phyllis were twenty; [272] they had a right to enter upon their kingdom. Barbara, too, at nineteen and engaged, was grown up. Mrs. Wyndham, with the gratitude of a mother who had brought her children safely through the development of character into sweet and good women, yet with the regret of a mother in losing her little girls, realized that her three little maids were little no longer.

It was March, and the season was forward after the heavy snows of the winter. The song-sparrow was lilting in the park, the twigs and buds were showing red and swelling on many trees and shrubs.

There had been, of late, mystery in the atmosphere of the little apartment, from share in which Mrs. Wyndham felt herself excluded. Evidently the girls were in a conspiracy of some sort; but their mother did not give the matter much thought, knowing that when they were ready they would confide in her, and feeling quite certain if she were not told it was because the plan worked better for her in ignorance of it.

Robert Lane came and went frequently, and Mrs. Wyndham watched him with the jealousy of a strong suspicion that he was finding her beautiful elder daughter attractive. But, watch as she would, she could not discover anything in the young lawyer which did not make her like him better as she grew to know him well. Jessamy and he—indeed, all three girls and he—seemed to have an understanding which Mrs. Wyndham learned to associate with the secret in the air; but [273] she could not determine whether Jessamy was growing to care for Robert in the way he was unmistakably learning to care for her. Mrs. Wyndham's watchfulness of Jessamy was divided with Phyllis. Alan haunted the apartment, and there was no mistaking the dumb affection for Phyllis in his eyes, as faithful as a dog's, and less reticent of speech than his newly silent tongue. Phyllis, happy, busy, interested to try her powers, showed no feeling for Alan beyond the frank friendliness she gave all their young men friends impartially, Tom, Robert, and David, and to distant Rick Dean, whose letters grew constantly more frequent and warmer in tone. Mrs. Wyndham began to wonder if Phyllis were the sort of girl who is so cordially kindly to all boys that no especial one becomes important to her. She felt sure that if, by and by, her niece could not return to Alan all that he was pouring out on her, it would be more tragic to the loyal-hearted and earnest young journalist than unrequited affection is likely to be to youths of his age.

However, girls were proverbially uncertain and hard to read. Mrs. Wyndham was too wise to worry over a contingency not yet arisen. She saw with pleasure that David Campbell was finding little Ruth decidedly to his liking. There could not have been a better happening for them both. David was an earnest, honest, manly boy, and Ruth would be the very best little housewife a man could ask. Mrs. Wyndham hoped that nothing would divert the course of the romance dawning in that direction.

"It is such a nice, quiet time now, mama, with Phyllis settled down again to private life, and no [274] especial work on hand; let's ask Aunt Henrietta to spend the day," said Jessamy one morning in that eventful March.

Bab groaned, and even Phyllis looked downcast. "Oh, dear, it's awful to have a sense of duty," sighed Bab. "What does make you so dreadfully conscientious, Jessamy?"

"It isn't such a tremendous proof of conscientiousness," Jessamy began; but her mother said:

"It is exactly what I have been meaning to suggest for some time. We have scarcely seen anything of aunt all winter, and we owe her attention; she is growing old."

"She isn't growing old, Madrina; you know that. She always was old; but she doesn't mean to admit it, nor let it increase," said Bab. "Well, I suppose I can maintain my portion of family virtue. Write your note, Jessamy-Griselda, the patient and heroic."

Aunt Henrietta accepted the invitation, which was for three days later, and appeared at half-past twelve precisely, in all the dignity of a stiff black silk, her old-fashioned heavy gold watch-chain with the seals, and a high tortoise-shell comb which had been her mother's. She no more held to the idea of ladies of her age wearing even so much as a widow's cap than she did to the absurdity of arriving ten minutes before luncheon. Half an hour, she declared, was not too long to rest after reaching her destination before sitting down to the table. It was ridiculous to come barely in time to lay off one's things. Hence she arrived at her niece's apartment thirty minutes before the hour [275]

for lunch, and before the girls had had time to get ready to greet her. The Wyndhams believed that it was impossible for one servant to do everything, and do it well; so when there was to be a guest in the little home, Jessamy, Phyllis, and Bab took their share of the preparations.

"You've been getting a new rug for your dining-room," said Aunt Henrietta, in the tone of disapproval which she kept "for family use," as Bab said.

"Yes; that is Phyllis's contribution to our comfort. She bought it with her 'Trumpet' money," replied Mrs. Wyndham, mildly. "The old one we took for Bab's room; her carpet was worn out."

"The idea of a girl who pretends to be a lady, a Wyndham, working for a horrible newspaper!" exclaimed Aunt Henrietta. "How do you get on now, Emily? You seem to be branching out." The last remark being called forth by the old lady's discovery of a picture which she had not seen before between the dining-room windows.

"It is fortunate Violet is not an ordinary servant, and that we don't mind her hearing these things!" thought Mrs. Wyndham, but she replied aloud: "We have enough to live on, you know, aunt. Of course we must look after the pennies closely; but with care we have all we absolutely need, and the girls have added considerably to our income. Jessamy and Phyllis have great reason to rejoice in their success with their magazine work, especially when one considers how [276] many are rushing into that field."

"So Barbara is the only drone?" said Aunt Henrietta. "No, no potatoes; my doctor forbids them. It is often the one who says most who does least."

"Barbara is far from a drone, Aunt Henrietta," said Phyllis, seeing Bab fold her lips with a look at once angry and hurt. "There has to be one to help with the housekeeping. Bab is the most competent little person you could imagine, and is so lively and cheery she keeps us all up to the mark."

"Humph!" ejaculated Aunt Henrietta, with a world of significance in the sound. "Take away that dreadful cat. I always detested cats! How people can keep animals in such a limited space I can't conceive. When are you to be married, Barbara; or will that young man you are engaged to ever be able to support you?"

"Next fall, if Doctor Leighton has his wish," said Bab, while Phyllis gathered up Truce, and bore him, surprised and indignant, from the room, where, as everywhere, he was used to being considered an acquisition. "Doctor Leighton expects to be able to support me. He would not have asked me to marry him, otherwise." Barbara disdained reminding her aunt that Tom was heir to a very good inheritance. It would have been so unbearable if even Aunt Henrietta, for whose opinion in general she had little regard, looked on her marriage from a mercenary point of view.

"Very probably. He seems to be a very nice young man," said Aunt Henrietta, to the surprise of [277] Barbara, who was ready to do battle for her lover. But Aunt Henrietta was more lenient in her judgment of boys than of girls.

The luncheon passed off with no further passage at arms, and Aunt Henrietta settled herself comfortably to slow knitting in the best chair in the parlor, and to conversation with her niece-in-law. The girls were unmistakably "fidgety," as Aunt Henrietta protestingly remarked. A note had come for Jessamy during lunch. She had read it with quickened breath, and conveyed it to the other two slyly, when opportunity offered. The effect on all three had been disturbing. Bab flitted about from room to room, finding it impossible to keep still. And, while Phyllis had greater nervous control of herself, her answers to remarks addressed to her were so wide of the mark that Aunt Henrietta commented on it severely, and her Aunt Wyndham kindly let her alone.

As to Jessamy, her cheeks were burning, her eyes so bright that Aunt Henrietta, looking at her attentively, prescribed: "Six drops of number three aconite in a half-glass of water, and take one teaspoonful every hour. You are certainly feverish, child," she added. Jessamy's beauty had made her Aunt Henrietta's favorite from her childhood.

At half-past four, just after Aunt Henrietta had rolled up her work preparatory to taking her afternoon tea before setting out homeward—"You live at such an unearthly distance from civilization," she said, as though the Wyndhams were selfishly inconsiderate of everything but [278] their own pleasure in living so far up-town and seeking low rent—just at half-past four the bell rang, and Mrs. Wyndham met at the door Robert Lane, looking so excited, entering with such a quick step, and with such flashing eyes, that he hardly seemed to be himself, and brought with him instantly an electric atmosphere.

"What has happened to you, Mr. Lane?" asked Mrs. Wyndham. "You know my aunt, Mrs. Hewlett? You look as though some one had made you heir to a fortune."

"Not a bad guess, Mrs. Wyndham," said Robert, taking the extended hand. "I have as good news as that to tell you. I honestly believe I like it better than a fortune for myself."

"Then it is all right? He came to terms?" cried Bab, while Jessamy and Phyllis, knowing the answer before it was given, dropped, quite pale with joy, on the sofa, their arms holding each other tight.

"All right, little lady. The check is here," cried Robert, jubilantly, slapping himself on the breast.

Mrs. Wyndham turned pale. Even Aunt Henrietta began to tremble. "May we know what you are talking about, young man?" she said sternly. "Evidently the girls have the advantage of us."

"My dear Mrs. Wyndham," Robert began, "it is a rather long story; the beginning dates back to the winter before last, when I was first graduated from the law school, and had a desk in one of

Mr. Abbott's offices."

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A BEARER OF GOOD TIDINGS.

At the mention of that fateful name Mrs. Wyndham sat erect, clasping tight the arms of her chair. [281]
"Mr. Abbott?" she whispered.

"Precisely; the Abbott who robbed you," said Robert, nodding emphatically. "At the time I was frequently asked to witness his signature to papers; among others were three deeds of transfer. I caught a glimpse of their contents, not reading them in detail, of course, but I saw enough to know they were transfer deeds for certain property held by Mr. Abbott in his own name. He made it over to his wife. The dates of those deeds I remembered—I have a good memory for dates, always had. The first was signed on my own birthday, December seventh; the second, on January third, the day on which a chum of mine, whose birthday I have always kept by dining with him, was born; the third was signed the day before Washington's birthday, and I had to witness it with my coat on, ready to start out of town for the holiday—so I was prepared to swear to all three dates with absolute certainty. At the time there were many things which led me to suspect that Mr. Abbott was not all one's fancy paints an honest man, but I was not called upon to meddle in his affairs, merely renting desk-room of him as I did. But the following spring, when I heard of the failure of the Wyndham Corporation, and that your family had lost everything, practically, while Abbott was still prosperous, I began to think seriously. A year ago I met Miss Jessamy, and I—I thought such a—I thought—why, it seemed a shame, don't you know, that she should be [282] deprived of anything, when nothing was good—" Robert broke off, much embarrassed.

"And you tried to help us?" suggested Mrs. Wyndham; while Aunt Henrietta looked sharply from blushing Jessamy to the no less crimson young lawyer.

"Yes, yes," said Robert, gratefully. "I went to Mr. Hurd and told him what I knew about that rascal having put his property out of his hands when the company was already involved and he could not legally do so. Mr. Hurd jumped at the information. 'Young man,' he said, 'you may be the very witness we needed to establish what we were all morally certain of, yet could never prove.' Then I spoke to Mrs. Van Alyn—no, I had already spoken to her before I met Miss Jessamy. I forgot—I had seen Jessamy when I began to act, but had not met her. Mrs. Van Alyn said you ought not to be told until we were certain, because you were too delicate to be upset on a possibly false clue. So Mrs. Van Alyn asked Jessamy—Miss Wyndham—to meet me at her house, and she gave me all the information necessary to proceed on. We have been at work ever since, more or less. You were not told, for it proved unnecessary; Mr. Hurd having power of attorney for you. Abbott is a sly cur; we couldn't establish illegal transfers beyond the deeds I witnessed, though it is absolutely certain he made others. However, those amounted to forty thousand dollars. Mr. Hurd and I proved to him that we could—and there wasn't much doubt Mr. Hurd would—sue him for that amount, and not only get it, but a pretty tidy sum would be out of his [283] pocket for costs. The old rascal hated to disgorge, but he wanted to economize on his restitution, and handing over forty thousand to Mr. Hurd was cheaper than meeting the suit. So Mr. Hurd got his check for that amount—it's certified—and he let me bring it up to you, and tell you the

story, like the trump he is, because he is good enough to say the recovery came through me. Mrs. Wyndham, here is forty thousand dollars, and if you are as glad as I am about it you are a pretty happy woman."

So saying, and with a decided choke in his voice, Robert laid a certified check on Mrs. Wyndham's knee, and dropped silently back in his chair.

Not a sound broke the stillness of the room for a few moments, then Aunt Henrietta electrified the company. Without a word, she arose to her full stately height, walked slowly over to where Robert sat, put both arms around him, and kissed him soundly, with a kiss that resounded. "You are a second Daniel Webster," she said, and solemnly resumed her seat.

Nothing better could have happened. Aunt Henrietta had relieved the tension of a moment that was in danger of becoming hysterical. Following her aunt-in-law's example, though with a difference, Mrs. Wyndham took both of Robert's hands, the tears of joy running down her cheeks. "I can't thank you, my dear," she said simply. "I doubt your wanting me to; but I shall never, never forget that we owe it to you that even this portion of our lost property is restored. And to [284] us, who have been taught the lesson of economy so sharply, forty thousand dollars will be a large sum."

Jessamy, Phyllis, and Bab were crying softly, but their faces were flushed with joy and bright with smiles. "Oh, here's Tom!" cried Bab, as she always did when she heard Tom's peculiar ring, and ran to the door to bring him in.

"Hallo, Bob, old man! I see you've got it!" cried Tom, the instant he entered and saw the April faces. "Well, talk about special providences; wasn't it about the neatest bit of good fortune you ever knew that you should have witnessed those deeds, and had your desk in old Abbott's office? And I believe you'll get your reward, too," he added for Robert's ear alone. "Leave it to me, and I'll manage the others—give you a chance. I tell you, Mother Wyndham, I'm tremendously glad. Now it's over, and you know the whole story, I'll tell you that my engagement to Bab depended on the recovery of this money. If it hadn't been captured I should have broken it off—I wouldn't marry a girl without a little fortune."

"She hasn't married you yet, sir, that girl-with-a-fortune, so you'd better not be too sure of her. I may use my share of the forty thousand to go off to fashionable watering-places this summer, and invest in a little French title attached to a little French man," said Bab, saucily, so saucily that Aunt Henrietta said severely:

"Barbara, such jests are not seemly."

"Now, Mother Wyndham," continued Tom, "aren't you going to treat on the joyful occasion? In [285] default of champagne and grouse, I propose a Welsh rabbit in the chafing-dish, and anything else to be found; and, as Jessamy is the chief conspirator of the family, the one who got into the plot first, I think she ought to make it. Go out to the kitchen, Princess, please, and make us a rabbit."

"Violet is out," began Mrs. Wyndham, hesitating.

"Splendid!" said Tom the artful, who had remembered this fact when he spoke. "Violet is no good at rabbits. Please be nice, Jessamy, and make it."

"Of course I will," said Jessamy, rising.

"Maybe some one will help you," continued Tom, a hand on Phyllis's and Bab's arm warning them not to offer. "I would, only I am not proficient."

"I know how to make a rabbit, at least to toast the bread," said Robert. "I'll help."

Mrs. Wyndham looked anxiously after the pair disappearing down the hall. It was not hard to see through Tom's Machiavelism, and she longed to follow Jessamy.

In the kitchen, empty save for Truce still hopefully waiting for mice, Jessamy lost her usual dignified grace.

She cut the bread for the toast on the bias, and lighted the top of the gas-range instead of the broiler to toast it, dropped the cheese in the sink, and at last burned her fingers so badly with a match that Robert had to come to the rescue.

"Let me see them," he said, getting possession of her hands. [286]

There must have been something in his voice not quite suited to the simple words, for Jessamy trembled violently, and would not raise her eyes to look at him.

Taking the little burnt hand in his, Robert forgot why he held it.

"Jessamy," he said, "I don't want to take advantage of any little gratitude you may feel toward me; indeed, you ought not to be grateful, for it was chance that enabled me to be a witness for you, and any one would have done what I did for mere justice's sake. But you know that I did it for you with joy, because I was doing it for the girl I loved, and will still love if she doesn't care a bit for me. But do you care for me, just a little, Jessamy?"

"No," said Jessamy.

"What!" cried poor Robert. "Jessamy, you can't mean that! You knew I was caring for you, and you are not a heartless flirt! Jessamy, don't you care for me?"

"Not a little, Robert," whispered Jessamy, and raised her eyes at last to look at him. Beautiful eyes Jessamy had at all times; now they were wonderful, lighted with the best and most precious thing in the world—a pure, unselfish, self-forgetting love.

Robert read it, and stood a moment abashed and awed, as a true man should be. Before he had time to recover, and accept the great joy and the priceless gift which were his, Tom's voice was heard talking volubly as feet drew near, quite as though he suspected the situation, and was [287] giving Robert and Jessamy warning.

"Not ready yet?" he cried, entering. "Why, you haven't set the table, nor toasted the bread, by Jove!"

Jessamy stood motionless a moment, then she looked at her mother. There was no use for her to try to speak of lesser things, her heart was too full. With a swift motion she turned to her mother, who, seeing what had happened, gathered her in her arms.

"Will you let Rob have me, mama—for forty thousand dollars, you know?" Jessamy whispered.

"Three cheers for Judge Lane and his bride," cried Tom. "Give you joy, old man! Except Bab and Phyllis, she's the best girl in all the world, and I can't say more for you than that you deserve her." The two young men wrung each other's hand with that hearty good will that means so much, and Phyllis and Bab kissed Jessamy with smiles and tears. Then every one rallied to make the occasion worthy of itself. Supper was served, not only the belated rabbit, but lots of other good cheer; and the health of Rob and Jessamy was drunk in coffee of the future bride's making, which may not have been as festive as champagne, but was very delicious.

Aunt Henrietta departed in such an amiable frame of mind that her nieces almost hated to have her go. Alan dropped in that evening, and David, who, when he came, was despatched to bring Ruth to hear the double tidings of good and congratulate the happy pair.

"But the best part of the whole wonderful afternoon," said Bab, as she bade Tom good-night, [288] helping him on with his greatcoat in the hall, to do which she had to stand on a chair, owing to her five feet and Tom's generous inches, "the best part of it all is that our princess should have become engaged in the kitchen. It is so funny!"

"Oh, I don't know," said Tom. "'The queen was in the kitchen, eating bread and honey'—sweet, too, you see."

"Oh, Tom, you goose! No, she wasn't. The queen was in the *parlor*," cried Bab.

"Well, you never can tell about versions of Mother Goose, nor where love will get you; it may have been the kitchen," said Tom, the wise.

CHAPTER XVIII
UNDER THE HARVEST MOON

[289]

THE swelling twigs of March had burst into leafage; rough winds had shaken the "darling buds of May," and the fruit hung fully formed, even ripened in many cases, on the branches. The summer had flown past, a happy summer, the last of Jessamy's and Barbara's girlhood. Tom and Robert had urged their claim to begin their own homes by the autumn, and Mrs. Wyndham, who did not approve of long engagements, had yielded.

"I am not going to spend the very last summer that I am free to be as jolly as I wish, without responsibilities,—the last summer before I settle down into a frumpy, solemn old married woman,—struggling with clothes," Barbara declared. "If I can't get enough together to be married in a month, I will start life in a shirt-waist and a duck skirt. We are going to have the very best time we ever had, just we four, with our own particular boys for a kind of entrée, all summer until August, and then I will consent to talk dress-making. I think it is abominable the way weddings [290] are turned into bugbears—as though they weren't bad enough in the best regulated households! That's what the nursery rhyme means:

"Needles and pins, needles and pins,
When a girl's married her trouble begins!"

"But it doesn't say *girl*, Babbie; it is when a *man* marries," said Phyllis.

"Misprint!" said Bab. "You ought to know what it is to have your sentiments perverted by a printer's error. That couplet plainly refers to the bride's agonies in the hands of the dressmakers; what would the *man* have to do with needles and pins? It is perfectly clear to me; but I don't mean to have any troubles begin that way. I'd rather be myself, ready to enjoy my new happiness, than be married all worn out and nervous as so many girls are, just for the sake of a few dresses more or less. People do make themselves so much bother in this world; it makes me ache to see them!"

"Hear, hear!" said Jessamy, applauding with two untrimmed hats she was holding like cymbals. "What a sensible wife Doctor Thomas Leighton is to have! However, I confess I agree with her—partly, at least."

"Well, I agree with her wholly," said Bab, impartially. "I want this last summer we are three girls together to be light-hearted and happy, with no bother we can possibly dodge."

Barbara's program was faithfully carried out. The Wyndhams would not go away because they [291] clung to every day of the few left them of their life in the little apartment where happiness had found them out, and where they had blossomed from inexperienced girls into valuable women. Like the previous summer, when necessity had kept them in the city, they took their country air in small doses, making excursions into the surrounding fields, if fields can be said to surround New York which have to be reached through such long stretches of diminishing tenements.

In August the serious business of wedding preparations had to be faced; but both Jessamy and Barbara insisted on their being as simple as possible.

How and where to be married was a problem for two brides in one family, when that family lived in an apartment not large enough for their daily needs. It never occurred to the girls to be married separately. Indeed, Tom urged Phyllis to seize some youth—violently, if she must—and be married with the other two; because, he pointed out, it would not only be effective to marry them all at once, but save trouble in the future.

Poor Phyllis! She kept her feelings bravely hidden; but it was not easy for her to look forward to parting with Jessamy and Bab. Even though they were to be near by when they were established in their own little nests, Phyllis, and still more their mother, realized that they would never be again as fully their own girls. But Jessamy and Bab were so happy that it would have been cruel to have shown a shadow of regret. Besides, Mrs. Wyndham and Phyllis could not regret what was [292] so certainly for the greater happiness of them all in the end.

Aunt Henrietta came out nobly. She returned from the sea-shore early in September, thus breaking up her custom of years' standing, and offered her big house for the wedding. "It is proper in every way that you should be married from my house, and have the reception and breakfast there," she said solemnly. "Your apartment is out of the question for such an occasion, and you must be married suitably to your father's social position."

"How about Madrina? I didn't think one could affect the standing of the saints in heaven by unsuitable marriages!" whispered Bab, the incorrigible, to Jessamy. But she answered her great-aunt dutifully, with sincere thanks for the kindness which was very unexpected and great from her.

Mrs. Van Alyn made a similar offer, much to Mrs. Hewlett's disgust. "Does she think you have no kindred?" demanded the incensed old dame.

"It seems to me," said Jessamy, discussing the matter in a private family conclave, "that it would be more dignified, besides being far sweeter and lovelier, to be married from our own little home, and not from any one's house, no matter how dear or how nearly related to us she might be. No one can understand just what this flat meant to us when we began it so courageously, and so

ignorantly of all we had to learn and do. I, for one, should be happier married from it than from [293]
anywhere else in the world; it would be mean to turn our backs on it for the greatest event of our lives, for which it has prepared us, and which began for us—I mean found us out—here. Then it is our home, and I don't like borrowed plumage, even an aunt's house. I think we ought to be our very selves, most of all at such a time. If Bab agrees, I should prefer having our friends come here to welcome us and wish us well after the ceremony; and I should like a wedding suited to this sort of living—suited to our means, in a word, though our means have increased lately."

"That's crystal Jessamy all over," cried Bab, warmly. "You know, for my part, I loathe show functions. It's much more refined and dignified to use one's own home, and cut your garment according to your cloth—no, cut your friends according to your space. Who wants a crowd, anyway? I detest big weddings."

"Of course I should prefer it," said Mrs. Wyndham. "Why not be married quietly at the church, with only the immediate families of Tom and Rob and our own present? Then serve a breakfast to the same people, with the addition of most intimate friends, and go away? A caterer could contrive a table in this room to seat all we should ask under this arrangement."

"As far as I am concerned," said Tom, "the less the merrier. I know Bob thinks so. All young men hate being married, and would like to sneak."

"I should say I did think so!" cried Rob. "My honest opinion is that the only decent way to be [294]
married is to escape on a rope ladder out of a back window, with no one but the parson and the necessary witnesses the wiser."

"Dear me!" laughed Jessamy. "I really do not think I should enjoy the ladder. Then it is settled; a quiet church wedding, no one present but our own relatives, a breakfast not much larger attended, and then rush for the carriage, with rice and an old shoe to follow, and that's all."

"We are not going to have a stylish wedding—dear me, that sounds like 'Daisy Bell,' doesn't it?—so let's have a pretty one—original, I mean," said Phyllis. "Instead of conventional flowers, let's trim our rooms here with jasmine and barberries; they are ripe now, and they would really be wonderfully pretty, and the decorations would be Jessamy's and Barbara's names written everywhere in white and red."

"What a pretty idea, Phyl!" said Rob; "but where would you get the barberries?"

"Send an order to a Boston florist; the berries grow abundantly in New England, and he could get them for us," said Phyllis.

"It would be lovely, Phyl; what a dear you are!" said Jessamy. "We'll do everything just as we have planned it now, and write grateful refusals to Aunt Henrietta and dear Mrs. Van Alyn for their offers."

The wedding was to be on the twenty-fourth of September. On the twenty-third the little
apartment was a dream of beauty. Phyllis's plan had been successful, the barberries had arrived, [295]
great boxes of them, and hung everywhere, graceful, bright, autumnal, yet cheery, full of suggestions of the woods, yet of homely virtues.

They really were rather like Babbie, prickly, pungent, little and slender, bright and cheerful, lighting up the darkest corner wherein they were placed.

As a foil to them, white jasmine filled the rooms with its peculiar perfume, suggestive of Jessamy in more than name with its grace, daintiness, and beauty.

Phyllis stood, tired but satisfied, surveying the completed work of her hands. Nothing was wanting; dear little Babbie and their Jessamy bride were to have as pretty a wedding as love and taste could make it—mere money could do far less than these.

Phyllis's heart was heavy. Both the brides of the morrow had gone with their mother, and Ruth, and Rob's and Tom's sisters, the bridesmaids elect, and little Margery Horton, who had earned the right to be maid of honor, to meet Tom and Rob with their best men at the church to rehearse the ceremony. Phyllis was, of course, a bridesmaid also; but there were so many little last things to attend to at home that she begged off from the rehearsal, promising to learn so well the instructions given her by the others that she would do nothing on the morrow to disgrace her family. The bell rang, and Violet admitted Alan. "I brought a little present," he began, and handed Phyllis two more of the white-wrapped boxes which had been pouring in of late.

"The room looks pretty, doesn't it?" said Phyllis, after she had thanked him for her cousins. [296]

"It is beautiful; but the best of it is the symbolism," said Alan, gravely. "It will be the sort of wedding I like."

"All weddings are dreadful," said Phyllis, out of her increasing loneliness.

"Now don't say that, Phyllis," said Alan, suddenly becoming very red. "I want you to look forward to mine—I mean, I—what I want to say is, Phyllis—oh, Phyl, don't you know I love you?" cried poor Alan in deadly earnest, and stammering in a way new to him.

"Yes, I do know it, Alan, and I'm dreadfully, bitterly sorry," said Phyllis. "I have tried in every way to make you understand I was sorry. I wish you had not made it necessary for me to hurt you to-day, when there ought to be no sorrow in the air. And don't forget for a minute that I am more fond of you than of any one in all the world, except my dear family. But there ought not to be an exception. I couldn't marry you unless you were dearer than every one, myself, my life, to me."

Poor Alan had listened to this outburst in absolute silence, his one refuge under any strong

emotion. Phyllis had spoken rapidly, like one who had gone over the ground with herself, and who was under pressure of strong excitement.

"Then you won't marry me?" said Alan. "I tell you, Phyllis, I won't give up. You say you are fond of me; I'll make you fonder. It's not a refusal; it's just a postponement. Forget I said anything about [297] it. I'll get you yet to say yes. Have some tea; you look tired, and it's but natural you should not be cheerful with the parting before you, and you all saying good-by, as it were, to your girlhood. I had no right to bother you now. I was a selfish brute. We'll be the same friends, Phyllis; for I could not live without you, my girl."

Phyllis felt as though this determined young man, with the quiet, intense face and the eyes that were full of love for her, were something she could never escape, and the feeling frightened her.

"I don't want to marry; I have my work," she said.

"Oh, your work!" said Alan, with a man's and a fellow writer's scorn for a woman's career. "Fancy giving up love, and a home, and everything best in life for such a thing as writing! If you were as great as George Eliot it would be folly, Phyllis."

"The only reason for marrying is that some one is so necessary to you, you can't be happy without him," said Phyllis. "That's what I think."

"Quite right; so do I; and you are necessary to my happiness, my dear," said Alan, gravely.

"You are not necessary to me, Alan, though I should miss you dreadfully if I lost you. Oh, please, please don't think of this any more, but let us be friends as before," said Phyllis, with tears in her eyes.

"Don't mind, my dear; I'll call for your tea. And as to the rest, I'll be necessary to you, if humble trying can make me," said persistent Alan, quietly.

The wedding was at noon. The day dawned sunny, warm, and lovely, an ideal day for a wedding. [298] Jessamy and Barbara were dressed early, and shut themselves in their mother's room for one last, sacred, grave little talk before they went forth to assume the vows which must always be solemn to those who remember how much they include, and who make them meaning to fulfil them to the end of life, however long it be.

Ruth Wells, Alice Leighton, Evelyn Lane, Phyllis's companion bridesmaids, clustered in Phyllis's room, sweet and blooming in their youthful prettiness, set off by rose-hued gowns. As the hour for starting for the church sounded, they came down the stairs, giving a vision of loveliness to the admiring children gathered from neighboring flats to see the entrancing spectacle of at least so much of a double wedding.

The church held but few friends. The simplicity of the service was not to be marred by the presence of those drawn thither by idle curiosity.

"Who giveth this woman?" asked the clergyman; but there was not one present who did not give something of dear Jessamy and Barbara.

Barbara's responses were inaudible; the solemnity of the occasion overawed gay Babbie, though all her heart vowed to Tom the promises asked of her. But Jessamy looked up at Robert, standing tall and a little pale beside her, and made her vows in a voice low, but so distinct that it reached to the door of the church.

And Tom and Robert vowed to cherish and love the precious gifts intrusted to them that day, in [299] tones that admitted no doubt that they meant to keep the promises to the grave, and beyond it, if that might be.

The wedding breakfast was spread at the return of the bridal party. The table did crowd the room, it was true, but no one minded in the least.

There was not one guest but had a claim to be there through near kinship or closest friendship, not one who did not love more or less the brides sitting side by side at the head of the table, the new and exceeding proud young husbands by their sides, and the bridesmaids clustered as near as circumstances permitted.

One of the bridesmaids wore a sparkling diamond on her left hand, and Phyllis learned for the first time that the Scotch friend she had found in Boston was going to take from her the friend who had been so much to her, and to Jessamy and Bab, through their days of trial, for Ruth and David were engaged.

Mr. Hurd, present of course, as few had a better claim to be, tried to make a speech, but broke down, and ended more effectively than his carefully prepared sentences would have done in a sincere: "God bless you both!"

Aunt Henrietta tried to relate a story of her own wedding, but lost the point in an unusual burst of emotion, and, instead of finishing, produced two old-fashioned jewel-cases, and presented them to Jessamy and Barbara, with the love, as Aunt Henrietta remarked, with unexpected poetry, "of their great-grandmother, though the dear lady had not lived to see this happy day."

It was hard not to smile at this bit of sentiment, considering that the brides' great-grandmother [300] had missed that happy day by some seventy years; but it was well to have something to smile at just when there was a little danger of every one growing sentimental. When Jessamy opened the leather case, there lay on the faded red velvet lining of hers a cross set with diamonds, and Barbara's blue-lined case revealed a string of beautiful old pearls.

When the toasts had been drunk, and the cake cut, and the little white boxes of cake, already

prepared, distributed to the guests, Jessamy and Barbara arose and slipped away to lay off their bridal white and don the traveling-gowns in which they were to go out into the world, no longer Jessamy and Bab Wyndham, but Mrs. Robert Lane and Mrs. Thomas Leighton. Truce and Nixie, with large white satin bows on their collars, superintended the transformation, and both girls stooped to hug the little dog and cat who were so thoroughly associated with their happiness.

"Good-by, you dear, loveliest young ladies in all dis yere world," sobbed Violet. "Miss Phyllis and I's goin' take care you ma while you's gone, so don' you worry 'bout nothin', an' you gowns sets lovely."

"Good-by, dearies; it is like seeing my own children married," whispered Mrs. Van Alyn, holding Jessamy and Bab close in one long embrace.

Phyllis kissed them each, and each clung to her as if the parting were forever.

"Come, come," called Tom, who had no desire to let the going away grow tearful. "There's no [301] time for long hugs, children, and we'll be back before you get the flat in order."

Mrs. Wyndham held out her arms, and both her girls rested in them for a moment without a word.

"Good-by, darlings; the best daughters a mother ever had," Mrs. Wyndham whispered; and Jessamy and Barbara ran down the stairs without daring to stop or look behind.

A shower of rice fell on the two carriages. Tom and Robert flew through the storm, the drivers cracked their whips, two flushed, sweet, smiling, tearful faces looked out of the windows for a moment, and Jessamy and Barbara had gone.

For a moment Phyllis and her aunt clung to each other, feeling that they alone were left out of a wreck of the world. Then a small boy rushed up the stairs, sent by Tom.

"Please, ma'am, Mr. Alan Armstrong is dead—run over by a trolley," he cried.

The cry of consternation which Mrs. Wyndham uttered drowned the moan with which poor Phyllis fell unconscious to the floor.

"Oh, what an ending!" murmured Ruth, as she rushed to help Mrs. Wyndham raise Phyllis's head.

"Is it true?" whispered Phyllis, when they had laid her on the couch and brought her back to knowledge of her pain.

"Hush, dear, be still; we have sent to learn the truth. Dear, dear Phyllis, do you care so much?" [302] sobbed her aunt.

Phyllis turned her head away without speaking. So much! Ah, now, too late, she knew how much. And she had wounded Alan, had thought her work might suffice her, and had told him he was not necessary to her happiness!

That was like her, not to know how dependent she really was, to go on happily in her little ways, nor know what was her most precious possession till too late.

That was the cruel thought—too late, too late!

As she lay there, numb with agony, Phyllis saw the long, blank years ahead, wherein Alan's dear, leaping step should never fall on her ear again, and could not face them. Thank heaven! Jessamy and Barbara had found their joy, and it would not be marred in its first sweetness by knowledge of her agony.

A step came up the stairs; it was curious—would it always be like this, Phyllis wondered. Should she always fancy all steps like his? It sounded so much like Alan, but Alan was dead, crushed—

"Where's my dear, poor Phyllis? 'Twas a cruel trick," cried a voice, and all the house rang with Phyllis's cry of: "Alan, Alan!"

There was need of no more words. Trembling, scarce trusting her eyes, Phyllis lay looking up at Alan—Alan in the flesh, come back from the dead, and to her!

"I have learned that you are necessary, Alan; I should have died if it had been true," she [303] whispered.

"It would have been worth dying for if I couldn't have taught you to love me any other way, my Phyllis," said Alan, with the old-time twinkle in his eye, and with a suggestion of an Irish bull in his meaning.

"A telegram, ma'am," said Violet, gingerly holding out the yellow envelope to Mrs. Wyndham.

Mrs. Wyndham tore it open; it was dated from the Grand Central, and she read: "'Beg Phyllis to forgive. Nothing less would fetch her; wanted Alan to share happiness. Tom.'"

"Well, Phyllis will evidently follow soon, Emily," said Mrs. Van Alyn, kissing her friend good-night very lovingly.

"I shall be the only one of the Wyndham girls left," returned Mrs. Wyndham, smiling rather tearfully; "the last corner of our dear square of four. Jessamy, Babbie, Phyllis; they are the best girls in all the world, Mary. Weddings are tearful things to mothers, but who could help rejoicing that all my precious three are so blissfully happy?"

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