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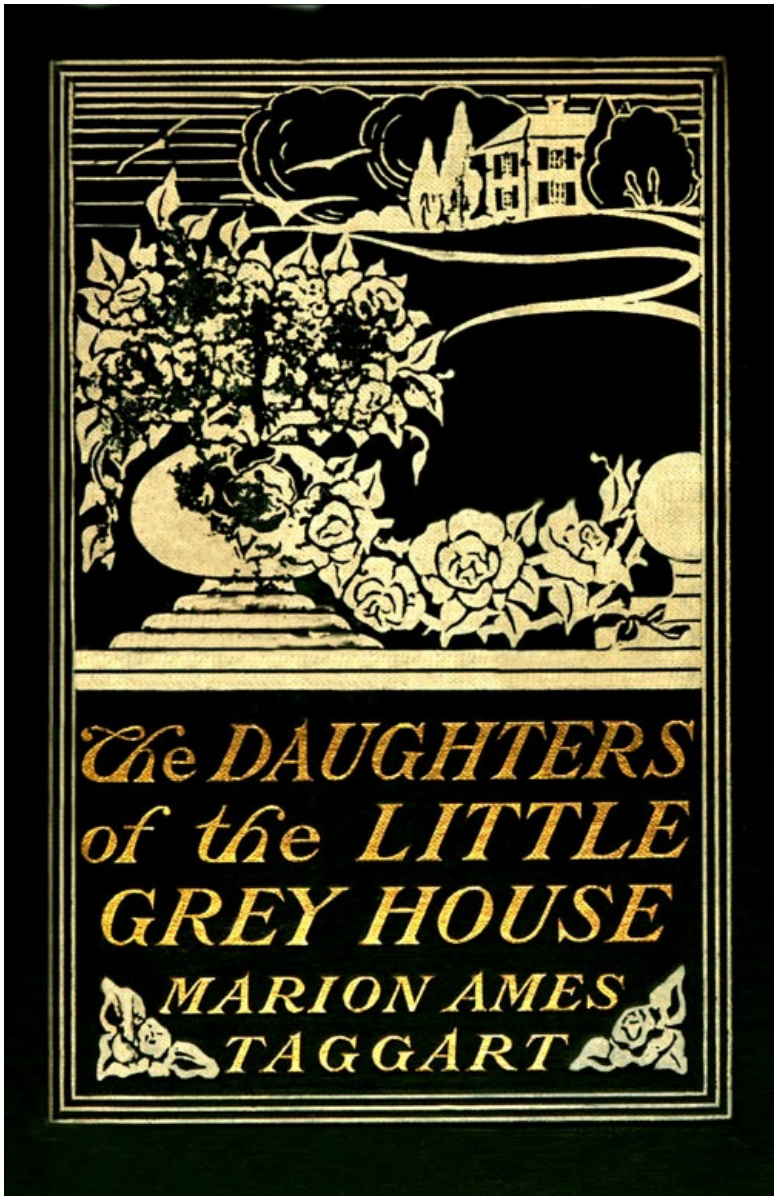
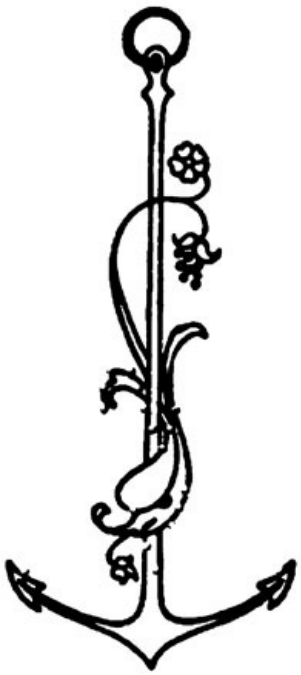


THE DAUGHTERS OF THE LITTLE GREY HOUSE

BY

MARION AMES TAGGART

AUTHOR OF THE LITTLE GREY HOUSE



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To

My Cousin

Ella T. Johnson, with love

CONTENTS

DAUGHTERS OF LITTLE GREY HOUSE [3]

CHAPTER ONE

ITS INMATES

"How do you know when you're a young lady?" asked Roberta Grey.

She was sitting before the ancient mahogany dressing-table in her—and Wythie's—room, unblushingly regarding herself in the mirror, while the fingers of both hands, supporting her brilliant face, experimented with changes in it by pushing up the delicate eyebrows into quite a celestial angle.

Frances Silsby, from the rocking-chair by the window, and Wythie on the foot of the bed, laughed.

"I know I'm young by the record in the Bible—and by the way I feel," said Frances. "And I know I'm a lady by the company I keep, since 'birds of a feather,' and so forth." Frances made a deep salaam almost to the floor, taking advantage of the forward tilt of the rocking-chair to deepen it.

"That's the retort courteous, Francie. You will be an ornament to the diplomatic circle when you [4] are Lady Ambassadress to the court of St. James'. But I should like to know how to be sure one's reluctant feet have crossed the meeting point of the brook and the river," insisted Rob.

"*Lady* Ambassadress, Rob?" hinted Oswyth. "You don't think that is tautological, do you? You know in 'Rudder Grange' they never noticed that Pomona had grown up until a young man walked home with her one night, and loitered at the gate; perhaps that's the test," added Wythie slyly. Bruce Rutherford had come down with Rob from Frances' the previous night alone, and not with Basil and Bartlemy to bear them company, as usual, hence Wythie's suggestion had a personal application.

"If one had to put on shoes and stockings, for instance, after she ceased to stand where the brook and river meet, she would know that she had waded in and had come out on the other side, a young lady," Rob went on with slightly heightened colour, ignoring her sister. "That's it; I have it!" she cried, wheeling around to look at her audience outside the glass. "It is something of the sort—it's the hair! I am just eighteen, but I wear my hair in a braid, with a big bow where it is [5] turned up on the top of my head. If I discarded that bow, and made a great soft knot of hair 'on the top of my head, in the place where the wool ought to grow'"—Rob chanted this direct quotation—"I should be a young lady! I think I'll do it!"

She jumped up, snatched a kimono from a hook in the closet, threw it over her shoulders, dropped back into her chair before the dressing-table and in a twinkling had the pins out of her braid; the bow, badge of young girlhood, thrown on the table, and her rebellious, red-brown hair tumbling about her slender shoulders in a mass of beautiful colour.

"Wythie is already done up, and Frances, too. I have been wondering why they seemed so much more the real thing than I did, and I never discovered till now," said Rob, speaking with difficulty as she sat, head almost touching her lap, gathering her wealth of locks into her hand. "Now, I am going to take my place among my peers," she added, righting herself, displaying crimson cheeks as she faced the glass, and twisting and coaxing her hair to the crown of her head. "You shall see me in my true dignity henceforth. Won't it be pathetic, when the fashion-books come and Mardy has no longer any interest in those charming pages headed: Styles for Young Girls? Thank [6] goodness, there is Prue still, but even she is sixteen, and that means her hours are numbered. I didn't want to grow up, and I mean to italicize the *young* in my title of young lady just as long as I can, but I think I'm grown up. There, will that do?"

Rob arose as she spoke and faced her sister and her friend. She was tall, slender, radiant with nervous energy and quick wit; pretty, yet charming more than pretty. The sort of girl that she had promised to be; one who would carry everything before her with her high courage, high standards, and her flashing charm of variety in colouring and expression. Wythie was the same Wythie that she had been always; pretty, womanly, gentle, sweet, with goodness, pure, simple, unadulterated goodness, shining from her steady eyes and smiling lips. Frances Silsby had not changed much. She, too, was pretty in an unobtrusive way, and had grown more so in growing older. "She was a girl," Bruce Rutherford said, "whom one would endorse or cash at sight," and she deserved the trust that she inspired. But Rob swept everything before her; no one ever stopped to criticise nor analyse Rob. She flashed on the scene, and instantly every eye was filled with the variable charm of her face, which defied regular laws of beauty. Every heart went out to [7] the warmth of her magnetic presence and kindliness of nature; while no one could be sceptic enough to doubt her crystal purity of purpose and truth.

Oswyth loved her with adoring love, and Frances regarded her as the embodiment of all her ideals, just as she had regarded her from her first meeting with Rob at the great age of three.

In the fifteen months that had passed since Rob's resolution had prevented the sacrifice of her beloved "Patergrey's" legacy to his family, and had secured for the Greys the full value of the patent into which he had poured the best effort of years of his pathetic life, both Oswyth and Rob had blossomed into girls of nineteen, and eighteen respectively, and into a fulness of life and happiness such as they could never have attained but that the stress and strain of anxiety and even want, had thus been removed. They were not wealthy people, by any means, these blithe and busy Greys, but they possessed, now, what seemed contrastingly like wealth to them, and which was quite enough to satisfy the true standards and tastes which their noble mother had given them. And the little grey house, which had always seemed rather like one of themselves [8] than a mere house, had blossomed with its daughters into fuller adornment and cheerfulness during this year and a quarter. Many pretty modern things had crept in to take their places among the riches of inherited mahogany, pewter and china which were the little grey house's glory and pride.

"Well, you don't say anything! Don't you like me in my new rôle of full blown young lady, sans braid, sans bow, sans everything that fettered me in the bud?" demanded Rob, as Frances and Wythie gazed at her without speaking.

"You are lovely, Robin dear," said Wythie, "but somehow it makes me feel a little sorry to see the familiar bow discarded, and your hair done up with a full grown *do*! I am so used to my young girl sister!"

"You have preceded me a-down the knotty way, Wythie," said Rob. "See what dreadful puns you force me to in order to cheer you when you become pensive! Your hair has been knotted and twisted up for a year. You preceded me into the world by a twelvemonth, and dutifully I follow you, one year in retard, in the matter of full-grown hair-dressing. Isn't it all right, Francie?"

"The rightest kind of right, Rob," said Frances emphatically. "You are eighteen, and it is time you came into your kingdom—besides, it is most becoming! I only wish I could make my hair puff and [9] lie up loose like that."

For Frances' hair was of that fine, yet determined kind which is no more capable of trifling with life than were the Puritan ancestors from whom it was derived.

"There is no power on earth could make mine lie down smooth and decorous like yours," retorted Rob, surveying with half approval, half disfavour her hair which, like her face, was as full of ripples and curves as ever. "Then, on the whole, the sentiment of the meeting is in favour of the new departure. Girls, you have been singularly fortunate! You have seen the larva turn into the butterfly—and you didn't have to stand a glass over me either! I am now, Roberta Grey, spinster, and I will fold up my hair-bow and present it to Prudence to have and to hold, and to use until her hour of eighteen sounds."

"Here she comes now, with your mother," announced Frances from her seat by the window.

"They went up to Aunt Azraella's, and then Mardy was going to Cousin Charlotte's, while Prue went to the post-office. They were to meet at Cousin Charlotte's, and come home together. I hope Mardy isn't tired," said Wythie, untwining herself from her Turkish position on the foot of the [10] bed, and running to look over Frances' shoulder and to wave her hand at the beloved mother and Prudence.

Prue ran up-stairs; the girls heard Mrs. Grey going through the house to find Lydia in the kitchen. Accustomed as she was to seeing Prue, Frances felt anew, as she always did each time that she saw her, the startling quality of the youngest Grey girl's great beauty. During the past year Prue had grown amazingly, and had shot up into a slender creature that topped by nearly a head Rob, who had seemed fairly tall until Prue accomplished this feat. Her complexion was white with not a hint of colour, unless it was brought there by her emotions, or whipped into her cheeks by the breeze. Her features were faultlessly regular; her hair bright gold, silky and abundant, flying like floss around her low white brow. Her lips relieved the pallor of her face by their warm crimson, and from under the golden crown of hair, which the tall young creature wore proudly, there looked out a pair of large dark brown eyes that startled one by their contrast with their surroundings. There was no question that Prue was not only the beauty of the family, but that she had grown into a beauty of a rare type and of a very high rank. Unfortunately, she was [11] conscious of her effect, although she was hardly to blame for this, since every one, except her wise mother and sisters, flattered her. It was a lucky thing for Prue that Wythie's sweetness and Rob's charm surpassed in the long run the attraction of Prue's dazzling beauty; for, otherwise, she might have forgotten altogether that beauty is by no means the only gift that the good fairies can bestow at a christening.

"I thought I should find you here, Frances. Here is a letter for you, Rob, but there was no other. I saw Battalion B down by the post-office; I thought they went back this morning," said Prue, dropping a letter in Rob's lap, and laying her hat on her knee as she seated herself beside Wythie and picked out the edges of its bows.

"No; Basil said he had to meet Mr. Dinsmore—they are having some trouble with their landlord, and Basil said if they couldn't get it straightened up they would buy the Caldwell place. It isn't really their landlord, but his agent that bothers them," said Wythie, trying to mention Basil

Rutherford's name in the same old, easy, unconscious way she had used it when Battalion B and the Grey girls had first become friends. "And Bruce wanted to see Dr. Fairbairn, so they all [12] waited to go back to New Haven this afternoon—of course Bartlemy waited to go with Basil and Bruce."

"Basil and Bruce both said that they would buy the Caldwell place rather than leave Fayre," smiled Frances, and Wythie blushed; but Rob was deep in her letter and did not heed. "Do you know, Wythie, I don't believe we realize what a lot of money those boys must have?" Frances continued. "You know they never say anything directly, but here they are, all three of them in Yale, keeping this place here, and having every wish gratified—all this means wealth, Oswyth, my dear. You know papa is called the richest man in Fayre, but he says Commodore Rutherford must have a great deal more than he has, for his boys to do all this. They are so nice and simple that somehow they seem to have the effect of being quite poor, but they are far from that."

"It doesn't make people simple to be poor, Francie; it makes them self-conscious and generally horrid. I have so recently escaped the throes of dire poverty, you know, that I speak by the book. The reason Battalion B are such nice, straightforward boys is that they don't have to think of money at all, and that—"

"That they are upright, straightforward, honest boys, well-bred, and all 'round fine," said Mrs. [13] Grey, entering and interrupting Rob. "What nonsense you do talk, Robin, you chatterbox! I think Wren would be a better name for you than Robin! As though money made people or unmade them, by its possession or lack! Qualities are intrinsic, as you know quite well, my dear. The boys are gentlemen, in the true sense of that abused old word, and would be such were they kings or beggars. Whom is your letter from; isn't it Hester Baldwin?"

"Yes, Mardy," said Rob meekly. "Please don't call me Wren; it doesn't sound lofty and dignified, somehow. Don't you see that I've done my hair up in what Wythie called 'a grown-up do'? I'd hate to be called Wren with my hair done up—it's such an abbreviated bird!"

"Rob, you are so very silly!" smiled Mrs. Grey reproachfully. "Your hair looks well, dear, but must I lose the last vestige of my little Rob?"

"Yes, Mardy; she is gone but not forgotten. Prue, here before these witnesses, I give you my last-worn hair-bow, and these, and these," said Rob, hastily rummaging in her drawer and producing several big, soft ribbon bows which she tossed into Prue's lap.

"Much obliged," said Prue, beginning to fold her acquisitions. "I think that I shall give up hair [14] ribbons before I am eighteen; whom will mine descend to?"

"There are always little girls, Prudy, though they may not be little Grey ones," said Rob wisely. "Your ribbons will probably go to little Polly Flinders. How did you find our relatives, Mardy? Is Aunt Azraella still herself, and is dear Cousin Peace well?"

"Aunt Azraella has a cold, Rob; it isn't serious, but she is nursing it. I think it would be as well if you and Wythie would go up there after tea. And Charlotte looked tired. I fear it is too much for her to go on keeping house there, now that she is alone. The dear soul clings to her life-long home, but without some one besides Annie to look after her it seems to me unsafe for her to live there," said Mrs. Grey, looking anxious. "Why, what did Hester say, Rob? I forgot to ask you?"

"And you may well ask!" cried Rob, springing to her feet. "How could I forget to tell you? She says that she wants to bring her favourite cousin here to-morrow, and that if she doesn't hear from us to the contrary she will assume that it is all right to do so, and come."

"Her cousin? What cousin is it? Does she mean to stay with us, or merely to call? asked Mrs. Grey [15] with a quick mental outlook over the domestic conditions for guests.

"To lunch only," said Rob, looking over her letter. "The cousin is that Lester Baldwin of whom she has talked so much. He is named after her father, with the John dropped. He is young—twenty something—and has been in Japan for three years. Hester thinks there never was such a boy. When we wave our Battalion B in her face and she praises them, you can see her reserving her opinion of Lester. We shall let them come, Mardy?"

"Oh, yes, of course," said that motherly woman. "It is curious, but with all her advantages I feel as though I must do everything I can to make Hester happy."

"She just escaped being morbid," said Wythie rising. "Frances, you will excuse me if I leave you to Rob and baby Prue, and go to look over the pantry? There is time for one of us to go down again with orders if there is anything that we must have for the lunch to-morrow. Suppose I go down with orders, and stop at Aunt Azraella's, Mardy? Then Rob won't have to go."

"You forget that I am now the favourite niece, Wythie dear," said Rob. "But go if you will, and try [16] to usurp that proud position; I will never upbraid you."

Wythie smiled her quiet smile and left the room. Just beyond the door she met with Kiku-san, grown into a mountain of a cat, but more clingingly kittenfied and dependent than ever. Wythie swung him to her shoulder just as she had always done since he had come to them, a white down-ball with pink trimmings, and continued her way to the kitchen to interview Lydia.

Lydia was the young woman who had come to preside over that department when the sale of the bricquette machine patent had made it possible for the Greys to have some one to help them in

the tiresome routine of housework.

"Help" was what Lydia was, in the old-fashioned sense of the word, used as a particularly proper —and personal—noun. She was a most staid and respectable young woman of native stock antedating Revolutionary days. She could not have been more than half-way through her second decade of years, but she seemed removed by eons from anything approaching to youthful pleasures, not to say follies.

She had scorned domestic service, having preferred attending Fayre's bake-shop, until she learned that the Greys were seeking "help"; then she offered herself for the position, which she [17]
had filled from that day to the present one. The Greys were immensely flattered by her preference for them over all their townsfolk until they discovered that Lydia had been willing to come to them because, as they had heretofore been doing their own housework unaided, "they wouldn't feel themselves better than she was." This humbled the Greys, but delighted their sense of humour, and from the date of this discovery they had, Rob said, "been vainly trying to feel themselves as good as Lydia." Thus Lydia was a character, in the possession of whom the merry Greys revelled, not less for her competent service than for her unconscious contributions to their mirth. She welcomed Wythie, and Kiku-san on Wythie's shoulder, with a solemn face raised from a small sheet which she was attentively reading.

"Don't you think you had ought to take the pledge, Wythie?" she demanded so unexpectedly that Wythie involuntarily glanced in the small mirror which hung convenient to Lydia's back door to see what there was in her appearance to warrant such a question.

"Why, no, Lyddie," she said rallying and with difficulty keeping her lips straight. "I can't say I [18]
have felt any special need of it. What made you ask that?"

"This paper," said Lydia, tapping the sheet she held as if Doom were wrapped in it. "I get it sent me from Maine; it's a warning. I think you had ought to take the pledge, you and Roberta and Prue, the whole of you. There's the Rutherford boys."

"Where?" cried Wythie, looking hastily out of the window, for the Rutherford boys were, she supposed, safely back at college by this time. "Oh, you mean we ought to take the pledge on the boys' account? Well, but you see, Lydia, we never give the boys wine, and they are perfectly safe, as far as I can see——"

"It's the example," said this serious young woman severely, "I'm a-going to sign. This paper has made me see I owe it to my conscience to Protest—" she spoke the word with a capital—"and Protect the weak from themselves. Was you going to get something?" she added, for Wythie beat a retreat to the pantry, hiding her face in Kiku-san's fur. Lydia frequently propounded moral questions to Wythie and Rob when they came upon her, or were working with her, but thus far they had not grown accustomed to these questions to the extent of meeting them with the gravity [19]
which their handmaid felt they deserved.

"No," came Wythie's voice huskily from the depths of the pantry. "No, Lyddie, I don't want anything, except to see what we have in the house toward a luncheon-party to-morrow. Hester Baldwin is coming out from New York, bringing a young man cousin of hers whom we have never seen, so I want them to have something particularly nice. I thought we would take account of stock and plan our lunch, and that I would go down to-night to order what we needed before tea. Then I shall be here all the morning to help you with some of the fancy things that take time."

"You might have lobster *à la* Newburg," said Lydia, folding her paper and abandoning the principles which it had just taught her with a speed that finished Wythie's hopes of gravity.

Her laugh rang out so infectiously that her mother, hearing it up-stairs, smiled in sympathy.

"Isn't that appropriate?" said Lydia, standing rigid in displeasure.

"We couldn't have anything better," cried Wythie emphatically. "That wasn't what I laughed at, Lyddie. And you make it so well that we are proud of your skill, aren't we?"

"That's what made me mention it," said Lydia innocently. And Wythie just succeeded in checking [20]
a second laugh.

But Lydia would never have guessed that Wythie laughed because the solemn girl beside her had lost sight of her principles and the wine in the lobster *à la* Newburg at one and the same moment, oblivious to all but her newly acquired skill in making the delectable dish. Lydia had long ago abandoned all hope of understanding at what Wythie and Rob Grey laughed so often. She had decided that it was usually mere light-mindedness.

CHAPTER TWO [21]

ITS GUESTS

Rob walked up and down the platform of Fayre's small station waiting the train which was to bring her guests from New York to spend the day. It was a day that it seemed a pity to spend; it

should have been laid by for the winter need of such weather, much as one would lay by a golden guinea against a dark day. And no guinea could have been more golden than this October day. The sunshine seemed to be filtered through its atmosphere till the very air was golden, and the trees sent their showers of yellow leaves down the shafts of sunshine in the brisk breeze, retaining more than they gave of their cloth-of-gold garments to brighten the quiet streets and illumine the hillsides.

Hester Baldwin had been a frequent visitor to Fayre since Rob's expedition to New York to save her father's patent had brought her into Hester's orbit.

An only child, with an inheritance of wealth on both sides, Hester lacked nothing in the way of [22] opportunities, and had been introduced to society the previous winter, in which she had thus far found little to interest or attract her. She was a girl of considerable strength of character, with vaguely great aspirations; it was true that she had barely escaped being morbid. Thus far her vocation had not been revealed, and she moved dissatisfiedly through a life from which all outward reasons for dissatisfaction had been removed. Rob laughed at Hester, and told her that she was only a degree less serious than Lydia, but she sympathized with her none the less. Rob said in private that Hester had been misplaced; that she should have been the oldest daughter of a struggling family of sixteen members, for whom she would have been forced to exert herself into forgetfulness of her own soul, and her hair-splitting self-analysis. Rob herself had never had time to question, being early called upon to do without choice of action, and she did not underrate the advantages of her early disadvantages in forming her character and keeping her cheerful—though nature had more to do with the latter than Rob knew.

The more Hester came to Fayre the more she wanted not to leave it. Her father and mother— [23] whom Rob had found perfect in those difficult rôles—were naturally wrapt up in this dear only daughter, but Hester revelled in the family life of the little grey house, and envied Rob her chum-sisters, thinking Rob richer in her simple home than was Hester Baldwin in her big house, with servants, society, and all the advantages of wealth which were hers alone, and which, being alone, she could not half enjoy.

Rob smiled to herself as she paced the platform, thinking how Hester's pale face was that moment lighting up with joy, for the train whistled around the bend, and in an instant would be in sight.

Hester, her cousin, an old woman, and the mail-bag were the only passengers for Fayre. The tall girl leaving the car would have been conspicuous, however, among many, and the young man, browned by Eastern suns, who followed her, not less so. Hester was as tall as Prue Grey. She had a keen, restless face, with hungry, eager grey eyes, and rather a melancholy droop to her well-cut lips. She was not a pretty girl, but she was distinguished looking, and would be fine looking at forty when many of her pretty contemporaries had become entirely commonplace. She was clad [24] in that quiet elegance of material and style which is the perfection of taste, utterly unattainable except one has a purse long enough to pay for its expensive simplicity.

Rob realized that their modest competence would never let her look as Hester did that moment; she realized it anew every time she saw her friend again, but it troubled her no more than it troubles her namesake, the redbreast, that he is not clad like the oriole. For while Rob was too sensible to ignore the lesser things of life she was too light-heartedly happy to care for them greatly.

Hester sprang off the last step of the car, beyond the conductor's extended hand, and had Rob in her arms before her cousin could disentangle himself from the leisurely elderly passenger and her bag which had got between him and Hester when they were in the aisle, and now, by dismounting from the car sidewise, one step at a time, delayed him from following his cousin. At last he circumnavigated the old person's bulk and came forward, laughing, to be presented to Rob.

He looked so much like a younger edition of his uncle, John Lester Baldwin, two thirds of whose name he bore, that Rob gave him her friendship on the spot, and the three young people walked [25] up the hill of Fayre's main street, talking gaily all the way to the little grey house.

"I asked Frances to luncheon, Lester," said Rob, as they turned in at the low gate.

"And this is the little grey house, is it?" asked Lester Baldwin at the same moment. "I have heard of it and dreamed of it in distant Japan."

"Just an every day, little colonial house; not worth dreaming of at the foot of Fusiyama, among the cherry blossoms and the chrysanthemums," smiled Rob. "But we love it dearly; it has been a little Grey house for five generations, including us, the present girls."

"*Present* girls?" laughed Lester Baldwin. "Or *pleasant* girls? And does that hint a future possibility; does it mean: Girls, at present?"

"It means: Present girls," said Rob accenting the last syllable as Wythie and Prue appeared in the doorway, thus turning her adjective into a verb. "Let me present you, Mr. Baldwin, to my sisters, Oswyth and Prudence. And our friend, Miss Frances Silsby," added Rob, as she espied Frances in the hall.

Now Kiku-san, hearing Rob's voice, had come towards the door to welcome her. Being abnormally timid, especially fearing men, he swiftly turned and started to flee back to the kitchen

for safety as he unexpectedly caught a glimpse of Lester Baldwin, where he had counted on finding only Rob. At the same instant that the white cat flew back from the door, Frances advanced towards it. There was a fearful shriek of terror and pain from Kiku, who thought that the worst he had feared had happened as Frances came down upon his paw; a scream of terror from Frances, who had not time to realize what was wrong, and she was launched headlong at the stranger, Hester's travelled cousin, before whom she, naturally, wanted to appear at her best. [26]

The stranger received the sudden charge with a gravity that at once established him high in the fun-loving Greys' good opinion. Steadying himself against the casement he caught Frances in time to save her from being dashed headforemost down the low steps, and helped her to regain her feet.

"Customs have changed in the States since I left home," Lester said quietly. "We exceed the hospitality of the East—there the arriving guests are never offered more than tea, water for their hands and, possibly, flowers."

All five girls burst into such a peal of laughter that old Mrs. Dinsmore, the lawyer's mother, passing on the opposite side of the street, laughed to herself till she had long passed the little grey house. [27]

"That reception was caused by the one Japanese member of our family," said Wythie. "Our white cat, Kiku-san, being timid, retreated from your presence and upset Frances."

"Kiku—chrysanthemum?" suggested Lester Baldwin. "Nice name for a white cat, but I was not prepared to find you speaking Japanese here."

"We have spoken all we know of it in naming Kiku. Won't you walk into our parlour? We are not spiders," said Rob. "Prudy, please tell Mardy we are come."

Prue disappeared, and the others entered the beautiful parlour of the little grey house. For it was a beautiful room with its extreme simplicity of green walls and high white wainscoting, its splendid old mahogany, fine pictures, books, and with the logs burning on the hearth, which the October wind made it just cool enough indoors to warrant.

Lester Baldwin threw himself into a hospitable chair with a long breath of appreciation. "I see why Uncle John said they had hard work to keep you at home, Hessie, and why you never dream of living in marble halls, but rather in a little grey house."

"Don't you?" said Hester, pulling out the fingers of her gloves, as she stood with one foot extended towards the warmth of the fire for the mere luxury of it, and not because she was in the least cold. "And you don't know it all yet." [28]

"My cousin doesn't mean that for slang, Miss Roberta," said Lester Baldwin.

"Thanks," remarked Rob. "We love to have people like our house. There is something in the dear little old thing that I can't get anywhere else—Maybe it's my own love for it," she added.

"No, it's quality," said young Baldwin. "It has an atmosphere that is quite indescribable that is partly the result of your love for it, no doubt, but it is also the very delightful architecture of the house, its simplicity and harmony, and its venerableness. An artist would envy you it, Miss Roberta."

"Oh, I forgot for the moment that you were an architect," cried Rob, beaming gratefully upon him.

Lydia might be solemn, but she made everybody else light-hearted on such occasions as this. Mrs. Grey emerged from the kitchen to greet her young guests, looking flushed, but peaceful. She and Wythie had been helping Lydia all the morning, and the result was a luncheon that satisfied her housewifely soul. [29]

It was a merry luncheon, too, and Lydia served it with a face so saddened by the constant laughter ringing around the table that Wythie and Rob telegraphed to each other their appreciation of its contrasting expression.

After luncheon Wythie, Frances, and Prue took Lester Baldwin to see the beauties of Fayre, which were well worth seeing; its lovely, quiet river; its great elms, and dignified mansions. Hester begged them to let her stay at home and keep Rob with her, and she bore Rob off at once, when she had obtained her way, for a long, confidential talk in the room which her friend shared with Wythie.

"Well, Hester, what is it this time?" asked Rob, when they had established themselves opposite to each other, one in a small, the other in a large rocking-chair, and were rocking for dear life at that cosey pace which seems at once to pursue and keep up with confidences. Rob's eyes wandered a trifle longingly out of the window at the perfect weather; though she was fond of Hester and interested in all that she could have to tell her, she, too, would have found the walk which the rest were enjoying pleasant had Hester been thus minded.

"Is it Chinese-missionarying, adopting a baby, teaching new Italian citizens, or what, Hester?" she continued. Hester had been full of each of these projects at various times. [30]

Hester sat up straight in the energy of her reply. "Everything is beginning, Rob," she cried, "and I can't stand it!"

"It does sound rather awful, though vague," retorted Rob, settling herself back in her chair as Hester grew rigid, and moving her head about until her hair got comfortably loose, and fitted over the chair top.

"Ah, you know what I mean!" said Hester reproachfully in her alto voice, which was her greatest charm. "Invitations, and teas, and all those things! If I let myself drift into it all it takes every bit of my time—strength too—and I shall never amount to one thing."

"Well, I suppose it's true that it will take all your time, but I don't see that the rest of your proposition follows," said Rob sensibly. "Your mother keeps up her social duties, and, except—loyally excepting, you know—Mardy-mine, I don't know any woman who amounts to much more. Amounting to something doesn't depend on circumstances, but conquers them. We've gone over this ground a good many times already, Hessie, and, really, what's the use?" [31]

"My mother married, and her duty is to do exactly what she does," said Hester. "She is a great help to father, entertaining his business acquaintances, and furthering all his interests. But I am not helping any one when I go butterflying about, and it is for me to choose now what sort of a woman I will be."

"I suppose I can't enter into this tremendous earnestness of yours as I ought," sighed Rob. "It seems to me that we both have only to lead good, kind, sweet tempered lives, and be ready for our work when it comes. I think a vocation ought to mean being called, and not calling—with a megaphone, too—to all sorts of distant duties to come and switch us off our track. We are young, Hester."

"Eighteen; quite old enough to find ourselves, Rob," said Hester.

"Yes, and I'm wearing my hair in full blown young-lady fashion; my bow is gone—did you notice, Hester?" said Rob, refusing to rise to Hester's heights. "But for mercy's sake, Hessie dear, don't adopt soulful slang! I've heard seven separate women, one lecturer and six private—geese?—talk about 'finding ourselves' lately! There's something in set soulful phrases that affects my stout [32] nerves."

"Yes," assented Hester with entire sympathy. "I didn't know I said it; those things are so catching! You see, Rob, you wouldn't care for a society life, any more than I do! It is full of catch phrases and catch ways."

"Hessie, Hessie, what are you trying to get at?" cried Rob. "You know I have as much desire for a society life as there is prospect of my leading one! But I don't see why you can't 'just be happy'; wasn't that the burden of one of James Whitcomb Riley's poems? Why can't you dance and play, and be eighteen, only, with all your might, and let the future take care of itself? I declare you are very like our Lydia! She convulsed Wythie last night by suddenly demanding, when poor Wythiekins came into the kitchen, if she didn't think she ought to take the pledge! Wythie felt satisfied with her naturally temperate tendencies, but Lydia thought she should sign as an example, chiefly to the Rutherfords, who are sobriety itself! Don't you think you magnify your office more as Lyddie does than as St. Paul did?"

Hester laughed. "I think one ought to make up one's mind definitely to something," she insisted. [33] "Rob, truthfully, do you think you would like to marry?"

Rob laughed long and merrily. "Not this afternoon," she cried. "I'll let you know if I feel differently to-morrow."

"No, but don't you think if a girl knows positively that she will never marry, and nothing can change her mind, that she ought to act differently from a girl who is willing to entertain the thought?"

Rob laughed again. "I notice the thought entertains most girls," she said. "We have spoken on this tremendous subject also, Hessie. It never occurs to me to make up my mind for good and for all about anything. I have lived only eighteen years, but I have changed my tastes lots of times, for food, for people, for amusements—for lots of things. I don't know how I shall feel at twenty, much more at five and twenty. I'm perfectly happy, and I'm not over the border of little girlhood—I wish I could romp and play dolls without shocking people. And I've had a hard fight, and tasted care and even sorrow, so it seems to be almost wrong to go on twisting and distorting these lovely young days the way you do, Hessie dear. You haven't told me what it is that has set you out this time, however?"

"It is something I saw the other day," said Hester sadly. "I wish I could be sunny and light-[34] hearted like you."

"The reason of the difference is partly in our temperaments, but it is a good deal because I had to be happy in self-defence from the trials that began early for me," said Rob, with the keen wisdom that underlay her merry ways. "You had your path made smooth; I had to be jolly to keep up myself and the others. If you had worked as I did with a frail, sensitive, beloved father, and had seen your brave mother trying to win a fight where the odds against her were too heavy to count, you'd have learned what virtue lay in a laugh. I don't mean to preach, Hester, but you ought to be satisfied to love and to be loved, and wait your life's meaning cheerfully. But what did you see?"

"Father had to go to a tenement district to look over some property there which a client talked of buying," said Hester. "I begged to be taken with him, and, though he objected, saying I was sober

enough without seeing misery, he let me have my way—as he usually does, the dear, kind father! I saw, Robin, a cripple boy that was heartrending. I never, never shall forget him, nor get over the feeling that I have no right to my comforts while there is such as he. No; don't interrupt. I [35] know all that reason can tell me on that head, because father talked to me, and he is not merely just—though that's the highest sort of kindness—but he is tenderly kind as well, we both know that. But the feeling remains after I have reasoned and reasoned. Then, after that poor, poor child, I saw others, crippled, maimed, and all incurable. What can be done with them, except leave them in the slums, to be maimed in mind as well as in body?"

Hester stopped, her eyes overflowing. Rob put out her hand with a responsive moisture in her own bright eyes.

"Dear Hessie, I beg your pardon. I suppose our point of view is different, and very likely I am wrong, and you are right in taking life so hard," she said.

"No, Rob; but you have your work in your family, which needs you, while I am free, and I can't help thinking I ought to find mine. Such sights make me sure that having money, I have no right to use it for teas, receptions, dancing gowns—all that sort of thing," said Hester earnestly.

"While we Greys, though we are freed from all our old worries, have only enough income to live plainly, and help one another," added Rob, finishing the thought Hester felt afraid to voice. [36] "Then, here in Fayre there is no such misery as you see in town, and when I go in to visit you I see only New York's splendour. Go on, Hester; what have you in mind?"

Hester flushed, and rose. "I don't know precisely, and I see the others, coming back, so I can't talk my thoughts into shape with you as I meant to. It will have to wait. But I know one thing: I can not possibly rest till I find out exactly what it is that is in my mind. Isn't Lester fine; don't you like him?"

"How can I help it, when he is so like his uncle?" retorted Rob. "There is no other man in the world equal to your father, Hester, or whom I love so much."

"Not Battalion B?" suggested Hester, fearing to narrow her question to one member of that battalion.

"Battalion B are boys," retorted Rob. "Your cousin seems to find our Prudy beautiful."

"Lester is an artist," said Hester. "Prue is the handsomest girl I ever saw, but she isn't Roberta." And Hester twined an admiring and loving embrace of both eyes and arms around the friend in whose mobile face she found a beauty more entrancing than Prue's.

"We must go down, Hester dear," said Rob, patting the arm under her right hand. She had grown [37] quiet since Hester had told her of the sad children, and the deep womanliness which lay hidden in her merry girl-heart, and which had grown deeper and more apparent since her father's death, softened the sparkling face into a most becoming gravity. "Perhaps something can be done, Hester. Perhaps something good may come, and through you, to the poor mite whom you saw! And perhaps, after all, your discontent is that 'divine discontent,' which makes the world better."

Hester smiled gladly; it was a comfort to feel that Rob did not think her ridiculous.

The Greys' guests departed after an early tea to which they were easily persuaded to remain. All three Grey girls saw them off on the edge of the October twilight, and came home under Fayre's elms and the young moon, discussing Hester's newly presented cousin, with unanimous praise.

"He may be an artist, but he liked the little grey house," said Prue, as they stood in a sisterly row, warming their feet, first the right ones and then the left, like a kind of drill, before the wood fire on the hearth.

"He likes it *because* he is an artist; not in spite of being one, as you imply, Prudy," said Wythie. [38]

"I am glad that he has come home to Hester, instead of becoming the Mikado's prime minister," said Rob, as if Lester Baldwin had narrowly missed that as an alternative.

"Tired, Mardy?" asked Wythie, turning to her mother as she entered, and Rob and Prue made room for her between them on the hearth.

"What lovely, lovely times we do have in the little grey house!" she added. It was the refrain that the Greys had sung to all their pleasant times ever since the old anxieties had been laid to rest.

CHAPTER THREE [39]

ITS OLD FRIENDS

Friday was a gala-day in the little grey house. "Battalion B," the three tall Rutherford boys, were at Yale, pursuing their way towards their chosen vocations with commendable industry, and with no apparent detriment to their health. Every Friday the three B's came back to Fayre to spend "the week end," bringing with them the cheer which they had shed upon the Greys' pathway

since their first meeting.

"It is like having six children," Mrs. Grey said happily, as she shook her duster out the dining-room window. "The boys' coming sheds joy upon the weekly task of sweeping and setting straight."

"It is a perpetual Thanksgiving Home-coming, isn't it, Mardy?" said Oswyth joyously. For though the Rutherfords were supposed to come to their own home, the Caldwell house, which they had occupied for nearly three years, with a competent housekeeper to preside over its destinies, their [40] return was really to the little grey house, where they made their absence of five days a plea for spending the other two of each seven.

"Your sister-in-law's coming," called Lydia from her watch-tower, the window beside the kitchen sink.

Wythie hastily glanced around the room which her mother was dusting, while she herself was polishing silver, with newspapers carefully spread over the fine old mahogany dining-table. Aunt Azraella had been another Aunt Azraella since his family had been established in comfort by the success of the machine over which poor Sylvester Grey had spent the apparently fruitless hours which she had then so fiercely denounced. But she never could conquer her habit of criticism, and the girls still felt vague apprehension of what was coming at her heels when they saw their aunt crossing the grass. Rob was out; since the day when she alone had held her ground against Mrs. Winslow's opinion, and had thus been the means of winning for the family all that they now enjoyed, Wythie had been deposed from the first place in Aunt Azraella's respect, and Rob was now, as she had herself said, the favourite niece.

"Good-morning, Mary. Good-morning, Wythie. Is Rob about? She asked me to let her know if [41] Tobias got sick again, so I came down. Elvira says she thinks he might as well be chloroformed, but Rob insisted on being told if the cat ailed; I think his leg is broken." Aunt Azraella delivered herself of her errand without giving any one time to reply to her opening salutation. She seated herself in the low rocking-chair, Mrs. Grey's favourite seat by the window, and began divesting herself of overshoes, and a cape which she wore over her coat. Seeing Wythie glance out at the grass she immediately said: "The grass isn't damp, I suppose you think, Wythie, and it doesn't seem to be, but in October, when the leaves are falling, you can't be certain. I think most people sow the seeds of their death in the fall of the year and the spring."

"Are you feeling better, Azraella?" asked Mrs. Grey. Wythie glanced up again and noticed that Mrs. Winslow looked pale, and less equal than usual to the demands of living.

"My cold's better, Mary, but I feel weak," said Aunt Azraella, settling back in her chair, having discarded her outer shell. "I think it must have been grippish, though I didn't know it at the time. If I should pass away, Mary, would the girls go back into all black?"

"Dear me!" ejaculated Wythie involuntarily. [42]

"Oh, Azraella, I am sure I don't know! Why do you think of such discordant things on this bright morning?" expostulated Mrs. Grey. "I am sure that you are going to live a long, long time."

"It is impossible to be sure of anything of the sort," retorted Mrs. Winslow, as though such obdurate cheerfulness annoyed her. "Human life is most uncertain. I wish you would go out of black for Sylvester Mary,—I mean solid black—this fall. White with it would be pretty, and by another year you could wear sober greys."

"We are always trying to avoid anything like sober Greys, Azraella," said Mrs. Grey with her sunny smile, while in her heart she knew that all her life she should wear the widow's garb for a loss irreparable to her, though borne cheerfully, and courageously.

"You are too young—only a little past forty—to wear black long," said Aunt Azraella, as if grief and mourning were a matter of astronomical calculation, like eclipses of the sun. "What would you do if you had my wealth, Wythie? You know you are not nearly as well off as I am."

"Quite as well off as I want to be," said Wythie contentedly. "Four thousand a year is an ideal sum [43] for four people. Enough to make life secure, too little to give us much bother, and not enough to allow us to be idle. Really, it is just the right sum. I never have thought what I should do if I were as rich as you are, Aunt Azraella."

"Your mind seems to be travelling rapidly from one thing to another, this morning, Azraella," smiled Mrs. Grey. "Tobias' leg, mourning, money—though these latter subjects are closely connected only too often."

"And the only thing I came for was Tobias' leg," added Mrs. Winslow. "I'm getting too warm here; I'll be overheated and catch more cold. You tell Rob when she comes that my cat's limping again and won't eat, and if she wants to see him, she can. If she don't we'll chloroform him—and I guess that's best."

Mrs. Winslow arose as she spoke, but Wythie pushed her gently back into her chair and knelt to put on her aunt's overshoes. "Rob will be up, Aunt," she said. "She has a surgeon's tastes and talents."

"I wonder if that's why she and that second Rutherford boy are specially good friends?" suggested Aunt Azraella, stooping her shoulders to receive her cape. "He's going to be a doctor, [44]

isn't he?"

"Yes, Bruce is studying hard for that end; he will make a good doctor. Dr. Fairbairn says he has a marked vocation for his profession," said Mrs. Grey.

"He's a good boy," said Aunt Azraella unexpectedly, "though they are all three fine specimens. Well, send Rob, if she wants to come. Good-bye."

"No fear of her not wanting to try to relieve Tobias and give him a chance to live his exemplary life longer," said Wythie as she let her aunt out of the side door by which she had entered.

"Is this your morning at home, Mardy?" called Prue from up-stairs where she was setting the chambers straight. "Rob is coming up the hill with Cousin Peace, and Mrs. Flinders is coming in the opposite direction with Polly."

"And the boys to-night!" sighed Wythie. "I don't believe I shall get done half I meant to do."

"That sigh must have been for Mrs. Flinders; it couldn't have been for Charlotte," said her mother.

"I've brought a trophy," announced Rob, coming into the room like a western breeze, eyes [45]
dancing and cheeks reddened by the October wind.

"Dear Charlotte, you are always the most welcome!" exclaimed Mrs. Grey, her voice tenderly caressing, while Wythie wound her arm around their beloved "Cousin Peace," as her other hand unfastened her coat.

"Robin insisted that I should not be in the way, and I did want so much to come that I am afraid it didn't take strong arguments to convince me that she was right," said the blind woman. "It is always good and better to come here."

"Why there's little Polly Flinders and her mother!" exclaimed Rob. "Now I wonder what has happened!"

She went to admit these last arrivals as she spoke, and Mrs. Flinders came gauntly into the room, followed by Polly, clinging silently to her adored Rob's hand, as if she were frightened.

Mrs. Flinders seated herself on the edge of a chair and began nervously fingering the fold of the shawl in which she defied passing fashions of coats and capes. "Did you hear?" she asked. And the Greys knew that something serious had brought her to them.

"You didn't hear?" Mrs. Flinders substituted, as the Greys all shook their heads. "It happened day [46]
before yesterday. He's had a stroke and the doctor says he won't never be able to use his hands again. He can talk's good's ever, and it ain't affected his mind, but he's done with life till he dies."

"How dreadful!" murmured Mrs. Grey, struck by the dramatic form of this closing statement, and greatly shocked at the hard fate which had overtaken the farmer who for a long time had taken care of the Grey place, sharing its product with the owners.

"What—You haven't made any plans yet, I suppose, Mrs. Flinders?"

"Yes, I have. I telegraphed his brother, and he telegraphed back I could bring him on to his house in Boston and see if anything could do any good, though I don't believe there's a doctor anywheres better than Dr. Fairbairn," said the woman, disdaining to wipe away the tears that had gathered in her eyes, and thus seeming to deny their presence. "You ain't heard the worst. Here I am, been slaving and scrimping all my days—you know just how near he's always been—and getting more tired every year, and losing all my children except Maimie there, who ain't any too rugged, and the only thing that kep' me up was thinking that we was saving and putting by [47]
each year, so's if anything should happen we'd have a tidy sum to pull through on. And as soon's he was struck, and Dr. Fairbairn told him the truth about himself, according to the doctor's principles of fair dealing with his patients, and had left, he called me to him, and he up and told me what I hadn't so much as an idea of. He's been drawing that money out of the bank and buying stocks through some kind of a firm that advertised in the papers just to catch country folks, and they kep' writing he was losing, with just enough gain once in a while to egg him on, till he used up every penny we had saved, and there ain't one red cent to show for all these years! It was worrying about it that brought on the stroke, I guess—land knows it's enough to give any one one! He never dared tell me, but when he was took he didn't dare not to. Now, I ask you, Mis' Grey, if that ain't just like a near man, to save and scrape and go without act'al necessaries of life, and then be caught by a glittering humbug that promises things even Maimie had ought to know it wouldn't fulfil?"

"I am afraid it is," assented Mrs. Grey, as the flood of Mrs. Flinders' passionate eloquence paused for her reply. "It's not an unusual story, but it is none the less a tragic one. I can't tell you how [48]
sorry I am for you—and for Mr. Flinders, too; poor, deluded, stricken man!"

Mrs. Flinders swallowed what barely escaped being a great sob, and Miss Charlotte asked: "But what does it all stand for, what degree of misfortune, I mean? What are you going to do, Mrs. Flinders?"

"How am I going to live, do you mean?" asked the poor woman, turning to the compassionate face that could not see her own. "The land knows; I don't. There's no use trying to plan ahead. That's what I've been doing, and now look at what's come of it! I know I'm going to his brother's in

Boston with him, and that's as far's I know."

"But Polly?" suggested Rob, clasping closer the little girl on her knee.

"Yes, that's what I was coming to, Roberta," said Mrs. Flinders, turning to Rob with an embarrassment that was at the same time relief. "I've been studying all the way here how I'd say it to you. First I thought I'd tell you the story, and ask your advice about Polly. Then I thought you'd see plain enough what I was hoping, and I ain't any hand to beat around the bush, anyway; I like straight cuts best. Polly—'s you call her—sets more by you than by any one on this earth, [49] not excepting me and her father. You took her here that time when she was pindling away out of the world, and I guess there ain't much doubt you saved her life. Would you see your way to taking her now for a spell? I hate to ask a favour, but I don't know which way to turn."

"We should have offered to take the child if you hadn't asked, Mrs. Flinders," said Mrs. Grey quickly. "Polly isn't any more trouble than the little mouse in the wall that Kiku can never catch, because it keeps in its hole there. Of course we will take little Polly, and keep her safe as long as you want to leave her with us. We are only too glad to get her back. Polly heard the last word my dear husband spoke, and Polly sang him into his long sleep while she was singing to her dolly."

Mrs. Grey spoke very softly, and Rob's face dropped on Polly's smooth head.

Polly's care-worn mother, worn into hardness and unloveliness, broke down at this. "Oh, Lord," she said, not as an exclamation, but prayerfully, "this life is queer. Sylvester Grey took just when he was ready to live, and that poor, mean-souled, grasping man of mine throwing away the work of his whole hard life, and then struck down helpless on top of it! Well, I'm more obliged to you [50] for your taking Maimie, and for the way you do it than I can say. I won't let her stay any longer'n I can help, but I've told you the whole story, and you can see just what my prospects are. We've got to sell our farm—'tain't valuble, but it'll bring something, if only some one wants it, and after that I've got to support him and me and Maimie, till she's old enough to do for herself."

Mrs. Flinders had risen as she spoke and the Greys arose too.

"I have told you truly that Polly is welcome for just as long a time as you care to trust her to us—weeks, months, or years. She is a dear, quiet, gentle child, and we have plenty of room to shelter her and plenty of bread and butter to nourish her till life has something better to offer her than we can give her. And you know, Mrs. Flinders, that my girls and I will give the child the same care, in body, mind, and soul that Wythie, Rob, and Prue received. You need not fear that she will not be lovingly cared for, nor feel any anxiety about her. I will do my best."

The two mothers looked into each others' eyes; one was seamed, thin, work-hardened, work-worn, the other was beautiful, calm, clear-eyed, wearing in the brave smile that illumined her face the look of one that has conquered.

Mrs. Flinders put out her hard hand without a word. Then she shook hands with Miss Charlotte, [51] Wythie, and Rob, and took Polly's little hand to lead her away.

"I'll send her up this afternoon," she said as she walked rigidly out of the door, speaking without turning her head. "As to the rest, whatever this blow is to us, Maimie's in luck."

"Isn't that tragic?" exclaimed Rob as soon as the outside door was safely shut.

"Have you taken Polly Flinders, mama?" cried Prue, coming swiftly down the stairs. "Good-morning, Cousin Peace. Oh, dear; don't you dread having Polly?"

"Not any more than I dread the sparrows around the door, hopping about for my crumbs, nor the dozen or so of cats who come daily for our larger crumbs," replied her mother stoutly. "I love to feel that the little grey house diffuses brighter colours on darkened lives. Polly really is as quiet as the little mouse I compared her to, and it isn't a great risk to take a child who lacks so much in her own home, is it Charlotte? Polly can't lose in coming to us, having very little to lose."

"That is not overstated, Mary," said Cousin Peace quietly, and even Prue reluctantly laughed.

"Well," sighed Wythie, who had not spoken for a long time, rising as she spoke. "Well, I feel [52] dazed. That is such a sad story that we have just heard, made sadder by the barrenness of its manner of telling! And then we have acquired a child, indefinitely, and lost a farmer most definitely. And I meant to have made a pudding for dinner, and it is altogether too late. I feel dazed. I wonder if this is to be an era of happenings? I have noticed events move in schools, like mackerel."

"I really hope, Wythie, that children aren't going to move upon us in schools, like mackerel," cried Rob, recovering her brightness of face and manner. "For our income is distinctly limited. I should have to resume my story-telling."

This was a mild family joke; Rob's story-telling always loomed in the near distance as a possibility when the warm Grey hearts led them to generosities of which their purse was not capable.

The puddingless dinner was despatched with some haste, because Wythie and Rob had cake to make to be ready for Battalion B's keen appetite, made keener by abstinence from the little grey house's cake, and Rob had to go to the rescue of Aunt Azraella's Tobias. There were preparations to be made for the coming of Polly, which had to be compromised for the immediate present by a [53] bed in the corner of Prue's room, for the afternoon was speeding away; it was almost time for the

arrival of the boys, while Polly must be quite due.

Mrs. Flinders, herself, did not bring the child. A neighbour drove her up in the dilapidated buggy in which she had arrived to make her first visit to the Greys. It did not look much more purplish and worn, nor Polly much older for the time that had passed since then, though the buggy had been in constant use, and the child had attained the great age of nine.

Miss Charlotte lingered to welcome the boys, between whom and the sweet blind woman there was the strongest affection. Polly had hardly been established before three long shadows came wavering up the eastward mounting hill of the main street, and Basil, Bruce, and Bartlemy strode over the little front gate without stopping for the ceremony of opening it, in quite their old way, and burst into the little grey house, filling it from roof to cellar with their hearty voices shouting:

"Little Grey Mother, little Grey girls, where in the little grey house are you?" this was their liturgical chant every week upon arriving.

"Here is the mother, and here are the girls. Welcome Battalion B!" chanted the girls, and the ceremony of reception was ended. [54]

Wythie, Rob, and Prue rushed to the door each trying to be the first to open it. Three strong brown hands clasped the three held out to meet them, and the girls, laughing and chattering, the boys chattering quite as loudly, came into the quiet green and white room, filling it with youth and joy.

Mrs. Grey sprang to meet her boys, holding out both hands, her face radiating pleasure as brightly as the girls' faces did. Cousin Charlotte pressed close behind her—it was not strange that the Rutherford boys counted the hours from Monday to Friday that lay between them and their glad home-coming.

"My but it's good to get here!" ejaculated Bruce, stretching his long legs to the fire, but looking at Rob whose warm red-brown hair, flashing eyes and crimson cheeks were every whit as heartening to look upon as were the flames licking up through the great logs.

"There's no place like it—John Howard Paine was perfectly right," said Basil with quiet conviction, watching Wythie's soft hands as they cut generous slices from the afternoon's cake baking and added the cookies the tall boys had "loved from their first meeting," as Bartlemy said. [55]

"There is no news, except that we have Polly Flinders here for a visit with no end in sight; her father is paralysed and has squandered all his money in worthless stocks," Prue was saying, in reply to Bartlemy's demand for news.

"Whew! As though that weren't news enough!" Bruce cried, sitting erect. "Fancy Flinders squandering! And paralysed, is he? The poor old fellow! He has been rather decent since your father died."

"Very decent," assented Rob. "And Hester was up, and brought her cousin Lester Baldwin, fresh from Japan. He is just like her father. And Hessie has some new longing, which I did not quite get at; something to do with helping incurable cripple children in the tenements," she continued.

"That sounds like the most interesting and sensible scheme she has had yet," said Bruce heartily. "But this cousin—You like Mr. Baldwin; did you say the Japaned cousin was like him?" And Bruce scowled melodramatically.

"Precisely," said Rob. "Only nicer."

"Come up to our other house, Basil," said Bruce. "I won't linger here!" [56]

"We'll be back after supper," he added, relenting as the battalion filed out of the little grey house. "We must go up to look at the Caldwell house, but we'll come home here as soon as our duty is done."

"It's good to get home, Wythie," said Basil turning back on the steps, just as he spoke and just as he turned back each week at the same hour.

CHAPTER FOUR [57]

ITS DREADFUL NIGHT

"I saved a life to-day, Bruce," said Rob. The Rutherford boys had got back to the little grey house, the evening had shut in around it, shutting out all the world except that small fragment of it which centred around the old hearth.

Over in the corner, under her green-shaded sewing lamp, sat the mother without whom the happiness of the six young people would have been incomplete, and this was true although the six were drifting more and more into the habit of being three pairs. Bartlemy was never tired of vainly trying to satisfy himself in painting Prue's wonderful colouring, and, if the truth were told, Prue never tired of having him try. Bartlemy's talent was developing into something to be taken

seriously; already his brothers were making up their minds to the first parting when they should be graduated together. Basil and Bruce had delayed college till Bartlemy could enter with them, [58] but evidently their ways would lie together no further. Bartlemy must go away to study in Italy and France, for his boyish nickname of Fra Bartolomeo was proving prophetic—Bartlemy would be a painter.

Wythie and Basil never seemed to have very much to talk about, but they drifted beside each other invariably, and their many moments of silence seemed to be quite as full of utterance as their moments of speech, as the observant Grey mother noted with a satisfaction that could not be wholly free from regret.

As to Rob and Bruce they chattered ceaselessly, never far apart, always absorbed in identical interests, and with the same kind of a sense of humour—which it is said is the strongest cement of friendship. It was hard to tell much about Rob and Bruce. It was plain to be seen that Bruce was of the same opinion that he had been from the first, which was that Rob easily surpassed all other girls, including sweet Wythie and handsome Prue, just as Rob considered Battalion B collectively the best and cleverest boys in the world, and Bruce the head of the battalion. But their comradeship was so entirely free from the suggestion of sentiment that there was no predicting how it would end. As to Prue, she was but sixteen, and Mrs. Grey was too sensible to [59] build up romances, or to encourage them for such a youthful heroine. She knew that Prue had plenty of that ambition which the other girls lacked, the ambition to shine, to see and to be seen in a larger world than the little grey house and Fayre offered her. She had never been the simple and contented little girl that both of her sisters had been, and the modest fortune that had come to the Greys had rather contributed to her restlessness than made her contented, for it had given Prue a taste of small luxuries which whetted her appetite for greater ones.

Mrs. Grey watched this tendency in her baby with uneasiness. This home-loving and essentially womanly woman believed that ambitions of Prue's sort never brought happiness to the woman whom they drew after their *ignis fatuus* attractions, but rather substituted heartburnings and envy for peace, holding out an unattainable gaol of triumph, which would prove empty and unsatisfying even should it be reached. Mrs. Grey was an old-fashioned woman, believing that love, not applause, good deeds, not brilliant ones rounded and filled a woman's life.

"Cricket on the hearth?" suggested Bruce, replying to Rob's statement that she had saved a life [60] that day.

"No; Tobias, I set his leg and bandaged it. Aunt Azraella thought that he must die," said Rob. "You're not the only surgeon of this sextette."

"Tobias?" repeated Bruce in the dark. "Don't know the gentleman. Where was Dr. Fairbairn, and why should he die from a broken leg?"

"Don't you remember Aunt Azraella's cat, Tobias?" cried Rob. Adding, as Bruce uttered an enlightened: "Oh!" "Aunt Azraella says that she doesn't want Tobias chloroformed because Elvira would grieve for him, but I believe she has a sneaking liking for the old cat herself; she drew a long breath of relief when I repaired him and uttered my professional opinion that he would pull through. Aunt Azraella doesn't seem quite strong, and it makes her gentler. Do you suppose that it would be your duty as a physician to impair the health of positive and vigorous ladies, like Aunt Azraella?"

"'Health chiefly keeps an atheist in the dark,'" quoted Bruce promptly. "I don't remember seeing that question of medical ethics raised, but it opens up a wide field for argument. I think a great many people would be softer and sweeter for having less cast-iron nerves, and less self- [61] sufficiency of health."

"Well, I think there are not a great many, but very few in America who suffer from cast-iron nerves," said Rob with a sigh. "I'm only beginning to realize what a horrible lot of misery there is in the world. I can understand your choice of a profession, Bruce."

"You always had medicinal qualities—" Bruce began.

"You mean medical," corrected Prue from her pose before Bartlemy near by.

"Do I?" asked Bruce. "I can perfectly understand my choice in every way, Rob. As to the misery, there is more than you will ever realize, I hope. But on the other hand as human beings grow better it will lessen. The higher the civilization the greater the capacity to suffer, but the stronger the sense of the rights of the weak and of our kinship and obligations even to 'our brother, the wolf,' as St. Francis used to say. His sanctity was great enough to reveal to him how endless was the chain of love—they hadn't found it out in his day."

"There doesn't seem to be much that girls, Grey girls in Fayre, for instance—can do," said Rob looking wistful.

"We know now, Robin, that everything is a system of units. We are all merely molecules, by [62] comparison, but working together for a result," said Bruce. "You can make life sweet and wholesome all around you. You can help three big fellows, for instance, to march straight in a world full of pitfalls; you can cheer everybody and set the best of examples, which preaches wordlessly, to all who come near you. I think, as a unit, Rob, you might be considered a success. If all units did their cheerful best, as it is done in this little grey house, the collective result would be the millennium."

"Goodness, no!" cried Rob. Then she shook off her gravity and her face rippled into its usual merriment. "Did we ever talk so seriously before, Bruce, in all the days of our partnership? It must be the effect of Hester's visit and Mr. Flinders' sad state! Or is it the influence of Lydia? I have long wondered how we kept up our habit of laughter with Lydia about. She is like a perpetual Ash Wednesday—seems to be going about putting a pinch of ashes on every Grey forehead all the time, and saying: 'Remember, man, that dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return!' And she conveys the impression of having such a very poor opinion of the quality of our [63] dust! I wonder if Lyddie really can be but twenty-four years old! I can't believe it! Isn't it odd how many things one knows to be true, yet can't believe? Like India, for instance, and that the world is round, and all those things."

"All what things?" laughed Bruce. "Don't you believe in India—after Kipling?"

"Kim is so vivid that I can't believe it—don't pretend you don't understand, Bruce, because you always do," said Rob.

"I know," assented Bruce. "The wonderful detail that is vivid and unreal at once, as dreams are vivid and unreal. Rob, you are in a queer mood to-night; you have somewhat the effect on me this moment which you are trying to describe—you are most vivid, yet you seem unreal, at least unlike yourself."

"I feel so," agreed Rob promptly. "I feel excited, stirred, restless, happy, unhappy—all ways, but my normal way. What is making Basil so much more talkative than usual to-night?"

"His plans, I fancy; he is probably telling Wythie what he is considering," Bruce answered regarding his elder with a twinkle.

What Basil was saying was nothing, apparently to call forth the twinkle.

"Then you approve the idea?" Rob heard him say. [64]

"Yes," said Wythie quietly. "I like the Caldwell place very much; it is dignified and beautiful. If you really mean to make literature your career, and to study, Basil, and became a specialist in bird study, besides writing a novel or so—you said a novel or so? Well, then," Wythie continued as Basil nodded a smiling assent, "I do not see how you could have a better place in which to live and work than in Fayre, so quiet, yet so near town, and in the old Caldwell place, among its elms and Norwegian pines."

"And you like it, Wythie? You think it could be made a home to be happy in?" persisted Basil.

Wythie looked up without embarrassment, her face shining with confidence.

"Anywhere may be that, Basil," she said. "And the Caldwell place more than most. If I were you I would buy it. And it is certainly an irresistible bargain at that price."

"Basil is talking of buying the Caldwell place, you see," said Bruce. "He has fully made up his mind, since father's latest letter came, to give up all thought of a business career after we are graduated and 'commence author,' as our English cousins say. I honestly think he is warranted in [65] the choice; I suppose he will do something the sort of thing John Burroughs does, as well as write novels—everybody writes novels."

"Except you and me," smiled Rob. "Must you go? How short these intercollegiate evenings are!"

"Intercollegiate, Rob?" echoed her mother, putting down her work and coming forward as the three tall guests rose to take their leave.

"Aren't they between college?" asked Rob unabashed. "Just two little full days sandwiched in between the five of hard labour at Yale."

The little grey house settled down to slumber soon after it was left to itself. The brisk autumnal winds are conducive to deep sleep, and Wythie and Rob in their room, and Prue in hers, opening from it, in which little Polly Flinders was tucked away in the corner, slept dreamlessly far into the night.

Then the sound of voices penetrated their sleep, far-off calls, men shouting, and, at last, a hand was shaking Wythie and Rob into wakefulness.

They sat erect, trembling and startled, to see their mother bending over them, a hand on the shoulder of each, as she cried: "Wythie, Rob, wake up, wake up!"

"What has happened?" cried the frightened girls on their feet in an instant. [66]

"Charlotte's house is burning; they have called us. We must go," gasped Mrs. Grey. "Put on warm clothing; make haste! Prue, stay here with Lydia and that child," she added as Prue, wide eyed and pale, joined the group.

Somehow Wythie and Rob found themselves dressing; everything went wrong, yet they managed, after a fashion, to get themselves sufficiently protected from the chill of the night air, and found themselves with their mother, escorted by some of their men neighbours down the street. The elms stood out against a background of red, from which tongues of flame occasionally shot up, dulling the red glow on the sky, and revealing the smallest twigs. It was Cousin Peace's house which was burning! The girls repeated the words as they ran, trying to make them real, convey a

meaning. Poor blind Cousin Peace! With this thought Wythie stopped short.

"Where is she? Where is Miss Grey?" she demanded.

It was Lawyer Dinsmore who held her arm; she felt his hand tremble on it as he answered: "We do not know; we could not find her—" Wythie groaned, and he hastily added: "It must be that she [67] is safe, Wythie. There was time to get out, but no one has seen her. Her senses are so abnormally acute that she must have known of the fire before the alarm was given, and escaped."

"Unless she slept, and the smoke—" Wythie could not go on. "Hurry!" she murmured.

Mr. Dinsmore did not attempt to reassure her further; indeed, the suggestion that Miss Charlotte, alone in the house, might have been asleep and overcome by smoke had occurred to him before Wythie voiced it. It was not pleasant to wonder why it was that the alarm had been given from outside, not from within the doomed building.

Mrs. Grey and her daughters were stationed beyond the reach of danger where the Rutherford boys soon found and joined them.

There was no question of saving the house; from the first it was doomed, and it would have been most painful to have stood helplessly by while the peaceful house that had absorbed so much of its blind mistress' calm repose was destroyed, had not all other thought been swallowed up in the absorbing anxiety which left Miss Charlotte's fate doubtful. For the feeling was growing among the knot of bystanders around the Greys that, if she were safe, they should have had some [68] assurance of it, that, by this time, some one should have come forward who could tell them definitely where Miss Grey had taken refuge.

"It is unbearable," groaned Rob at last, through her set teeth.

"I will go around to the other side and see if I can't find out something, Rob," said Bruce with a glance at the girl's agonized face. "Look after them, Basil, Bart, if I can't get back very soon."

His tall form moved through the crowd, elbowing its way until it was lost to sight, before the Greys fully realized that he was going.

Moments passed, a quarter of an hour, and Mrs. Grey, held fast on either hand by her girls, watched with them the mounting flames, tense, silent with the misery that made each second seem an hour. Bruce did not return, the fire licked and burst its awful way around the eaves, around Cousin Peace's chamber window! Wythie hid her face, shuddering; she could not look.

Suddenly a great roar went up from the crowd, and many voices together shouted words which the onlookers could not catch. They cheered mightily, and then a deadly stillness settled upon the mass of human beings.

"What is it?" Rob asked of a man who pushed his way towards them.

"Shut up!" Wythie heard another man mutter to this new-comer, and on this hint the latter [69] snarled: "I don't know. Nothin', I guess." But Rob felt sure that the snarl was to conceal something, and that it did not spring from bad temper.

Suddenly the crowd seemed to go stark mad. Swaying, surging, pushing, it began to yell, hoarse, loud, frightful, like some sort of a monster.

"Come out, come back! The roof's caving! It's going! Come out!" the crowd roared, plainly articulate to the group on its edge, which was most vitally interested.

"Some one's in there, in that horrible fire!" gasped Rob. With one instinctive movement Basil and Bartlemy turned and looked at each other, reading each in the other's eyes the same thought. It was so exactly like Bruce!

Rob caught the look, saw the boys' hands meet in a tight clasp, saw their faces turn paler than before. Instantly she guessed, and shared their fear.

"Not he! Not Bruce!" she groaned.

Before the boys could answer a great shout rent the air, a shout that was triumphant. For an instant Rob forgot Cousin Peace.

"He's out!" she cried, and Basil and Bartlemy dropped each others' hands to steady her as she swayed.

"I shan't faint," she cried. "I never faint. They're cheering. He's out, he's out!" [70]

"You must let me go," said Basil, and Bartlemy made no demur, though it must have been hard to stand at his post on guard with the mother and girls while Basil pushed his way to the front.

The roof fell in with a great plunge and a fierce up-leaping of flames which burned rapidly for a brief time. Then the fire began to fade out as it consumed the last remnants of the pretty old home.

"If we do not hear something soon I think I shall die or go mad!" cried Wythie. The waiting was getting unbearable.

"Don't you think you all ought to go home and wait there?" suggested Bartlemy. "You are

shivering, and we shall hear about Miss Charlotte there as soon as here."

"I couldn't go, dear Bartlemy," Mrs. Grey said, and Bartlemy did not insist.

It was taking all the force the boy possessed to keep himself to his present duty when every muscle twitched to follow his brothers, and anxiety for Bruce was added to his previous fear for Miss Charlotte.

At last the strained watchers saw a movement in the crowd; it seemed to be falling away, and a path was opening towards them. Through this path they soon saw Basil's head towering above his surroundings, and behind him another even taller than he—Bruce? Ah, thank God, thank God! The relief of seeing him was so great that both Rob and Bartlemy groaned with the pain of it. Mrs. Grey and Wythie looked at them in new terror; they had not known the fear for Bruce shared by the other three. [71]

Bruce was being helped along by Basil; he was hurt. Behind them came—yes, Dr. Fairbairn, and he was carrying something in his arms. A woman? It certainly was. The Greys clasped each other close, their throats tightening.

It was Miss Charlotte.

"You mustn't look like that," called Dr. Fairbairn in his booming voice as soon as he could make it reach the group that he was approaching. "I forbid it! Charlotte is safe; not a hair harmed. Mary, don't you dare to faint away! Wythie, pull yourself together! Rob, be sensible."

Scolding them as he came the big doctor set his burden on her feet, and Miss Charlotte smiled feebly, as Mrs. Grey gathered her in her arms.

"Not a word; not a word here, you womankind!" said the big doctor. "I've sent for a carriage. When you get home you may cry and faint, or do whatever you will, but not here. Charlotte was in no danger; she walked off—most sensibly." The old man nodded significantly, scowling over his shoulder at Mrs. Grey who was totally in the dark as to how to interpret his meaning. [72]

"Here is my patient," Dr. Fairbairn continued turning to Bruce who had been trying to answer Bartlemy's questions and reassure Rob, though his lips twisted with pain.

"Bruce is burned. Wanted to get his name in the papers, so rushed into the burning house to rescue Charlotte. It served him quite right; she was quietly out walking all the time. She defeated his purpose of having his picture in the papers, bearing a limp woman out through curling flames! No one in the house, you understand, yet in he went, risking his life, and getting badly burned for nothing in this world! And he to be my partner as soon as he has finished his medical course! A pretty partner he will be, a sensational scamp like him! Here is the carriage. Let me put you in, Bruce, dear boy. Look out there, Bart; don't touch him—he isn't in a state to be handled." And the old doctor helped Bruce tenderly into the carriage, for he loved the boy as a son.

"Now, Charlotte, you next. Come, Mary; come children. Basil and Bartlemy, you and I are going to crowd up outside. It has been a horrible night; I don't believe any of us are up to walking," he said, as he closed the carriage door. "I've got to attend Bruce's wounds, and I'm going to take him to the little grey house where there will be some one besides a housekeeper to nurse him, Mary." [73]

"Yes, of course," said Mrs. Grey, not fully understanding what was happening, and still clinging thankfully to Miss Charlotte.

Rob sat opposite to Bruce staring at him with big, frightened eyes. He had been in that horrible danger, and he was hurt!

Bruce looked at her, then at his two brothers, whose faces were ghastly, and at Wythie crying quietly in the corner.

He smiled, in spite of his pain. "I'm all right, boys and girls—and Rob," he said. "I thought we had Rutherfords to burn, while there was only one Miss Charlotte."

CHAPTER FIVE [74]

ITS HERO

The crowded carriage bringing its exhausted occupants the short distance which lay between what had been Miss Charlotte's home and the little grey house, revealed the latter bright with lights as it drew near. The sight cheered every one; it seemed as though nothing could be seriously wrong as long as the lights of home gleamed forth unchanged.

Prue had the front door open before the carriage stopped, and ran down the flagged walk to meet it. She caught Cousin Peace in her arms with a depth of feeling that delighted her mother—a girl could not be in great danger from worldliness who thus appreciated one who was the embodiment of unworldliness.

Basil and the doctor, with Bartlemy tenderly aiding, led Bruce into the house, and got him on the ample couch in the dining-room which the Grey girls still called "their nurse," in remembrance of babyhood days when it faithfully tended them. [75]

It was on occasions like this—no, there had never been an occasion in the least like this, but in emergencies, that Lydia's gravely responsible mind scored heavily. That venerable young woman had a brisk fire burning in the kitchen when the family and its guests came back, and the tea-kettle was steaming to the boiling point. Lydia had early been trained in all emergencies to have hot water in the tea-kettle, and she now faithfully lived up to the traditions of her forebears.

Dr. Fairbairn rubbed his hands with satisfaction as he glanced into the kitchen to see what were the prospects there.

"Lydia," he said, "your common sense would do credit to seven older women, if it were subdivided among them. Will you make coffee in abundance and rather strong and as quick as you can? Your tea-kettle is ready, I see."

"My grandmother always said that to have your kettle always full of hot water, and your Bible thumbed was a sign that you were the woman of Proverbs, and a comfort to your family," said Lydia with a sort of solemn self-satisfaction. "I'd ought to be commonsensed; *she* was."

It did not take long to make the coffee, and its fumes put courage into the chilled and tired group waiting it even before the invigorating beverage had been tasted. [76]

Dr. Fairbairn set down his empty cup with a satisfied smack of the lips. "Now, Bruce," he said, "we are both fortified to bind up your wounds, pouring in oil like true Samaritans."

The other boys helped remove Bruce's coat, a painful process, and the doctor's scissors bared his arms to the shoulders. They were badly burned, and Dr. Fairbairn's big, deft hands moved over them with extreme gentleness, anointing them and covering them with absorbent cotton which he bound into place with the linen bandages produced from the capacious depths of his inexhaustible pockets.

Bruce's hands had fared worse than his arms; they were ministered to in turn, and the poor lad found some respite from his pain when the ointment was bound on and the air excluded.

Wythie and Rob in the meantime had been helping Miss Charlotte to bed in their mother's room. She scarcely spoke; there was no need of Dr. Fairbairn's injunction to the girls to make her keep silence. She seemed utterly dazed, and there was a look in her face that made her cousins fear that the fright of the night had affected her mind. They gave her the sedative which Dr. Fairbairn had prepared, and Rob ran down-stairs, leaving Wythie on guard at Miss Charlotte's side. [77]

"Do you think she can be injured—mentally I mean?" Rob asked, ending her account of Miss Charlotte's docile, silent and lost manner of behaving.

"Not a bit, I am certain," said Dr. Fairbairn cheerfully, though he could not help realizing that cases where a shock had permanently affected the mind were by no means rare.

"Charlotte is too well-balanced to be unhinged. We must expect her to suffer from a shock like this, and from the grief of losing a home to which she was deeply attached. You must keep her perfectly quiet, and we must make her sleep and sleep, until her quivering nerves are restored. She must not be allowed to talk of to-night more than just enough to prevent her dwelling on it in secret and magnifying its events. Bruce, do you feel able to tell us in a few words just what did happen to you—What made you go into that house when Charlotte and her maid were both out, and where did you find her at last?"

"It doesn't take long to tell how I happened to go in," said Bruce. "There seemed to be a growing conviction in the crowd that Miss Charlotte must be in the house, or some one would be able to account for her. So I went in to see." [78]

"Perfectly simple, and a natural thing to do," observed Dr. Fairbairn dryly. "Well?"

"There were rooms which I couldn't get into—indeed they were no longer rooms; the fire had started there. But they were in the rear of the house, and I felt sure Miss Charlotte would not have been there. Indeed, the only possible explanation of her being in the house at all was that she had been smothered by the smoke, and had not wakened. This could only have happened in her bedroom, or on the way to the door, so I managed to get up-stairs——"

"Were they burning?" demanded Rob, leaning forward, her face pale, her hands tensely clasped.

"A little," said Bruce, smiling at her reassuringly. "Don't have a Looking-Glass Land scare, Rob; it's all over, and you see I did not perish on that burning stairway." Rob shuddered, and Prue dropped the cup she held; it fell in fragments to the floor.

"Hold on, Prudy! This story seems to be hard on the china," cried Bruce. "There isn't any use in dwelling on details, aside from the effect on tea-cups. 'Suffice it to say,' as I suppose Basil will say when he writes novels, I got into Miss Charlotte's room, and she wasn't there. Then the crowd began to shout at me to come out, and I took its advice. Not much too soon; the roof fell—" Bruce stopped short. He could not carry off his story with the lightness of touch with which he had begun it. The recollection of that crashing roof, falling just as his feet crossed the threshold, sickened him. Life seemed very precious as he recalled it, and the death he had so narrowly [79]

escaped unspeakably dreadful.

Bruce felt his audience tighten, as it were, under the strain of his own feeling and a sudden, full realization of their close reprieve from an unbearable tragedy.

He turned to smile into Basil's blanched face. "I lost my overcoat," he said quickly. "I had wrapped it around my head to keep off the heat and smoke. It was an unusually satisfactory coat."

"Where did you find Charlotte?" asked Dr. Fairbairn.

Bruce turned to him, grateful for being helped over and away from the remembrance of that [80]
frightful exit with the crash of the infalling roof in his ears.

"Some one said that Annie had been taken over to St. Chad's rectory," said Bruce. "But I heard people around me saying when I came out without Miss Charlotte and without having found any trace of her that she must have perished, or she would have gone with her maid. There was a moment as I heard them talking that my heart sank within me, remembering those rooms in the rear, burned out before I got there. And then, like an inspiration, there flashed upon me a picture of Miss Charlotte's favourite spot down by the river, and I started for it on the run. There she was, walking up and down, back and forth, her hands clasped straight in front of her, her head hanging, and a strange, bewildered look on her gentle face. Not a hair was harmed, but it was most pathetic."

Bruce paused for an instant, and Dr. Fairbairn frowned dreadfully, as Mrs. Grey caught her breath in a half sob.

"Very fortunate she was there, and nothing whatever pathetic in her being sensible enough to get out of the way of the rabble, when she could do no good," the doctor said gruffly. The Rutherford boys smiled at one another, well used to Dr. Fairbairn's ways, and Bruce resumed: "Miss [81]
Charlotte knew me at once, and came with me willingly when I told her that the Greys were waiting for her anxiously. The doctor and Basil met me coming back with her, and brought us to you. After that you know what happened—no one better, since you brought me here to the little grey house, and comforted me with coffee and affection, as the Greys best know how."

"And I intend that they shall continue their ministrations," said Dr. Fairbairn promptly. "Mary Grey, you can keep this boy here until he is able to be about, can't you?"

"Of course I can," said Mrs. Grey quickly, though she hadn't the least idea how she was to manage it.

"Oh, wait a minute, Doctor," expostulated Bruce. "I shall do very well at home, and I can't add to the burdens in this house; the Greys are rather heavily weighted just now."

"You wouldn't do in the least well up at that big Caldwell place, Bruce boy," said the doctor, like the autocrat that he was. "You are going to have a hard time for a few days, harder than you realize now when you are freshly made comfortable. You will be feverish and in pain, and there isn't any one up there to nurse you—not even these amiable young giraffe brothers of yours, who [82]
would know as much about nursing as a cat, if they were there! You didn't accomplish much by your folly—rushing into a burning house when it was empty on the chance of saving a life, but it wasn't the meanest form of folly, after all, and I'm not sure that you don't deserve some reward, if only in consolation for missing the medal for life-saving which you hoped to earn. Certainly the Greys will keep you—I order it!"

"There's the lean-to room in which I used to plan my stories when I was a public entertainer," said Rob. "Wythie and I will turn in there—it's perfectly comfortable, so don't remonstrate, Bruce! Cousin Peace will share Mardy's room, Polly is already established in Prue's, so there you are! This is the most blessedly elastic little house! I've no doubt we could tuck away Basil and Bartlemy if they insisted."

"Nobody need desire a better bed than is this old nurse," said Bruce stretching one hand into the curves of the ancient couch, and immediately bringing it back with an involuntary moan.

"Now, Mary," said the doctor, viewing with experienced eye the mounting colour in Bruce's cheek and the dilating brightness of his eyes, "if you and your girls can get ready these various nests [83]
which Rob has just planned, I think our foolhardy young hero here had better be put to bed with a quieting draught, and allowed to sleep. He is more overwrought than he realizes."

"Certainly, doctor," said Mrs. Grey rising immediately, restored to herself by the necessity of action. "Come, Rob and Prue. We will improvise a bed for Wythie and Rob that will answer for to-night, and settle Bruce in the girls' room, then by the morning we can make everybody more comfortable."

"Oh, please—Mrs. Grey—Rob, I can't turn you and Wythie out of your room, you know!" remonstrated Bruce distressed at the thought.

"That's all right, Bruce," cried Rob. "I'd do more than give my room to one who tried to save Cousin Peaceful, even if he were not my chum."

She laughed as she spoke, but the laugh was tremulous, and Bruce and Dr. Fairbairn looked after her and then looked at each other with eyes so full of meaning that in that glance they exchanged

confidences.

"You will go back to college on Monday, boys, and tell the heads what has happened, and get permission to take notes of the lectures for me, won't you?" said Bruce after a moment's silence. [84]

"Aren't you together in lectures?" asked the doctor.

"I'm taking the scientific, but Bas and Bart take the *belles lettres* course," said Bruce. "I shall be able to go back in a few days?"

"If you don't catch cold, and can go back with one of the boys to attend to you. You can't use those arms under ten days," answered the doctor. "It seems to me at your age I should not have been so impatient of coddling in the little grey house, by the three nicest and prettiest girls between Maine and California."

"It would be a hero, doctor, that could turn from it, if it did not postpone greater happiness," said Bruce. "I want to graduate."

"Oh, you want to graduate! And you are in a tremendous hurry to read medicine with me—I see!" said the doctor. "I have always been a meek and humble man, my boy, but you will make me conceited of my charms."

The kind old doctor, whose sixty years made his rest at night important after a busy day, helped Basil and Bartlemy get Bruce to bed, and drove away only when morning's nearness made going to bed an absurdity. Basil stayed with Bruce, and Bartlemy decided to nap on the broad old "nurse" for the few remaining hours of darkness. [85]

For several days Bruce suffered more keenly than he had expected to, just as Dr. Fairbairn prophesied. Bartlemy went back to Yale on Monday, as usual, but Basil stayed behind to help nurse and serve his brother, who was helpless for nearly a week.

Miss Charlotte slept for three days, only waking to take nourishment, and then she drifted back to oblivion of her loss. She had loved her home, the home of her birth and entire life, so dearly that Mrs. Grey was grateful for every hour that spared her consciousness of that loss.

That courageous woman found even her competent hands overfull for those seven days of nursing and a crowded house. But Wythie and Rob pervaded every corner with their helpfulness, and between school hours Prue uncomplainingly shouldered the hardest tasks that she could find undone. The thought that the little grey house had so nearly lost big, noble Bruce, and that he had risked his life only on the chance of saving Cousin Peace, who was dearer than any one outside its immediate circle, awoke in Prue such a depth of gratitude that nothing was too hard for her to do to prove that gratitude. [86]

When Miss Charlotte came back from her voyaging in unknown waters the Grey family rejoiced anew, for she came back her old, calm, sweet self; sorrowful in the loss of her house, but not harmed by the shock of the fire, and far too deeply good to brood over the holocaust of all the memorials and associations of her life. Nothing was said by Miss Charlotte of Bruce's daring plunge, at that last moment of special danger, into the burning house in search of her. But once Rob, coming into the dining-room, saw Cousin Peace bending over the boy's couch with both her delicate hands lightly enfolding his bandaged ones, and she knew that Bruce was receiving his thanks.

Bruce's back was towards the door, which was fortunate, for he would have been greatly embarrassed to meet Rob's eyes, and Cousin Peace, of course, could not see her. Rob slipped away quietly, and when she came singing along the hall a little later Bruce was relating college tales to Miss Charlotte, smiling over by the window, in Mrs. Grey's low sewing chair.

"Fayre is ringing with your heroism, Bruce," cried a voice from the other direction, and Rob turned to see Frances coming in the front door. "And what is more, Rob," Frances added as she and Rob met in the doorway of the dining-room, "I see Hester Baldwin coming up the street as fast as she can come." [87]

"Hester!" cried Rob, setting down her bowl of blancmange. Bruce ungratefully called all the food prepared for him during these days of feverish tendencies by one generic name—"softness."

"It is Hester, actually," she cried. "And Dr. Fairbairn is driving down the street; I wonder he didn't overtake you."

"Not while he continues to drive Reliable," laughed Frances. "Reliable makes his daily visits in time, but he doesn't overtake many people."

"Well, Hester, it's very nice to see you coming up the hill unexpectedly, as if you were a Fayre maiden, and not a daughter of Gotham!" said Rob welcoming her friend.

"I had to come out—I'm going back early, so don't be frightened," said Hester. "I saw in the paper an account of Bruce Rutherford's splendid act, and that your cousin was burned out, and I couldn't rest one more day without finding out for myself how bad everything was."

"Pretty bad," said Rob, raising her voice slightly to be sure it reached Bruce on the dining-room couch. "We have Bruce here, being nursed by Basil, and bothering the Greys,—tended by everybody. Cousin Peace is here, of course. And we have adopted a child, more or less—more or less adopted, I mean; not more or less a child. Altogether this has been an eventful week for us." [88]

"It certainly sounds so!" cried Hester, looking at Rob hard, not knowing whether to take her seriously.

"You go into the dining-room; Basil and Wythie and Prue and France are there, burning incense around our martyred Bruce—as though he hadn't had enough of burning! I'll open the door for the doctor, who is tying his horse, and follow you," said Rob. She came in, bringing Dr. Fairbairn, whose six feet two of height, and proportionate bulk always seemed to fill up the little grey house in every crevice.

"Is this a bee?" demanded the doctor as he entered, pulling off his driving-gloves with a light chafing of each hand as he stripped it, and glancing around at the five girls.

"Two B's, doctor; two thirds of Battalion B, but there's no chance for anything but the busiest sort of idleness in this house, since Bruce took possession of it, with his wounded hands,—to drop into [89] a poetical strain," said Rob.

"Dr. Fairbairn is going to let me decamp on Monday, aren't you, doctor?" hinted Bruce.

"If you will promise to take proper care of yourself. One would suppose he might be reasonably contented here, now wouldn't he?" added the doctor, looking around the pleasant room.

"Oh, well, I may be a B, but I don't want to be a drone," said Bruce. "I can take lectures with my bandages on. A little too long of this halcyon weather and I'd be good for nothing, smothered in honey, like an unworthy B." And Bruce's eyes rested lovingly on the Grey mother that moment entering.

Hester had been looking so preoccupied all this time that Wythie noticed it.

"Hester has something to tell us," she said.

"I'll take Bruce up-stairs and bandage him afresh, and Miss Hester can disburden her mind while we are gone," said Dr. Fairbairn.

"If you wouldn't mind listening, you are the very ones whom I most want to hear what I have to say—if I have courage," added Hester, with a sudden unusual shyness.

Dr. Fairbairn settled back into his chair with a surprised look at the girl. [90]

"I can sit here exactly fifteen minutes," he said, consulting his candid looking watch.

"I told you, Rob, about that crippled child that I saw in the tenement," Hester began. Rob nodded. "And I told the others Greys and Bruce," Rob said.

"I have been thinking hard ever since, and wondering how to help him," said Hester. "It seemed to be impossible till I suddenly remembered to find out how much it cost to support a child, and then I found it a simple matter, after all. I hate society, I—oh, Rob knows; I didn't mean to talk about that. But I got mother and father to say that I might drop certain things which I never wanted to do in the first place, and use the money they would cost for that boy. I couldn't get him into a hospital, because he was incurable, so I put him somewhere to board—in the country—till I could do better. Then it struck me that it wouldn't cost very much to support a house for such children, and I talked to father. He was respectful to my plans at last. He had always laughed me aside, because he thought I was full of notions, just a dissatisfied young girl. But he told me in this talk I had with him that if I would go slowly and sanely he would help me every step of the [91] way; that he couldn't possibly object if I wanted to lead a useful life, instead of a merely pleasant one—not that this life wouldn't be pleasanter than playing all the time! I have a little money that is all my own, and father will help me. I should like to hire a house and a housekeeper, and put into that house as many incurably crippled children as we could afford. And I'd like them to have a good doctor's care, so that, though they were incurable, they might be helped as much as they could be. And I should like this home to be in Fayre, where the Greys could help me, and watch over it. Besides, this is where I learned so much that I should like to have the Home where the atmosphere of the little grey house could flow over and around it."

Hester paused, quivering with excited eagerness, embarrassed that she had revealed her innermost self to such a circle of listeners. But it was a circle of the right sort. Dr. Fairbairn arose, with a mist on his spectacles. He walked over to Hester and took both her hands. "My dear, good, earnest child," he said, "I admire you and respect you. You have thought of a beautiful thing, beautifully conceived and it seems to me simple and practical. Everything can not [92] be done in a day; let me turn over in my mind what you have said, and we shall see, we shall see."

"We will do all we can to help you, Hessie," said Mrs. Grey, her eyes beaming with longing to begin that instant to mother all the maimed waifs whom Hester could offer her.

"Father will help; I know he will," cried Frances, eagerly.

"Our father, too," said Basil quietly. "Some day he is coming to Fayre, not too long hence, I hope."

"It is lovely!" cried Prue, her imagination picturing vividly the attractive rôle of Lady Bountiful to forlorn and grateful childish hearts.

"I'll begin telling stories again, at once, to earn money for the support of one little incurable. I could earn enough to support one, if it were a small one, with not too big a hump, or whatever ailed her," said Rob, talking nonsense as usual to hide her deeper feeling. "And, Hessie, I am

proud to call you my friend!"

"I will be a specialist on little children's incurable diseases, and I will give my services to the Home!" cried Bruce, sitting erect with tumbled hair and his face glowing with genuine enthusiasm. "I have always been afraid that I might be a failure in my profession because I had income enough to live on without practising, but this will save me." [93]

He followed Dr. Fairbairn up-stairs to have his wounds dressed, and Hester looked from one to the other left behind.

"They were in earnest? They really did approve?" she implored.

"In entire earnest, and they approved profoundly," affirmed Rob. "This may be the birthday of good that shall outlast our day."

Hester caught her breath. "If only I can do something!" she murmured.

CHAPTER SIX [94]

ITS LEAN-TO ROOM

Bruce went away on Monday, with Basil and Bartlemy to support him, and with his arms and hands still bound up. He resolutely turned his back on the temptation to let his wounds serve as an excuse for prolonging days which had been among the pleasantest of his life, in spite of physical suffering.

Miss Charlotte had been persuaded by the council of all her friends to abandon indefinitely her intention of rebuilding her house. It was irreplaceable; nothing could restore to her the walls permeated with the love and associations of a lifetime, and there was room for her and need of her, as Mrs. Grey urged her to remember, in the little grey house. So, for that winter at least, the little house was the richer by another inmate, and the Greys set about fitting for her use the room in the lean-to, to which Rob had been wont to repair through her childhood and big-girlhood for [95] solitude and inspiration. It really was a dear room, although one could not stand erect in all parts of it to view its charms. On either side of the door by which it was entered sat a low rush-bottomed chair, with yellow stripes running around its grooved back much dimmed and worn by years of service. At each end of the room was a window; between the corner and one of these windows stood a mahogany bedstead, with rolling head and footboard of equal height. Beside the other window stood a high mahogany bureau, with carved columns unnecessarily upholding its swelled front upper drawer, and with two small drawers raising its top into a second story. Above this bureau hung an old gilt mirror, divided across its top by a strip of gilt framing a pleasing representation of two white houses facing a common, through which a walk, bordered by the stiffest of trees, mounted to the village church. The lean-to roof slanted rapidly down from these windows on each side of the room towards the south, but the few feet between the ceiling and the floor on that side were broken by two half windows, their tiny panes contriving to let in a little of the southern sunshine and breeze, and a glimpse of the apple-trees beyond. It really was a most lovable and harmonious room, and its quaintness seemed the proper setting for Cousin [96] Peace's sweet aloofness from the world of to-day.

Rob came alone to begin dismantling the room of its mementos of the time when she had been the Scheherazade of Fayre, and had told stories to the children for money which the Grey family had then so sorely needed. These mementos were the absurdities which Battalion B had showered upon her. The mottoes which Bartlemy had illuminated still adorned the walls; Rob smiled and then sighed as she took them down, one after the other—"Young Robin Grey came a-Courtin' We," "Plain Tales for the Bills," and other ridiculous sentiments which the boys had contributed for her to hang in her auditorium, so they declared, but which had hung here all this time, here where Rob used to come to prepare her stories. Battalion B's other contributions to her enterprise were also piled on the chairs and in the corners of this room—rattan rods, slates, primers, a pedagogue's cap, and an impossible false front of yellow flax, with its wide cotton parting; this Bruce had sent her.

Rob laid her treasures in the clothes-basket, amusement and regret written on her face. She was still young—just over the line, childhood not out of sight behind her, but its very nearness made it [97] worse to know that it was inaccessible. Those had been hard days, but they had been pleasant ones, and sixteen was a delightful age! Eighteen's two additional years made great differences.

Rob folded the false front down its parting and smoothed its flaxen locks meditatively. No shadow had come over the jolly comradeship that had been established between her and Bruce at their first meeting; he was still her boy friend, treating her with that fine mixture of consideration, perfect understanding and equality which is the ideal of American boy and girl friendship. But Rob felt quite sure that Bruce's chummy manner hid quite as much of another sort of affection for her as Basil quietly, but frankly showed for Wythie, and which Wythie accepted with her sweet, honest single-mindedness. Rob had no desire to exchange her most precious comradeship for love, and Bruce was too keen-eyed not to know that, and not to retain the good he had by the utmost vigilance, biding his time in the hope of making himself indispensable to Rob. Bruce was

nineteen; Rob felt sometimes, and for a brief moment as if she were drifting towards a trap, for she was a little girl at heart still, and shrank like a wild bird from a retaining hand.

"It is a great pity to be eighteen, and it's a greater pity that your friends have to grow up," Rob [98]
said aloud, depositing the false front on the top of her collection in the clothes-basket, and recalling Bruce's expression when he left the little grey house on Sunday night to be ready for an early start to college Monday morning. He had bidden her good-bye with his old chummy pat on the shoulder, given with the finger-tips which protruded from the bandages of his right hand. All that he had said was: "Good-bye, Bobs Bahadur; you've been to me the trump you always are. I'll pour oil on the troubled waters for you if ever you get into trouble—hot water, I suppose I could more appropriately have said. I don't suppose I'll ever have a chance to tend you wounded, as you did me, because Bobs Bahadur is a general that doesn't know defeat, but I'll read to you if you are laid up, and return my obligations in any other way, if I have the chance. A wounded hero might have worse nurses than you and Wythie, and Prue, too, between her pursuit of knowledge."

He had gone off laughing, speaking like a schoolboy, but though Bruce could control his tongue, and include Rob with the other two girls, he could not keep his eyes from regarding her with a [99]
look that told her there was only one girl in all the world for Bruce Rutherford.

"Bother such nonsense!" ejaculated Rob impatiently, shaking her shoulders as she saw her clouded face in the gilt mirror, below the village green and the white cottages.

"What nonsense, Robin?" asked Miss Charlotte's soft voice, and Rob turned towards her, glad for the moment that her cousin could not see her face.

"Only growing up, being a young woman, Cousin Peaceful," she said. "I was taking down these trophies of my story-telling days, the absurd things Battalion B used to send me, and I was thinking what good times we used to have, and what a pity it was that we couldn't be boys and girls forever instead of sober men and women."

"I haven't noticed any very great sobriety so far, Robin dear," remarked Miss Charlotte quietly. "Do you feel sorry to see the story unfolding for Wythie and Basil?"

"Oh, I hate it! No, I don't!" cried Rob. "I'm glad about it, of course—Wythie goes on as quietly as if she were a little rosebud opening—sunflower, would be a better simile, because she looks up to Basil in the most sunflowerish way imaginable. But it is rather horrid, though it is nice, now don't [100]
you think so, Cousin Peace?"

"I think Robin is not fully fledged yet," said Cousin Peace wisely, and Rob was silenced by the portentous little word at the end of her sentence.

Cousin Peace had firmly refused to consider becoming one of the family in the little grey house unless she were allowed to use the lean-to room which was never occupied; no one, she declared, should be disturbed by her coming, though Rob promptly reminded her that they were sure to be disturbed by her wherever she might be, for she was such a disturbing element. Rob was constantly caressing Cousin Peace by loving pretence of her being a great trial.

The Greys had all objected to giving Miss Charlotte the lean-to room, but when it was ready for her Wythie cried out in surprised delight: "Why, it's the very nicest room in the whole house!"

It was a dear little room. The old-fashioned, fine furniture remained in its place. Soft green and white short curtains framed the small paned windows, plain green carpet covered the floor, long boxes of flowers stood before the half windows on the south side of the room, under the lean-to, and a few good pictures hung on the straight sides of the walls. Though Cousin Peace could never [101]
see her surroundings, her senses were so delicate that one felt impelled to surround her with the finest beauty, beauty which she, more than most people, would have revelled in had she not been debarred from seeing it. But Rob said truly that "Cousin Peace's insight was much keener than most people's outsight"; it was hard to believe that she did not get all the colour and outline of every picture, flower, and sunset that came before her.

Over Miss Charlotte's bed Wythie had hung a fine photograph of St. Lucy, with her lamp and the palm of a martyr's victory. It was like Oswyth to remember the significance of St. Lucy's legend, her sacrifice of her beautiful eyes and her reward of others more beautiful than those which she had lost, and her name's meaning—light. To remember how peculiarly appropriate to blind Cousin Charlotte, whose inward vision revealed to her more than mere eyes could have shown, was the legend of Santa Lucia.

"It seems kind of quiet, like a place to be good in," said little Polly Flinders, surveying the result of the girls' work in the lean-to room with serious gaze, as she nursed Prue's old doll, Hortense.

It grew to be just that to all the Grey family. When annoyances came, when those days dawned [102]
which dawn for every one, in which nothing seems right and many things seem wrong; when nerves quivered and other people seemed suddenly aggressive and unkind, then Wythie, Rob, and Prue fell into the habit of creeping up to Cousin Peace's little lean-to room to be set straight.

"It is like having a domestic chapel," said Rob, who most of the three was subject to perturbed spirits and the variability, which, she said herself, was due to the reddish shade of her bright brown hair.

Little Polly Flinders loved dearly to crawl off into the corner, as far under the lean-to as the low

rocking-chair, which had served all the Greys in turn, would go, and quietly to sit rocking Hortense, watching Miss Charlotte with awe-struck eyes that never got to the end of the charm and the lessons of that gentle face.

It became Polly's task to water the flowers in the boxes under the windows in the lowest dip of the lean-to, because she most easily of any of the inmates of the little grey house could crawl up to them as they thirstily awaited her. Perhaps it was because Polly was so faithful to them, perhaps because Charlotte Grey loved them so dearly, but for some reason the flowers in the [103] lean-to room blossomed as no others in Fayre seemed to blossom, and filled the air with the sweetness of mignonette, heliotrope, and roses, brightening the quiet room with their glad colours.

Prue came home one afternoon with a face that would have betrayed her perturbed state of mind to her family had there been any one about to have seen it. But her mother had gone to Aunt Azraella's, Wythie and Rob were out, Lydia sat in the kitchen darning long black hose to a wailing accompaniment, and Kiku-san was too sleepy at that hour to be observant of Prue's expression.

But the instant she crossed the threshold of the lean-to room, Miss Charlotte dropped her knitting—as usual she was making soft wrappings for little babies—and said: "Why, Prudy, dear girl, what has happened?"

"No one ever sees things as quickly as you do, Cousin Peace!" exclaimed Prue, taking off her hat before the landscape mirror, and lightly "fluffing" her golden hair before she took the low stool opposite Cousin Peace. "There hasn't anything really happened, Cousin Charlotte, but there is a chance for something to happen."

"There usually is," remarked Cousin Peace, resuming her knitting. "Fourteen chances of sixty [104] minutes each, at the very least, in each day, and I think we may as well count them as twenty-four, because the greatest event of my life was that dreadful fire, and that happened in the night."

"Yes, but I mean that I have a chance, right here in my hand, for something nice to happen to me, and I'm afraid mama won't let it happen," said Prue dubiously.

Miss Charlotte reached over and touched the letter that Prue held.

"What is it all about, Prue?" she asked, leaning back again.

"First of all, Cousin Peace, do you think it is so very dreadful to be ambitious?" asked Prue.

"I think it is very dreadful to lack ambition, Prudy. I think it all depends on the direction one's ambitions take," returned Miss Charlotte.

"Mama warns me all the time not to be ambitious, to be content—I think she means humdrum," said Prue. "Of course there is no one half as good as mama, but just think a minute, Cousin Peace. She married early, and she has been swallowed up in her home, living for us and for poor papa. Now, couldn't a woman be good and happy if she was called to a different life? Is this the only way to be good?"

"Prue, that is a foolish question, because you know quite well that a great many people are being [105] good, in a great many different ways and places," said Cousin Peace. "Just what have you in mind? Don't you think you had better tell me exactly what you have to decide? What is the text of your address?"

"Yes, it is this that has set me off, but I think of these things a good deal," said Prue slowly. "This is a letter from Hester Baldwin. She knows I want dreadfully to go to New York for music, and drawing, and languages, and such special studies. She has told me that her father can get me into a perfectly fine school—I think I mean a fashionable school," Prue interrupted herself to say, with the honesty that was a Grey characteristic. "She says that they would be delighted to have me spend the winter with them, with the Baldwins, Cousin Charlotte, who entertain and go out a lot, and where I should have a chance to meet the people I want to know, and to see the life I want to see—Oh, I know mama will say no!" Prue broke off with almost a sob.

"Prue, you are but sixteen," began Miss Charlotte.

"Just at the age when impressions are keenest!" cried Prue. "It would do me heaps of good! Don't [106] disapprove, Cousin Charlotte! Please don't! I want you to make mama see it my way."

"My dear little Prudy, come nearer; put your head on my lap. There!" said Cousin Charlotte, running her long fingers through the hair that glistened like spun gold between them. "Now, dear, listen to me. You are getting a good education in Fayre; better, very possibly, than you would have in that fashionable school—certainly as good as one could ask. Look at the question honestly, Prudence, and as a truthful girl tell me if I am not right when I say that I think you are far better off to be denied this doubtful opportunity that has come to you. You have good society in Fayre; the companionship of gentlemen and gentlewomen, and it is society within the scope of your income to go into and to receive in your turn. In New York you would meet well-bred people too, dear, because the Baldwins would not admit other into their home, but fashionable people are not necessarily well-bred; as soon as you went beyond the Baldwin's immediate circle you would probably find many things less satisfactory than they are here. This is an age in which notoriety is mistaken for fame, and success is measured by a standard very like the circus posters

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which adorn the barns around Fayre in June. You have been taught by example and precept that success is not always measured by results, but is always measured by the end for which one works and lives. Dear Prue, keep your ideals; never for one moment lose your hold on the vision of perfection in character and the ends for which you labour. It is a dream which brings its own fulfilment, if not in outward surroundings, at least in the character of the dreamer. Your mother fears, dear Prue, your tendency to be attracted by glitter and by the noise of plaudits which are not the echo of truth. Neither of the other girls will be drawn away from their poise of mind, which enables them to distinguish relative values very exactly. But you, my Prudy, are less content, and your mother wants you to find happiness within yourself, since outward belongings never give it."

"But, Cousin Peace, I only want to see and be seen; I can't help knowing what I look like, and I want to use my gifts in a larger field," said Prue, very low, and rather glad that her cousin could not see her handsome face as she claimed its possession. "Now, do you despise me?"

Miss Charlotte laughed. "My dear, my dear, my dear!" she cried. "It is very natural to want to see and to be seen, though it does sound a little odd to hear you claiming beauty so frankly. But, [108]
Prudy, don't you expect to use your eyes to good purpose, wherever you are, and is it a little thing that your bonny face will give pleasure to your loved ones? I am afraid you want an audience, my little cousin, but remember that anything outside doesn't matter seriously; it is the close heart things that count, especially to women. I don't mean to underrate your gift of beauty, Prue, nor to have you underrate it, but don't overrate it. Wythie is very sweet and pretty, and Rob's charm exceeds her good looks, which are not insignificant. You have fallen into the Grey heritage—that's all. The Greys are usually more or less handsome. But that does not necessitate foolish ambitions. There is another side to this plan of going to New York for the winter which does not seem to have occurred to you. You would be cultivating tastes which you have not the means to gratify. You have a comfortable, dear little old home, Prudy, as much of this world's goods as you need, but you could not maintain the habits of the girls whom you would meet in that fashionable school, not for one month. Can you afford a great many expensive dresses, carriages, flowers, theatre tickets unlimited, all the costly nothings that make up tremendous [109]
sums in a season? And if you can not, why should you want to make yourself miserable by acquiring tastes which you have no reason to suppose that you can ever gratify? If you are vaguely restless now what would you be after a winter in that atmosphere, to which, at first, you would take only too kindly?"

"I could manage," said Prue. "They would not know what I could afford."

"Don't you think, Prue, that is not quite honest?" suggested Cousin Peace gently. "Don't you think upright, self-respecting honesty demands that one should take that place in the world which belongs to him? And common sense will tell you it is the only way to be happy. I don't mean to preach, my dear, but when you look around you and see how many people are false to their ideals, and sink to incredible baseness for the love of display, it seems to me that when one is but slenderly equipped with money it is an obvious duty to safeguard one's self by cultivating simple tastes, and by living with perfect integrity on that basis which is his rightfully, striving of all things for contentment. I do not approve of your feeding your love of luxury, your desire for a wider field, even though I can easily forgive you for knowing that you are a remarkably pretty [110]
girl. You should not accept Hester's invitation, Prue; you should stay in your own place until you are old enough to carve your way through to what you want, and by that time I hope very much that you will see how lovely it is to live in the simple, noble, unworldly atmosphere in which you have been born and bred. If I were you I wouldn't ask my mother to let me go to Hester this winter."

"There wouldn't be any use in my asking her if you disapprove," said Prue, half tempted to resentment, though she liked to be preached to by Cousin Peace.

"There wouldn't be if I did approve, you rebellious child," smiled her cousin. "Mary would never expose her baby to the danger of having her golden head filled with the sort of ambition which leads to bitterness of soul." Cousin Peace stroked the golden head very kindly as she spoke, and Prue lifted it with a sigh.

"Worldiness is beautiful to think about," she said, "but I wonder if worldliness isn't rather splendid to live? I can't help thinking it would be fine to enter a vast room, magnificently attired, and hear people catch their breath and whisper: 'There's the beautiful Miss Grey!'"

Miss Charlotte laughed long and merrily. "Prue, you are just a little girl after all, and in spite of [111]
your great height! You haven't changed at all since the time that you used to get on that ragged old silk from the attic and trail about playing you were Mary of Scotland. Do you remember how you used to add: 'Before she was beheaded,' when we asked who you were, and you used to say: 'Mary Queen Scots'? I think I needn't have preached such a long sermon to you, if you have only such a childish ambition as that!"

"Who's talking of ambitions?" cried Rob in the doorway. "Here is Polly going to have a birthday next week and be nine years old, and I have found out that her ambition is to have a lovely doll, all her own, so that she can feel that her child is not an adopted one, like Hortense."

Rob came in, all fresh and glowing from the out-of-doors. Miss Charlotte put out her hand and Rob dropped Polly's little hand to clasp it.

"What are your ambitions, Robin Redbreast?" asked Cousin Peace, using Rob's childish nickname.

"I believe I haven't one; isn't it disgraceful?" cried Rob. "Only to be happy, happy, with Mardy and the girls—and you, dearest Cousin Peaceful—in the little grey house, forever and ever without change or decay."

"Dear Robin!" murmured her cousin. "If only that might be! But your ambition may be, it *will* be realized, for love is eternal." [112]

"Oh, yes! I believe I am ambitious to resume my story-telling successfully, to help Hessie's little cripples," added Rob with a light pressure of her cheek on Miss Charlotte's hand as her only answer.

CHAPTER SEVEN [113]

ITS AMBITIONS

Prue laid before her mother the proposition from Hester Baldwin which it seemed to the girl herself one that no one could possibly refuse. Mrs. Grey did not entertain it for a moment. "The Baldwins are charming people, dear," she said quietly, as she folded Hester's letter and returned it to its envelope. "If you had no home I should be thankful to have you received into theirs. As it is, and considering that the home to which you would return is such a simple one, I think you would get more harm than good from the school of which Hester speaks. Your place is in the little grey house, my Prudy, and in the little Grey family; it would be too small a family by one if you left us."

Prue did not urge the point; there never was the slightest use in urging Mrs. Grey to do something upon which she decidedly made up her mind in the beginning, but the girl's beauty was clouded for some days by the shadow of her dissatisfaction. [114]

When Hester came out to spend a few days before Christmas Prue hoped that she might convert her mother to other views, but Hester was so engrossed with her project of founding a home for crippled little children that she had forgotten her plan for Prue.

"They tell me that, though he is incurable, the poor little fellow I have sent out to Jersey really is better!" cried Hester almost the moment that she arrived. "Only suppose there were twenty of them!"

"Five dollars a week—two hundred and fifty a year, five thousand a year—Oh, Hester, I'm afraid you will have to get on with less than twenty little cripples. You can't afford so many!" cried Rob.

"Nonsense, Rob! It wouldn't cost nearly five dollars a week apiece if we had them all in one house, and weren't paying board for them, but had a housekeeper, and made a fund for them all together," retorted Hester.

"I'm afraid it would be a sinking fund," remarked Wythie quietly.

"It can be done; only give me the chance!" cried Hester.

"We will give you a chance!" cried Rob. "I'll announce immediately that I will resume story-telling to the Fayre children. It won't be much, but it will enable you to afford one more cripple, anyway." [115]

"I think we might have a costume entertainment; our attic is full of the loveliest things," said Prue.

"Why, Prue, how did we all happen to forget those venerable costumes up-stairs!" exclaimed Wythie. "We can give something really worth while."

"It would be no end of fun," said Frances slowly; she had dropped in at the little grey house and had been kept for luncheon. She was wondering if the Grey girls did not remember the frolic they had had in those antiquated garments on the last night of their father's life. She saw Rob's lips draw a little at the corners as she smiled, and she knew that her "Patergrey's" "son Rob" was thinking of that night.

"It would be a frolic for us, but what form could the affair take that people would come to it? You mean to sell tickets to it?" Rob asked.

"Why, of course; we mean it to earn money to give Hester another cripple," laughed Prue.

"Make it a dance to which everybody must come in costume, and for which they must buy tickets for the privilege of coming," said Frances, whose practical mind always was quick to plan details. "We will lead the dancing, and do a costume gavotte, or something—Let's see—three Greys, Hessie and I are five girls, and Battalion B and Hessie's cousin are four boys. We'll get three more girls and four more boys, and we'll practise an old-time dance; we can make it lovely. And—why not?—let's have the dance preceded by a short concert of old-time songs. Mama will lend our house, I'm sure of that, and we could have the nicest kind of an affair." [116]

Hester fairly beamed with joyous excitement. "Why, what has made you girls so perfectly angelic

this morning?" she cried. "You have always been interested, but not so ready charged to go right off at a touch as you are now. If Rob would tell stories for the Home this winter, and you would have this entertainment—why, we could take two more children at once! It seems as though I could not wait to carry out this beautiful plan, and I can hardly believe it when I see that it really begins to look like a possibility."

"It's getting to be a probability, Hester," said Rob. "One thing that has fired our zeal is Dr. Fairbairn's report on it. He has been talking about it here, and he has found several people deeply interested, while the dear old man himself is enthusiastic. Then Aunt Azraella, of all people under the sun, has inspired us with courage. She said the other day that if we proved to be in earnest, and she could be shown that this home for incurable little waifs stood a chance of being an accomplished fact, she might help it. I could hardly gasp out my answer, but if she can be interested in the scheme it could be put through, for Aunt Azraella has a good deal of money, we think—we never knew how much she really had." [117]

"Come here, my beloved Feather-bed!" cried Wythie as Kiku-san swung into the room, so big, and white, and fluffy that Hester laughed aloud at the appropriate name.

Before the golden eyed cat had risen from the toilet which he immediately sat down to prepare when Wythie called him, a clear, delicate sound of singing floated in through the door, a high, sweet, childish treble, fine as a gossamer thread of sound, but beautifully true. It sang "Annie Laurie," by no means an easy task for a childish singer, without a false note or a break, and when the song was ended the same voice took up "Oft in the Stilly Night," which it sang with the same charm. [118]

The five girls listened, breathless, Rob with uplifted finger of warning.

"That's little Polly Flinders," she said when the lovely little voice died away into silence. "She is in the lean-to room, singing to Cousin Peace. It is the prettiest companionship imaginable. Little, old-fashioned, quiet Polly, and lovely, blind Cousin Peace. Polly steals away to her at every opportunity. I wish I could paint the picture: that sober, pale faced child on her stool, with her new, birthday dolly, at the feet of the blind woman, with the saintly face, and the lean-to room, with its old furniture for the setting of the picture! Polly worships at her feet, figuratively and literally. The child sings exquisitely. Mardy, Wythie and I—and Prue, I suppose, only she hasn't discussed it with us—want her educated in music. She has decided talent, and she sings quaint, unchildlike old songs which she has learned from her mother, so she says, but I'm sure Mrs. Flinders' tired, hard voice never sung them as Polly does. We love to hear her——"

"Rob," interrupted Wythie, "fancy Polly in an old-time gown, singing her songs at our entertainment!"

"The very thing!" cried Rob and Frances together, while Hester choked Wythie in a rapture of gratitude. [119]

"Well, you have had an idea worth having, Oswyth!" cried Rob. "And it might be of use, later, to Polly. There are so many things to be done, I begin to wish we were rich. I want to help Polly—to tell the truth, 'way down in the bottom of my heart, I care more for giving talented girls a chance than I do for cripples—forgive me, Hessie! And I wish I could found a home in Fayre for the homeless animals in the New York streets, and I'd like to brighten up the lives of girls who have no fun, with an occasional concert or theatre ticket. Oh, dear; I believe a million would not go far!"

Prue looked disconsolate. "And I want fine things and a million just for myself!" she said. "What shall I do if you are all going to turn saints or philanthropists?"

Wythie laughed. "Poor Prudy, it would be trying to live with a family given over to good works exclusively," she said. "But we are not quite saints, nor even philanthropists. What's the difference?"

"The philanthropist does good from purely humanitarian motives, natural pity, while the saint works from supernatural motives," said Prue promptly and triumphantly. "You can't catch me, Miss Oswyth; didn't we have all that in a lecture lately?" [120]

Saints or philanthropists—or a little of both, which these girls were—the five young creatures worked with a will for the object in view, and the plan that they had hit upon that morning. Hester even cut short her visit to go back to New York to work for it at that end, and wrote what she described as "a chortle and not a letter," to tell the Fayre girls that she had sold a hundred and eight tickets in four days, tickets that brought two dollars each—"So there's another cripple for us already!" wrote Hester at the end of her letter; wrote in such a hasty, tremulous way that a big blot, representing her joyous excitement, crowned the H of her signature, like a black king in checkers.

Rob's audience for her story-telling was secured without any difficulty, for most of the children who had heard her first series wanted to hear these new tales, and their little brothers and sisters had grown up in the meantime to a size that added them to her hearers. She sold forty-five course tickets, at five dollars apiece, and was to begin the story-telling after New Year's. So that while the preparations for the concert and dance were going on, Rob's mind was additionally burdened by the preparations for the storytelling. [121]

Her first set of twenty stories was to be from Grecian history and Grecian mythology; she tried to

concoct them in her mind while she made ready the room in which they were to be told. When she had first told stories to the children of Fayre, Mrs. Silsby had lent her big parlour for the enterprise, but now that the master of the little grey house had gone away from it forever it had a room to offer its bravest daughter, a room upon which she had a special claim.

On what Mrs. Grey called "the morning side of the house," opposite the dining-room, was the quaint old room, originally intended for the kitchen of the little grey house in the days when a kitchen was also the dining and living-room.

It was a large room, consequently; the only one on that side of the house, and it had been Sylvester Grey's special sanctum. In it he had laboured long on the invention which, with the house, had been his sole but sufficient legacy to his family, the invention upon which Roberta, his "son Rob" had helped him for many long hours between her thirteenth and her seventeenth year.

The dear old room, with its high wainscotting, narrow cupboards, and immense fireplace, had [122]
been left as its master had quitted it, except that the models of the machine and his books had been set in order and no longer lay piled over the rush-bottomed chairs as they had been when they were daily used by the thin, nervous hands which for a year and a half had been folded in rest.

Now Rob was to take this room for her auditorium, and she had assumed the task of preparing it. After all there was not much to be done; when it came to the point neither Rob nor her mother could bear to make more than absolutely necessary changes. The tall book-cases still stood there with their contents, the books which Sylvester Grey had most used; dignified scientific books in one, the well-worn Thackeray and a few other novels and a few shabby looking poets in its mate. They would not be in the way of seats for forty-five children; Rob was sure that her little hearers could easily squeeze into the chairs in which, judging by her first experience, they would not stay. She knew that they would crowd around her knees, and hang upon her arms, drinking in the story as if it were a syrup which might flow past them if they were not close enough to catch it at its source.

"There isn't much to be done, Mardy," said Rob looking up to her mother from her knees as she [123]
straightened a file of magazines in the bottom part of one of the cases.

Mrs. Grey aroused herself by an effort from the thoughts into which she had fallen.

"I was thinking how much had been done, Rob, and how much was done with forever," said her mother.

"It is all right, Mardy," said Rob quickly. "I feel more and more sure that it is all right. Much as we miss him it was so beautiful to slip away in the moment of assured triumph that we would not have it otherwise, would we?"

"No, dear; very likely we wouldn't if we had time to remember to be unselfish if the chance came to get him back—but, oh Rob 'son Rob,' the first impulse would not be unselfish!" Mrs. Grey's voice quavered over her words, though she bravely smiled.

Rob scrambled to her feet, and went over to put her arm around her mother.

"I can't help remembering how the first money I earned story-telling went to introduce the bricquette machine to the world, and now, thanks to the machine, I am going to be able to tell stories for a charity," said Rob "let us call this room yours and mine, Mardy, as it used to be [124]
Patergrey's and mine, and let us creep away from the others sometimes, and come here for little cosey talks. I feel more like little Rob here than anywhere else. This room makes me forget my eighteen years and five feet six."

"Do you want to forget them, Rob? Your life seems to me so ideally simple, so lightheartedly happy, that I thought you were glad you were no longer that little Robin that used to perch on my knee." Mrs. Grey looked at Rob sharply as she spoke, and Rob looked her squarely in the eyes, with her changeable face flashing into smiles. "She was a nice, dreaming, sunny little Robin, Mardy, but I am as blithe as a blackbird now, so don't imagine the hand of time lies heavy on me yet. Only you know I never did want to be a woman," said Rob. "I think it is so very lovely to be vastly young. Coming events cast their *shadows* before, you know; they don't cast rays of light. The present is nice." Rob laughed as she spoke, but her eyes were wistful.

"Your future will be 'nice' too, Rob dearest," said her mother. "Somehow, I don't fear for you."

"There doesn't seem to be much plot in our lives, Mardy. Just a little income, just a little house, just a little work, considerable play— and so the Grey days drift along, only they're not grey days [125]
in any but a cognominal sense. Now, Mardy, wasn't that a lovely word to have made up just as it was needed, with no malice, nor aforethought?"

"Very lovely, Rob—Listen! Why here are the boys already!" cried Mrs. Grey interrupting herself.

"Goodness! Can it be late enough for them?" cried Rob darting out to give the Rutherfords welcome though the front of her waist was all dust from the books which she had been hugging, and her hair was more rebellious than usual from the stooping and climbing which she had been doing, loosening hairpins that were only too ready at all times to escape.

"How's the fancy-dress ball progressing?" cried Bartlemy the instant the door was opened. He had unexpectedly developed more interest in the plan than either of the other boys, a fact which

he himself explained by saying that it appealed to his artistic sense.

"It's going to be the loveliest thing!" cried Prue enthusiastically.

"And the date is fixed for Twelfth Night," added Wythie. "There is something in the ring of that name that seems to set off the costumes."

"The very night!" cried Basil. [126]

"How are the burns, Bruce?" asked Rob.

"Nearly burned out. How many listeners to the stories have you secured? Did they pay in advance?" asked Bruce, kissing Mrs. Grey's cheek, as all three boys always did when they came home, and stroking the hand which Miss Charlotte had given him.

"Forty-five, actually!" announced Rob, with exclamation marks in her voice. "Two hundred and twenty-five dollars down! And Hester must have nearly as much more, by this time, for the tickets she has sold to the entertainment. We are going to sell lots here in Fayre when we begin, and we have hardly any expenses. I gasp at the thought of the wealth we are amassing for the crippled children with very little effort and hardly any planning."

"It's a good beginning; enough to make some one ready to help you with an endowment fund, or the like, for, of course, you will have to have such help," said Basil, the careful one.

"'Little drops of water, little grains of sand,'" chanted Prue.

"Just so. You must let me look at your costume, Prue, and see if it is all right," said Bartlemy. "When can you have a rehearsal?"

"We shall rehearse to-morrow night, but not in costume," said Wythie. "We waited for you, [127] Battalion B, to be here. Hester is coming out, and her cousin."

"To stay over Sunday?" asked Bruce.

"Hester will; Lester Baldwin goes back on the last train—unless he misses it, then we shall have to send him up to you boys," said Rob. "You don't look hospitable."

"Yes, we are," remonstrated Basil. "Send him to us in any case, girls; it is ridiculous to let him go back on that crawling train when he might as well have a pleasant Sunday with the crowd. You approve of him, don't you?"

"Oh, he's very nice, Basil; you will like him," said Wythie in her kindly way that explained Basil's confidence in her indifference to the new friend. While Rob, on the contrary, smiled provokingly and said: "I haven't met so nice a youth in many a day."

"Not since we met our nicest of all boys," said Wythie quietly, for she had no liking for that sort of teasing.

"What a blessing you are, Wythie!" ejaculated Bruce fervently.

"Hester told me that Lester Baldwin admired Frances very much," said Prue. Her attempts at [128] casual remarks were usually transparent and not very successful.

"Shows his sense!" commented Bruce.

"Frances deserves admiration," said Rob.

"She is very nice, of course," said Prue with her most grown-up air, which always made her seem decidedly less than sixteen. "But I don't think Frances is striking at all; she is only just a little pretty."

Basil and Bruce laughed and tweaked tall Prue's ear in the elder brotherly way of theirs which always tried her; it really was trying to have a B at each ear simultaneously. "Pretty Prudy!" they said together.

The two older Rutherfords made it their business to check Prue's vanity, which they considered the only defect in any Grey girl.

But Bartlemy stoutly defended her. "Don't you mind those two moles," he said, seeing Prue's cheeks reddening and her eyes dangerously near tears. "They don't know how artists feel about beauty. I can't imagine giving Frances more than a kindly thought when there's a tearing beauty in sight."

"Bart, have some caramels; I made them to-day," interposed Rob, offering the boys the result of [129] her labours. "Taffy's bad for the digestion, so I never have any."

For in her turn Rob believed in checking Bartlemy's manifest desire to offer incense to Prue's handsome face; at least till she was long past sixteen, and somewhat less appreciative of that face herself.

CHAPTER EIGHT [130]

The rehearsal for the Twelfth Night entertainment went off so well that the double quartette most interested in it were greatly elated.

Eleanor Dinsmore, Edith Hooper, Helen Lacey three pretty girls—as well as Fayre girls—had been asked to complete the number for the gavotte, and their brothers and cousins and friends, four in all, had gladly added themselves to the Rutherfords and Lester Baldwin to make up eight men. Rob had had an inspiration, and had written words to be sung by the dancers to a beautiful old French gavotte air, as they moved through the stately figures of the charming dance. Even in ordinary modern dress the effect was so exquisite that the few privileged people who looked on were enthusiastic. The young people began to plume themselves on accomplishing something really artistic, while the fear that the ticket purchasers would feel that their purchase was [131] equivalent to an outright donation, with no return to themselves, vanished like mists in the sunshine of the dancers' perception of unhoped-for success.

The songs were not going to fail either. The Greys and Battalion B, with Frances, had sung together since their first meeting. Now Bartlemy's uncertain bass had deepened into the real thing, Basil's tenor had grown sweeter, and Bruce's barytone richer. Oswyth had a sympathetic, true little home voice, exactly like herself; Rob sang alto very well, and Prue's high soprano had grown stronger than when they first sang together rowing and working through that summer of the beginning of Greys' acquaintance with the Rutherfords. Frances had always sung well, and now Hester's rich, splendid alto was a real acquisition, while Lester Baldwin's tenor was stronger and higher than Basil's. It really was an unusual combination of voices, and long practise together, of most of the singers, made them know exactly how to bring out one another's best points, and made the voices blend quite beautifully.

It had not taken much persuasion to get Lester Baldwin to give up his intention of going back after the rehearsal, but to accept the Rutherfords' hospitality that night and take Hester back [132] Sunday evening.

Bruce glowered at Lester for an hour after he met him, then yielded to his personal charm, but still more to the charm of his marked preference for talking to Frances, and became cordial with a heartiness that surprised Lester. He did not know that it was not for what he had done, nor for what he was, but for what he had not done and for what he was not that Bruce Rutherford suddenly became his friend.

Sunday morning the three Greys and Battalion B carried off Hester and her cousin to the quiet church where the Grey girls had been carried in white draperies to be made little Christians in baptism—Very little and very reluctant ones.

They came out of church into a fine, cold winter rain which had threatened them on setting forth. It had kept Miss Charlotte and little Polly at home for a peaceful morning in the little grey house; it had served, with her cold, to retain Mrs. Grey at Lydia's side, for appetites attend on church-going, as a rule, and there was much to be done by those mother-hands which always smoothed out possible rough places, and made all kinds of comfort certain.

Aunt Azraella was not out either, which was a relief to the girls, who dreaded her probable [133] addition to them at dinner, for however gentler Aunt Azraella's diminution of health might make her, she still was not adapted to great increase of joy.

"Do you think," Rob asked as they gathered around the hearth after dinner, "do you really think, Mardy, that it would be unsuited to the day for 'we (twice) four, and no more' to go up into the attic and look over the chests and trunks of old clothing?"

"It would be Shintoism—ancestor-worship," said Bruce.

"Bruce, we have sufficient knowledge of the Eastern question to understand what Shintoism is without your foot-note," remarked Rob sternly.

"I think it would be perfectly proper to the day, dear, to go into the attic and see those old costumes, that is to the Sunday side of the day, but how about the weather side of the day? Wouldn't it be too cold for you?" Mrs. Grey stretched her fingers towards the fire as she spoke; she dearly loved warmth—of all sorts.

"We're not afraid of the cold, are we girls? Of course the boys are afraid of nothing," said Rob.

[134]

"Won't you walk into my attic?" said a robin to her mates.
"I have venerable garments that would fit up many crates.
"The way into my attic is up a winding stair,
"But, 'spite of cold, these garments old repay a journey there."

Rob chanted this effusion, and Battalion B arose as one body and echoed, as a refrain:

"But, 'spite of cold, these garments old repay a journey there."

Then the entire eight departed atticward with Polly and her doll, Roberta Charlotte, bringing up the rear.

"Go on, Wythie; I must put Polly's jacket on," said Rob, pausing at her chamber door. "Queer, that

little bodies take cold more easily than larger ones, which have more surface to catch cold on."

"What an absurd girl she is!" sighed grave Hester with supreme content in the qualities which she lacked and which Rob possessed in excess.

"She talks nonsense all the day long, and acts sense more than any one," said Wythie, with her loving smile.

Rob and Polly came quickly, the bunch of keys dangling from Rob's hand.

"We forgot these," she cried breathlessly. "We may get too cold if we try to look over all the clothes. Shall we omit the fantastic ones, Wythie, and get out only the serious ones, which we can use for the gavotte?" [135]

"Let us open the cedar chest first," said Oswyth, taking the key Rob offered her.

She laid back the lid and displayed its contents. In five minutes they were being shaken out of their folds and held up for inspection, big cloaks, fur-trimmed hoods, shirred with rattans, long veils, shawls, for this was the chest given over to materials which might attract moths.

"The beautiful things are in the trunks," said Prue. "We shall want the silks and embroidered muslins. Open this trunk, Wythie, please."

Oswyth opened it, and the girls drew a deep breath of joy over what even their first glimpse displayed.

"Oh, Frances, do you remember these?" whispered Rob, taking out a gown of 1776, and one of the Madison Era. "Do you remember the night we wore these?"

"Indeed I do, Rob," whispered Frances. "We must only remember now what a happy night that was, and be thankful that it was so—that special night."

"I think I'll wear this gown in the gavotte," said Rob, turning to the others. "That is if no one else wants it." [136]

"Ah, yes!" said Bruce involuntarily, and Rob knew that he too remembered her wearing it in their impromptu frolic nearly two years ago.

"Would this do, Bartlemy?" asked Prue, holding up a pale blue brocade over a quilted satin petticoat.

"It's beautiful, but better for Wythie or Frances. You ought to wear this." And Bartlemy drew out a yellow satin, overshot with white, and sweeping open down the front to display a paler yellow petticoat. "Here is a cloth-of-gold effect for a golden-haired maiden."

"We will make our audience play a game after the entertainment called 'The Search for the Golden Girl,'" suggested Lester Baldwin.

"And introduce Prue to them afterward as Miss Midas," added Hester. "My mother has a great-grandmother dress for me—crimson and silver."

"I'd like to have Oswyth wear this," said Prue looking well-pleased with her own allotment, and displaying a brocade of rosebuds on a blush ground.

"No," said Wythie. "That is lovely, Prudy, but I have a sentimental desire to wear something else. Eleanor Dinsmore and that gown have an affinity for each other." [137]

"We must try to select gowns that not only suit each wearer, but which contrast and compose well in the general picture," said Bartlemy.

"I know what Wythie wants to do! She wants to wear one of Oswyth Grey's gowns!" cried Rob.

"Her own?" asked Hester wondering.

"No, indeed; Oswyth Grey long dead and gone; our thrice repeated great-aunt. That is her trunk standing there." And Rob pointed to an ancient chest with a heavy, old-time lock. "She died when she was not much past twenty; there was a love-story, of course, about her, and we children have always felt the fascination of our vague knowledge of her history, especially Wythie. When she was a little girl she seemed greatly impressed by this kinswoman whose name she bore—I think, in a childish way, she must have had some cloudy notion of reincarnation."

"Might we see her chest?" asked Frances. "It sounds as if opening it would be like opening a volume of poems."

Hester shivered in spite of her effort to convince herself that she was warm. Prue noticed it, and was rather glad of an excuse for getting down to warmer quarters. [138]

"Hester is freezing," she cried. "Oswyth Grey's chest hasn't such splendid gowns in it as those we have seen; they're all simple muslins, delicately embroidered, except one heavy violet and white brocade—white, with violets strewn over it—which is the one Wythie will wear at the dance, if she wears any of them. Let's go down and get warm, all of us."

"Shall we? Are you cold, Hessie, Frances, little Rutherford B's, and Lester?" Rob asked, hesitating a little over the use of Lester Baldwin's name, though both he and Hester had protested against

formality.

"Well, I'm more nearly goose-flesh than one could possibly expect me to be," said Bruce.

"I confess that the wood-fire down-stairs might be spelled wooed, for it woos me strongly, though I should dearly love to see Oswyth Grey's chest opened," said Hester.

"Why, she's shivering as she speaks!" cried Rob. "Come, then my brethren. We might carry down these gowns we have selected. I'll lay them in Mardy's room to be tried on by the girls tomorrow. Hester must slip on hers to-night—oh, I forgot! Hester has her gown at home. We haven't [139] provided for the other two girls, but we didn't come up here intending to select gowns; merely to see them."

Rob was talking as she went on down the stairs, following her guests and Prue, Polly following her, as she always did. Her voice floated back to Wythie who had remained behind closing the trunks. She arose from her knees when the last key was withdrawn and looked longingly over to Oswyth Grey's chest, where it stood in a corner by one of the gable windows. She loved that chest and its vanished owner, whose kinship to herself she felt so strongly, the young maiden, about whom she knew really nothing but that she had loved and died—which, after all, is an epitome of all lives.

"Ah, well; I shall have plenty of chances to see you again, dear Oswyth," she said aloud.

She turned around and there was Basil, waiting for her.

"Why, you startled me, Basil," said Wythie, her colour rising. But she did not look in the least startled; it always seemed possible to Wythie that she might raise her eyes and see Basil, even when he was away.

"I thought perhaps you and I might stay behind long enough for just one peep into that other [140] Oswyth Grey's chest," said Basil. "Let me know her, too, Wythie."

Wythie crossed over to the chest without a word, and knelt to unfasten it. Then she threw back its lid, and looked up at Basil.

"There isn't much to see, but it has always seemed to me that there was much to feel in this chest," she said.

An odour of attar of roses, of lavender, of tonka beans, blended into an indefinable, sweet mustiness by more than a hundred years, arose into the young faces bent to inhale it. Soft muslins, fine with the fineness of the importations from India when broad-sailed merchantmen went out from New England ports, yellow with age, and daintily wrought with broidery, lay neatly folded before their eyes.

Beneath them, as Oswyth the second tenderly raised them, lay high-heeled, narrow slippers, a fan that had been brought from China long ago to the happy young girl whose cheeks' tint matched its mandarin's crimson robe, a white silk shawl that might have come with the fan, its knotted silken fringe and heavily embroidered flowers several shades more yellow than the delicate fabric. Neckerchiefs of soft mull, white and in colours lay there, ribbons, stained and faded by the years, a sampler, a bead bag, clocked stockings, and a great leghorn hat with its [141] plumes and gauze ribbons flattened by long lying. It was a young girl's chest, and its pathos spoke to Basil, the pathos of a light heart that early had ceased to beat, of brief life and long death.

Wythie lifted, one after the other, that other Oswyth's treasures, and at last raised from its box near the bottom of the chest the beautiful brocade which she wished to wear in the gavotte. Beneath it lay bed-linen, hemmed with the tiniest stitches, and table-linen with its "O. G." carefully wrought in its corners. And underneath all, in the very bottom, lay a few thin books, and a bundle of letters tied with a yellowed ribbon that might once have been either white or pale blue, and marked in the finest of old-fashioned writing: "From B. R. to O. G. Her all of life."

"B. R.?" exclaimed Basil. "Am I in this story, too, Wythie?"

"I never thought of those initials before," said Wythie, flushing to the uppermost line of her brow, "I have not opened this chest, not for ever so long—three years, it may be."

"You couldn't have thought of the initials then, Wythie, dear; I wasn't in your story as long ago as that," said Basil.

"I remember that Oswyth Grey's lover's name was Benjamin Raymond," said Wythie. "Poor little [142] greatest aunt—they are sad letters!"

She gently untied the discoloured ribbon and the letters fell apart in her lap as she sat back on her heels to look at them. From among them fell a bunch of flowers and lock of hair; the usual trivial mementos of greater values lost.

"The first ones are formal, but they were written happily; one can see that," said Wythie, as she unfolded a yellow sheet, handling its brown folds carefully, for age had made it very frail. "It's curious how the mood of the writer shows through the set phrases of that time."

"Nature and strong feeling break through stronger barriers than phrases, Oswyth, the second," said Basil, as he picked up the flowers. "Look," he added, "these flowers were waxed for their

preservation."

"Yes. I imagine Oswyth Grey did that, for her lover could never have sent her waxed flowers," said Wythie, lifting the sheet which had held them for so long that Basil might replace them. "The letters grew more frank and assured as they went on—some day we will read them. Then there was one reproaching my little greatest aunt for her hardness of heart, her cruelty after so long, [143] and then a last one bidding her farewell. It is quite pitiable. But this is the saddest thing of all." And Oswyth unfolded the sheet which bore on its outer fold the initials and the inscription that had lain on top of the packet of letters, like their epitaph as well as Oswyth Grey's. "See, she wrote this letter to him in reply to the reproach he had made her, knowing that he would never see it; it was never sent. Read it."

Basil read it. It threw no light on the cause of the lovers' parting, but it was a passionate protest against the distrust of her which her lover had expressed to that Oswyth, and a revelation of devotion and beauty of character that, after all the years, still palpitated with life. Oswyth Grey, the little Puritan, would not have poured out her soul thus had she not felt sure that no other eyes than her own would ever rest upon that paper.

"What a pity!" murmured Basil, gently folding the unsent letter in its brown creases again. His eyes were moist.

"She died not long after that the records show; he never knew. Isn't it a pity?" Wythie's lashes hid her downcast eyes as she fingered the papers absently. "I always felt that I ought to make it right to her, because I bore her name. I can't explain just what I have felt about her, though the feeling [144] is strong. Yet the dear girl has been quite happy for more than a century; I suppose we need not feel sad about her now. Here is a stanza written to her, signed B. R. It isn't remarkable, but it is enough to prove that her B. R. cared for poetry when many were indifferent to it."

Wythie looked up, smiling to show that the moisture on those lashes meant nothing, and offered Basil one more yellow page. He took it and read:

If there were other like to thee, my loved one,
Then might I love that other perfect she;
But since the world holds naught like thee, my loved one,
How can I choose but at thy feet to be?
For, save in this, thou hast no fault, my loved one,
That to my love thou prov'st thy obduracy.

Basil returned the verse without comment, and Wythie tied up again the packet just as that other Wythie had tied it so long before. But with the great difference that for this Wythie happiness just within reach seemed to fill the shadowy attic.

"You didn't care for B. R's poetry?" she said, bending over to replace the letters at the bottom of the chest.

"On the contrary, and I like him for writing it," said Basil. "Wythie, there will never come [145] anything between us? We shall not be parted as were this other B. R., and Oswyth Grey? I am still in college, but when I begin life you are coming to begin it with me in the Caldwell house, aren't you? We know you are, both of us, but I have been feeling lately that I wanted to hear you say it."

Oswyth trembled. She had known that Basil's first preference for her had grown into a devoted love, and she knew that she would have had no courage to face the years if they did not include Basil. Gentle Wythie had gone on to this moment without a fear, quietly unfolding without doubt or dread. But, after all, it meant so much, and for a moment the girl paused. Then she looked up into Basil's face. "It couldn't be otherwise, Basil, because it is just as Oswyth Grey wrote here: All of life," she said.

Basil bowed his head for a speechless moment. "God helping me this Oswyth shall never be unhappy," he said. Then a great joy seized him, and he was silent, holding back the expression of it, for Wythie's dove eyes looked up, half frightened, at the new, manly Basil beside her. And before either could speak Rob's voice rang out, and Rob's step came up the lower flight of stairs.

"Where are you two? Basil, Wythie, what has happened to you?" she called. "Have you fallen into [146] a trunk, and are we going to have a case of the Mistletoe Bough right here in the little grey house and our own attic?"

She appeared at the foot of the attic stairs, peering up through the gathering darkness.

"We opened Oswyth Grey's chest—Basil wanted to see its contents—and it took longer than we realized," said Wythie coming to the head of the stairs. "Here is her white brocade with the violets; I shall wear this in the gavotte."

Wythie's voice sounded unnatural; Rob pounced on her the moment she descended, and glanced at Basil, following her with his eyes alight as they had never been before.

"What have you been doing?" she demanded. "Reading Oswyth Grey's letters? Wythie, what has kept you? Weren't you cold?"

"Oh, no; it is as warm—" began Wythie.

"'As springtime, the only pretty ring time,'" supplemented Basil.

"Wythie, tell me!" insisted Rob.

"Not now; wait until to-night," said Wythie, and escaped with Oswyth Grey's white brocade all bestrewn with violets.

"If I have to wait until to-night there's nothing to wait for; I know this minute," muttered Rob. [147] Then she turned fiercely upon Basil.

"Basil, I thought we could trust you," she said.

"Nonsense, Rob, you knew quite well what was coming," retorted Basil with a quiet laugh of triumph.

"Does that make me like it?" she demanded. "My blessed Wythie! How do you expect me to go down again to the rest?"

"Shall I send Bruce up?" inquired Basil blandly.

Rob bolted for the back-stairs, to the calm atmosphere of Lydia till she should have regained sufficient composure to face her guests and the first romance of this generation in the little grey house.

CHAPTER NINE [148]

ITS TRIUMPH

When her young guests had gone, and the little grey house was quiet for the night, Mrs. Grey stood before the charred embers on the hearth, thoughtfully regarding the blackened scales, with their under edges still glowing, which lay all along the sides of the bits of logs remaining.

Kiku-san stirred, stretched his paws, lifted his head and remarked: "M-m-m-mmm?" in a cooing voice, at once welcoming and inquiring. Mrs. Grey looked up to see Wythie in her violet kimono. She held out her arms without speaking, for she knew what Oswyth had come to say.

Wythie sprang into the loving arms and nestled her head on her mother's shoulder.

"Basil wants—" she began.

"You, when the time comes, darling," whispered Mrs. Grey. "I suppose we have known that for a long time."

"Yes, but he said so," Wythie whispered back.

"And that alters it? Yes, a little. But I want it to be just as little as possible, my Wythie," returned [149] her mother. "We won't talk about it to any one outside the little grey house, and you and Basil will be just the same friendly, simple comrades you have always been. You are so young, dear, and Basil is still in college. But we understand, as we have understood all along, that by and by your friendship is to broaden and deepen into much more."

"It can't, Mardy," said Wythie.

"Ah, Oswyth, everything broadens and deepens with time. Youth feels tempestuously, but years bring profounder depths. You are too much a child to know the truth of what I say to you. Be a young girl still, my Wythie, and be happy. Basil is all we could wish him to be," said Mrs. Grey, speaking out of the knowledge of her years of sacrificial love and her widowhood.

"Then you are willing, you don't mind, Mardy?" murmured Wythie.

"I am very glad, dearest, and I believe my gentle girl is going to be a happy woman. I mind nothing now but that she should miss sleep and take cold. Go to bed, little daughter, and go to sleep. Waking or sleeping my very breathing prays for you and Robin and little Prudy."

Mrs. Grey kissed Wythie hastily and half pushed her from her. Wythie clung to her as she [150] returned the kiss, but went instantly away with her tear-wet face smiling. It was the mother, left standing beside the hearth, whose tears fell without the smiles. At last she stirred, sighed, stooped to pick up the fallen hearth brush, and stroked Kiku-san with the other hand.

"Of course I am glad, glad and thankful," she said, with only the white cat to hear. "But joy seems brief when one is a widow at forty-three, and mothers are selfish creatures." And this most unselfish mother brushed the ashes over the dying embers of the fire, looked at each window fastening, slowly put out her reading-lamp, and crept up-stairs like one that craved for rest.

Twelfth Night was not long in coming; it was to bring such a great event that it even successfully hurried the holidays out of the way.

Rob, watching Wythie jealously, saw no change in her except a greater sweetness and gentleness, and a deeper look of contentment in her brooding eyes.

"You see I am not very old, Rob, and Mardy says that I'm not to be formally engaged; only to go

happily on till the time comes to go happier further," explained Wythie.

"H'm!" ejaculated Rob, inconsistently exasperated by the fulfilment of her own wishes. "I don't know about the formality—we're not particularly formal as a family—but you're as much engaged as you can be, and I long to put you back into short dresses and braid your hair down your back." [151]

"And whip me soundly and put me to bed, like the old woman that lived in the shoe?" laughed Wythie. "Your voice sounds threatening. You silly Robin! You're much taller than I am. I doubt my having a monopoly of growing up, or——"

Wythie stopped suggestively, and Rob said hastily:

"Here comes Aunt Azraella, critically examining the boundaries of the path I dug around the clothes whirligig, out through the back yard towards her place. Her Aaron and I met at the fence. Poor Aunt Azraella; she looks older! She has her little black bag; I believe she is coming to render her account of the tickets that she has sold for to-morrow night."

"I went over to Mrs. Silsby's on my way home from market this morning," Mrs. Winslow said without preliminary on entering. "She is having her great parlours decorated beautifully, and her arrangement of the spectators' seats is perfect. I think it is safe to say that this will be the finest affair ever held in this place. I have seventy-four dollars here for thirty-seven tickets, and several people sent to me for tickets while I was out. Elvira could not find them; I had them all with me." [152]

Prue could not repress a tiny giggle at this excellent reason for Elvira's failure. But Wythie covered it by saying: "I can deliver them when I go out. Everybody is coming up on the same train this afternoon, Battalion B and the Baldwins; I am going to meet them after I have done a few errands. We have a dress rehearsal to-night up at Mrs. Silsby's. I can take the tickets to the people who sent for them, Aunt Azraella."

"Very well. I will send Aaron around with the carriage; you'll be too tired if you walk everywhere, and rehearse dancing to-night. I'll send the victoria, and you can bring the Baldwins and two of the Rutherfords home with you," said Aunt Azraella with her new consideration of the Grey's comfort.

"Thank you, Aunt," said Wythie. "Hester writes that there will be more than a car full of people from New York to-morrow—Oh, I do so hope the good weather will hold out!"

"My almanac says that we shall have fair weather for six days; this is the third day," said Aunt Azraella confidently; she pinned her faith to a certain venerable publication, withstanding frequent failures on the part of her prophet. "The good weather began with the change of the moon, which occurred at the right hour—shortly after midnight; this weather will hold." [153]

"If your almanac won't play us false this time I will ask no more of it," said Rob.

"It never fails," said Aunt Azraella with generous oblivion to facts. "If it makes what seem like mistakes sometimes it is owing to local currents, which cannot be foretold. Is your mother up-stairs? I want to see her and Charlotte."

"They are together, in Cousin Charlotte's room. You look serious, Aunt Azraella," said Rob.

"I feel serious, and I want to consult them about something serious," returned her aunt. "After this excitement is over you will know what it is about; I shall be guided by their advice."

"The best advice we ever got was from those two ladies, Aunt Azraella," said Rob. "I am sure you will not look serious after you get it."

"You don't know what you are talking about," returned Mrs. Winslow moving majestically away. [154]

Aunt Azraella's victoria brought up Hester, her cousin and Basil; Bruce and Bartlemy arrived on foot, and all the performers, except little Polly Flinders, went up to the Silsbys for their final dress rehearsal that night. They came back to the little grey house so excited by its result that there was no checking the flood of chatter till past one o'clock.

"This was Eleventh Night," as Prue suggested, and Twelfth Night, *the* night, followed as quickly as it could, coming into weather that fully justified Aunt Azraella's almanac-maker. Crisp, cold, clear, January sunshine—there could not be better weather for a revel.

The day sped in a whirl of excitement, a delightful day to all but Lydia's orderly soul. She could hardly be expected to approve it, since it included no meal at a normal time, and this disturbance was, besides, the prelude to a dance, which Lydia regarded with horror.

After a supper at half past five which none of the gavotteers, as Rob called them, wanted in the least, Aunt Azraella's carriage came to take them up to Mrs. Silsby's.

Frances flew out to meet them, and the flushed faces of the other three girl performers beamed on them as they descended. [155]

Mrs. Grey superintended the dressing-room with four maids to assist her. It was a trying office, with eight girls chattering like magpies, and eighty things to be done at once, admitting of no delay. The concert that was to precede the gavotte was to be costumed fantastically, and when the girls were ready one could hardly have said whether the picture they presented, huddled, laughing together, was prettier or funnier.

Wythie was a dear little Puritan maiden, in her grey dress and folded kerchief; Rob a brilliant fantasy in her ante-bellum gown with its hoops and sloping shoulders, and her lovely, rebellious hair ringletted from a tremendous back comb. Prue would not consent to being fantastic, so she looked beautiful in a pale green muslin of the empire style, with her golden hair filetted with gold and a great feather fan waving from her long-gloved hand. But the cream of them all was solemn little Polly.

The child was not pretty, but something gathered through her few sad years in the lonely home whence all the other children had departed, her frail health and active imagination, had written [156] itself on her sensitive, pale little face. Now her dilated eyes shone like stars; grey eyes they were, under black lashes, the sort that have a trick of looking black, but whose colour is hard to determine.

They had dressed her in a long gown, belonging to some Puritan child in the days when costumes not merely denied, but annihilated childhood. Polly's gown had a stiff long stomacher, its front was cut square, like a court lady's, and the heavy silk stood out around her figure, disdaining a hint of a droop. A round cap surmounted the pale brown hair which had been brushed smoothly back from the blue-veined brow, and yellow lace fell around the childish throat and tiny thin hands. There was something in the child herself, poor as her home had been, that exactly suited her quaint fineness of habiliment, and she stood, a quick breathing little poem, a picture of perfect harmony and of a quality that made every artist-eye that rested upon her flash with the perception of its values.

When the door of the dressing-room opened and its occupants came forth it was to encounter in the hall a long line of queer and pretty figures of other Fayre girls who were to compose the chorus, and big lads in the collars and coats of their ancestors, delightful foils to the girls' [157] brilliant colours. First and last Fayre, an old colonial town, possessed a goodly store of relics of the past, and there was no lack of material for costuming the concert.

While they were dressing the singers had been hearing carriage after carriage roll up the Silsby driveway, and depart, and when they peeped through a life-saving hole in the curtain, but for which they would have perished of curiosity, they saw the ample accommodations which Mrs. Silsby had provided for an audience already filled, and people beginning to station themselves standing at the sides of the long rooms, in the best positions now obtainable.

A small orchestra of harps and violins, 'cellos and bass viols, had been Mrs. Silsby's welcome contribution to the affair, and the concert began with an overture by it while the curtain slowly parted and rolled away, disclosing the thirty-five singers seated on the stage, the double quartette which, later was to dance the gavotte, in the front row, and little Polly, the soloist of the occasion, seated alone before them all. She did not seem at all frightened; the hand that Rob contrived to slip between the rounds of her chair for a little pressure on her shoulder, was not necessary.

Polly sat quite still, very pale, but not frightened, with an uplifted look on the pathetic little face, [158] with the big eyes staring upward, unseeing of the considerable audience. Miss Charlotte and Rob had told Polly that she was to sing for suffering children, without homes, friends, or childhood, and Polly's whole soul was bent on singing for them so well that all these blessings should be theirs at the close of the concert.

Choruses, quartettes, trios, double quartettes, followed each other on the programme, old-time songs and classics, bright, lively, sad, and patriotic. The audience applauded wildly, which was to be expected at an amateur entertainment. In this case the applause took on enthusiastic fervour from the real enjoyment which the music was giving; it was good in itself, and not "considering." It was a delightful surprise to hear the quality, the precision, the expression of these choruses and quartettes, for, when it comes to amateur music, given for charities, few of us can echo the sentiments of the gentleman in Punch, who replied to his hostess' inquiry as to whether he was fond of music: "Madam, I am not afraid of it."

At last came Polly's turn, and she arose at a signal from Rob and walked quietly down to the front [159] of the stage. No one applauded for fear of frightening the child, but the effect the little figure produced could be felt in the sudden stillness, together with a tension of interest.

A single violin played "Annie Laurie" and Polly began to sing. Not a tremble in the clear voice, not a false note in the sweet tones, as they soared up, thrilled with feeling and died away in pathos that the singer was far too young to feel. For an instant the room was still and then the applause rang out. Polly stood very quiet, looking up at the ceiling, forgetful of the bow in which she had been carefully drilled. It did not matter. The violin began again, and the child sang on and on, as the audience clamoured for more at the end of each song. She did not seem to tire, but a red spot glowed in each cheek, and the tiny figure trembled.

"Sit down, Polly," said Rob at last, fearing the effect on Polly of such repressed excitement.

Polly obediently turned and seated herself amid the plaudits of her audience. Then she remembered her duty, arose, went forward, took her stiff skirt in her hands on each side, and dropped the ceremonious courtesy of the period which she represented. The applause broke out anew, but Polly was to sing no more. A rousing chorus covered the clapping, and the audience [160] settled down to listen to the remainder of the programme.

A young artist from the city who had been trolled to Fayre by Mr. Baldwin, generously offered to

amuse the audience while the gavotte was being costumed, and gave a Chinese three part play, in which he was the maiden, her lover, and the stern parent by turns, with a Chinese song chanted wonderfully as a last touch. It was really very funny, and Mrs. Silsby gratefully heard the audience laughing as she hastily surveyed the supper room which was to be her surprise to the performers, after the gavotte.

In the meantime, Mrs. Grey and the maids were getting eight excited girls into their beautiful gowns for the dance. It really did not take long but it was a time into which so much disturbance of mind, so many thrills were compressed that it seemed a little eternity.

When they were ready the eight filed forth, and met their eight cavaliers in the hall.

Wythie in her white silk, brocaded with violets, and with the romance of Oswyth Grey in her heart, under the gown that she had once worn, joined Basil in his purple velvet court costume, and led the way down the stairs.

Eleanor Dinsmore in the blush pink, brocaded with rosebuds, came next. Her partner was a youth [161]
in black velvet.

Then came Frances in her pale blue; with her was to dance Lester Baldwin, in dark blue velvet.

Hester in glorious crimson, with silver headdress, petticoat and trimmings, joined her partner in white satin, with gold lace.

Edith Hooper in overshot white and silver danced with Jack Dinsmore in red velvet.

Helen Lacey, a clear, dark brunette, wore a bronze brocade that revealed its blue lining with every motion; her partner in golden brown velvet made them into an autumn harmony.

Rob's brocade was dark green, overstrewn with a pale green conventional design. A silver petticoat revealed her silver slippers with the big paste buckles, and splendid silver lace fell over her pointed bodice and bare arms. Bruce, her partner, wore black velvet with green satin waistcoat, and flashing knee-buckles on the green ribbons that bound his knees.

Prue came last, regal in her golden raiment, so beautiful that Mrs. Grey's heart leaped and then contracted with fear as she fell back to look at her, for beauty is a difficult crown to carry steadily, thought this simple, loving woman.

Bartlemy wore hunting green—it did not matter what he wore, he said, while he danced beside [162]
the golden girl.

The curtain went up on the empty stage, and the orchestra played the air of the gavotte. The dancers entered, hands joined and held high, and marched in minuet step around and up and down the stage, crossing and recrossing, bowing, forming brief figures, instantly dissolved into the march. Then they took their places for the gavotte, and in the pause between the end of the march and its beginning the audience went quite wild with delight over the really beautiful picture.

The orchestra sounded a few bars, and suddenly the sixteen dancers began to sing to the old French gavotte the words which Rob had written, beginning the dance at the same time. In breathless silence the audience watched and listened. The colours blended and contrasted, the girls flushed and dimpled, carrying their heads regally under their powdered hair, while the young men, not less gorgeous in their degree, led them forth with courtly bendings of their powdered heads, managing their swords and the laced hats which they carried with creditable grace and dignity.

There could not have been a more beautiful picture. Faint, irrepressible applause broke out at [163]
intervals, quickly silenced that the audience might not lose one note, one lovely, gracious motion. But when it was ended the room was stormed with plaudits, unescapable demands for a repetition, which the dancers were not in the least reluctant to accord, when they were satisfied that the demand was sincere.

There were many in the audience who were strangers to all the performers; several from New York whom only Hester knew slightly, but the majority were friends or familiar acquaintances of the dancers, and after the curtain had gone down they came forth in all their ancient splendour to mingle with the audience and to be congratulated.

Rob went to Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin as straight as circumstances allowed her to go.

Mr. Baldwin took her hands with the fatherly affection that he always showed her, almost equal to that which he gave to his own girl.

"It was fine, Rob; really fine, a gavotte in colouring and execution worthy the old days of Daly's Theatre, and the dances he used to give us in 'Much Ado' and 'Twelfth Night.' You look like a dryad in your green, my Robin. And how really magnificent Prue is going to be! Hers is wonderful [164]
beauty for a girl of sixteen. I have a ward of mine here who says he never dreamed of such a girl. He wants to speak to Prue. Shall I take him over there?"

"He is a nice boy, Mr. Baldwin?" asked Rob.

"What a dragon of an elder sister—and only two years the elder!" laughed Mr. Baldwin. "Trust me, Rob, not to introduce any but nice boys to my Grey girls! This is not precisely a boy, though.

He is twenty-four, and that is a great age compared to sixteen. He is still my ward, because I was to take charge of his property, by his father's will, until he was thirty. I'll go take him to Prue. Mr. Armstrong is here, and wants to see you."

"Mr. Armstrong who bought Patergrey's patent?" cried Rob.

"The very same. He has never forgotten your describing it to him in his office, so frightened, yet so brave," said Mr. Baldwin. "He heard of this entertainment, and came out for your sake."

"What a lovely world this is!" laughed Rob. "I'll go find him." And she moved off in search of her elderly acquaintance, looking back to see Mr. Baldwin taking up to radiant Prue a young man [165] whose face was turned from her, but whose "back looked well-bred" Rob thought.

Her progress towards Mr. Armstrong was impeded by congratulations, but at last Rob reached him.

"I am glad to see that you have not forgotten me," said the old gentleman, grasping the hand she extended.

"I am not likely ever to forget you," returned Rob simply.

"No, it is not likely; our acquaintance was brief, but impressive to us both," said Mr. Armstrong. "You will be glad to learn that your father's invention has proved valuable to us, Miss Grey. Are you Miss Grey?"

"Not yet," said Rob with her whimsical twist of the lips as she smiled up into the kindly face. "It is delightful to know that my dear father's work was all he believed it to be."

"Fully," assented the old gentleman. "But Miss Roberta, what about the child that sang here to-night? They tell me she is a protégé of yours. She is a prodigy. I want to know about her. I am not going back to town to-night; I have no fancy for these late, crawling trains back from suburban pleasures. I am staying over night at your Fayre hotel—why do you have a town with a name so [166] provocative of puns? May I call on you to-morrow? Not only to tell you what real pleasure you young people gave me to-night, but to hear about this child?"

"We should all be glad, indeed, to see you, Mr. Armstrong, with no errand whatever," said Rob. "I'll tell you all there is to learn of Polly. I suppose I shouldn't stop now; there are so many people to whom I ought to speak."

"Run along, run along, lovely little green great-grandmother," said Mr. Armstrong, with an appreciative downward glance at Rob's beautiful costume.

The rooms were rapidly thinning out as she turned away from the old gentleman; Frances was beckoning her.

Rob crossed over to her. "Mother has a spread for us, the thirty-five performers, in the dining-room—she is the dearest thing! We are going to have a glorious time, so hurry up and do the pretty-behaved to those who bought your tickets, and then come to the banquet."

Rob needed no further hint. The eight heroines of the gavotte sipped the sweets of adulation for a short time, completely overshadowing their less brilliant but equally meritorious partners, till the last of their audience had departed.

"Come ghosts of departed years; come ancestral descendants; come and see if modern viands [167] have a pleasant flavour," cried Mrs. Silsby from the doorway, and the picture-figures, seizing their proper partners' arms, burst into the song of the gavotte and to it marched to supper.

CHAPTER TEN [168]

ITS AFTERMATH

The day after great festivities is a trying time. Everybody feels mentally out-at-elbows; it is a day like those fifteen minutes between the ebb and flow of the tide when the waters seem to lie motionless. No one feels like ordinary duties, and there is a general impression that they may be neglected, though it is not avowed. It takes a day for energies to wake up and get into harness.

The boys had set out early in their workaday tweeds for college and business. Velvets, queues, laced hats and swords discarded for the commonplace, the girls' partners in the gavotte had been forced back to the actual world with the wintry dawn, but the girls revelled in reminiscent laziness and the joys of "talking it over."

Hester had stayed till an afternoon train, and she lay across the foot of Wythie and Rob's bed, her mind vibrating like a pendulum between the events of the preceding night and their results, [169] between recalling some little point which had not been mentioned, and wondering how many cripple children they would now be able to afford. Wythie lolled in the rocking-chair in a relaxed attitude unlike her usual compact little self. Rob reclined on her elbow beside Hester, with her unruly hair tumbled into the many ringed disorder in which it was always prettiest, and most

comfortable. Prue, who was staying home from school that day in charitable allowance of time in which to descend from her pedestal and readjust her mind to study, sat on the edge of the bed at its head with the pillow whose place she occupied "laid as tenderly across her knees as if it were one of the cripples," Rob said.

"One might think there wasn't a chair in the room," remarked Wythie languidly, as she glanced at the unused ones standing about. "I wonder why all girls love to pile on a bed together?"

"They like to be on a bed because it suits 'a rosebud garden of girls,'" suggested Rob. "That seems to lack the suggestion of a garden bed that I was aiming for—as a pun it is a failure. Confidences and caramels are best enjoyed on a bed, among pillows. Please pass me another caramel, Hester, and let me see your Christmas ring again. I like emeralds!"

"Speaking of rings," said Hester as she complied, "I wonder if I am betraying confidence in telling you what Lester said?" [170]

"You might try it and see," said Rob. "We'll tell you frankly after you have repeated it whether or not it is a betrayal of confidence."

Hester laughed. "I'll risk it," she said. "Lester has taken a great fancy to Frances Silsby, and he says he is seriously going to try to make her care for him. He is in business with his father, representing the Japanese end of the firm, as his older brother represents it in London, so he would be able to think of marrying as far as being established in the world goes."

"Marrying!" cried Prue, dropping both hands into the pillow with a thump as she sat erect in her surprise. "Do you mean to say he is going to marry Francie right off?"

"I don't know that he can ever marry her; I don't know that she will ever see the charm in him that I see—he's the dearest boy and the best cousin in the world! But I think it's safe to say that he won't marry her right off, Prudy; certainly not before Easter," laughed Hester. "There are other reasons for not doing so besides canonical ones."

"Yes; comical ones," amended Rob. "But only think of France, my playmate, with a wooer in serious earnest! I think it is fearful the way we are getting on in life." [171]

"Mrs. Silsby wouldn't think of letting Frances marry for ever so long," said Wythie, her colour mounting. "She is such a good, sensible mother! But I wish when the time does come Lester would have his way. He is right to choose Frances; she is as true and trusty and good as a girl can be. Wouldn't you like it, Hester?"

"Yes; I like Frances, but I could find it in my heart to wish it were a Grey girl," said Hester. "Only there aren't enough to go around, and Lester stayed too long in Japan."

"Fiddle-dedee!" remarked Rob. "Grey girls aren't going around—do you take us for tops, Hester?"

"Yes; tip-tops," said Hester, scoring that time.

Rob gave her a withering look of pretended reproach, and Prue said: "Who was that interesting young man whom your father introduced to me? That Mr. Stanhope?"

"Is he interesting, Prudy? He has lots of interest, if that's what you mean," said Hester. "You have just said nearly all I know about him. He is Mr. Arthur Stanhope. I know a little more. He had a cautious and conservative father, who had a million to leave this boy, so he appointed my father [172] his guardian, and left the money so that the son could use only the interest until he was thirty. Then he comes into his million, and in the meantime is not starving on its interest. Father says he is a good youth, not spoiled by his prospects, and I know that if he is it is largely owing to my father, who has been a faithful guardian, and has influenced this boy's tastes and aims. I don't know him particularly well myself, though he has been to the house a great deal; we never seemed to get on together.'"

"I thought he was as nice as he could be," remarked Prue with her grown-up air, which made it trying to have Rob suggest quickly that none of us could be more than that, and to have the older girls laugh.

"Oh, Rob, here comes Mr. Armstrong!" cried Wythie from her post at the window.

"So early!" exclaimed Rob. "Yet we might have known that he wouldn't linger in Fayre for luncheon. And we were having such a heavenly, halcyon time! Prue, do get out my brown dress while I smooth this demented hair of mine!"

Rob pulled out her pins and brushed her unruly locks into her hand, head downward, and with the brush, like the Red Queen's, in "Alice," in danger of getting lost, in the bright and beautiful [173] rings of which Hester telegraphed to Wythie an admiration which Rob would have resented had it been audible.

Wythie always seemed to be ready for any one's arrival, from the king to the ashman. She placidly smoothed her soft hair, of which not a lock was misplaced, pulled down her shirt-waist, made sure her belt covered the line of her skirt—which it invariably did—and was ready to go down to help her mother receive their caller, leaving Rob to Hester and Prue's mercies to be helped into her street gown.

"Because I've got to go up to Aunt Azraella's when I take you to the station, and I can't go

through the agony of dressing three times a day," she explained frantically struggling with a hook that refused to find its affinity in a loop half buried in the shoulder seam.

"Not faded by late hours, Miss Roberta?" said Mr. Armstrong, rising to greet Rob as she entered looking radiant from her hurried toilette.

"Only my glories of last night are faded, sir," said Rob, giving her hand to the old gentleman whose kindly voice and manner she found even more likable than her memory of them.

"Now, my dear Grey young ladies, all of you, for my daughter must be older than these lassies' [174]
mother, I have not many minutes to spare if I want to lunch in town, as I mean to do," began Mr. Armstrong. "I want to hear the history of the child whose singing last night was so remarkable."

"It is easily told, Mr. Armstrong," said Mrs. Grey. And she briefly related Polly's story, and that of the Flinders family.

Mr. Armstrong listened attentively. "Now, for my reasons for asking," he said. "I have a sum of money entrusted to me, the principal well invested, and the interest left for the education of young girls whose talents and industry make them worth helping. Your little Polly is certainly wonderfully gifted, and there is a gap now in the application of the money; we can take another girl at once. I propose to make your Polly Flinders—what an extraordinary name!—our next experiment. What do you say to it?"

"How could it be done?" asked Mrs. Grey considering, while Wythie and Rob flushed with pleasure over the proposition. "She is so little, so sensitive and frail that I do not feel like giving her over to strangers, even though her mother should consent to it."

"If you are willing to keep her here it would add the much-needed touch to our methods," said [175]
Mr. Armstrong. "There are five of us joined in administering this fund, of whom I am chairman, or president, or whatever you choose to call an informal board officer. Our trouble always is to find a place where our girls can get home training while they are educating, until they are old enough to be placed in a good boarding-school. If you will keep this child, I will see that the funds are provided for the musical education which she deserves. She should begin to be taught piano at once, and every year as she grows older suitable instruction shall keep step with her development. If she proves as talented as we now think her, and you will contribute her maintenance, as your part of her provision, the sum which her support would have cost shall be laid aside to send her to Germany to study, if, when she is grown, it seems better for her to go there."

"It is the most delightful thing I have heard in years, Mr. Armstrong," cried Mrs. Grey. "I have wondered and wondered whom we could interest in little Polly, and how we might get for her the training she should have. I have taught her the beginnings of the piano, and she recites her lessons daily to my daughter Oswyth, but we are not rich people, as you know, and I have never been able to see what I wanted to see in Polly's future. You have solved it, and I can't tell you how [176]
thankful I am. I must write her poor mother to-night; poor creature, she needs good tidings, I fear."

"I don't know what you call rich, my dear madam," said the old gentleman decidedly. "This little house has always seemed to me, and remained in my memory, as the most richly endowed spot I know. The money which is at my disposition can give the girl her opportunity in life, but you will give her far more than that; an education far surpassing mere schooling, and a training that will fit her to use her opportunity and to live her life aright. I suppose you would rather have the money given to crippled children." he added, turning sharply to Rob. "I'm sorry, but it is a trust fund, its purpose distinctly limited and defined."

"Indeed, I wouldn't rather have it used for cripples," cried Rob. "The one thing I ever wanted to do in this world—except to found a home for dogs and cats and horses—is to give girls a chance, girls who would use the chance and are hungry for it. To tell the truth I have drifted into cripples because Mr. Baldwin's daughter made me—she is the one who started all this. I have helped her, because, after all, I am sorry for maimed little things in those awful tenements and when a good [177]
cause takes hold of one and pulls one's hands—well, of course, you can't make a fist! But little girls, like Polly, or even bigger, appeal to me most. I don't want one penny of the fund for cripples, Mr. Armstrong. I haven't forgotten the days before you bought the invention, and how hungry I was for a chance, even with such people as my mother and the father you did not know. So I can imagine how girls feel who long for education and who have no home, or worse than none."

"I might have known that you would have cared more for minds and souls than for bodies, you strong, warm, sensitive child!" said Mr. Armstrong. "And I see that your quiet sister sympathizes with you, though I suspect that she dearly loves to comfort and cuddle suffering bodies. Now see here; about your cripple home," added Mr. Armstrong rising. "How much money have you?"

"We don't know yet, but enough to take care of three or four children anyway, if only we had a house for them," said Rob.

"You tell me that this Flanders—Flinders'—farm is not rented. Why not hire that, and begin? I'll pay the rent, and if the work is inspired it will grow, and something else will come from this small [178]
beginning. If not, no harm is done; you have made your experiment, and will turn your energies to the next work at hand. What say you?" And Mr. Armstrong paused, looking from Wythie to

Rob, excluding the mother as if he wanted to deal here with the girls only.

"Well, why did we never once think of the Flinders' place?" gasped Wythie. "That would help the Flinders, as well as start our home. It is a wonderful idea, Mr. Armstrong!"

"The farm would rent for a hundred a year," said Rob, eying their would-be benefactor doubtfully.

"Very probably. Well, will you accept my offer?" asked Mr. Armstrong.

"Oh, you kindest of fairy godfathers!" cried Rob, laughing, yet very much in earnest. "I should think we would accept it, and bless you every day. We will call the farm the Sweet William Farm," she added slyly.

"Nonsense!" cried the old gentleman, much pleased. "Then it is a bargain. Baldwin and I talked it over coming out on the train last night and made up our minds to help you children, he with his legal lore and I with my wealth galore. Well, I shall lose my train!" he cried hastily, consulting a [179] watch very thin and small in proportion to its owner. "Good-bye, little Grey girls. Goodbye, Mrs. Grey. I shall come out again, purposely to see you, and to complete our arrangements, after you have heard from Polly's mother. This is a blessed little grey house, and I believe that it is going to prove like the mustard tree, whose branches reach out and shelter the helpless creatures."

He was gone in an instant, and Wythie and Rob fairly flew up-stairs to announce to Hester their startling news, news which made that young woman sit up, her eyes dilating as she realized that it rendered the beginning of her beloved project possible with no further delay.

Rob and Wythie took Hester to the station, from which point Wythie returned home, while Rob went on up the hill to Aunt Azraella's. Her mother and Cousin Peace had prepared Rob's mind for something out of the ordinary in this visit by telling her that Mrs. Winslow had something important to discuss with her, the nature of which they were under solemn promise not to reveal.

Rob was not greatly interested in the matter; her mind was so full of the prospect for Polly, and of the events of the night before. She was tired, and yet the echoes of the gavotte still haunted [180] her. Aunt Azraella's momentous announcements usually proved less impressive to others than to herself.

Roberta found Mrs. Winslow seated in the westerly window enjoying the declining sun, with Tobias, who was of late allowed to visit other rooms than the kitchen, sitting solemnly blinking near her.

"Good-afternoon, Aunt Azraella. How are you, Tobias? I hope you remember that I saved your life?" said Rob, bringing into the room the freshness of her beautiful colouring, and the bright January air.

"You do not look tired, Roberta," said Mrs. Winslow. "Last night was a great success, I hear. Elvira and Aaron were full of it when they got home, but I have heard from others to-day that it was really a beautiful entertainment, and that while all three Grey girls were more than pretty, that Prue was very handsome."

"She was magnificent, Aunt, really," said Rob. "Prue is going to be so handsome that I don't know what is to be done with her."

"She'll do it all for herself," remarked Mrs. Winslow with unusual brevity and wisdom.

"Roberta, lay off your coat and furs, and take that chair and bring it over here. There is [181] something I must talk to you about. Has your mother told you?"

"She told me that you wanted to see me about something, yes, Aunt," said Rob as she obeyed. "Is it something that I can do for you?"

"It is something that I want to do for you," said her aunt. "Once I should have sent for Oswyth under these circumstances, but since you showed so much character and business ability at the time that you held out against us all in selling your father's invention I regard you as the cleverest of your family in business matters. Now, first of all, Roberta, I want you should understand that I have an incurable disease."

Rob caught her breath, and gazed speechlessly at Aunt Azraella, not knowing how to reply to such a statement made with as little emotion as if Mrs. Winslow had told her that she was going to the post-office.

"I have seen Dr. Fairbairn, and he brought up two physicians from the city," Aunt Azraella continued, after waiting an instant for Rob to speak. "They tell me that I may live three years, but I am entirely without hope of living longer than that. There isn't any particular hurry—" here Aunt Azraella paused, and Rob sat helplessly waiting. Surely Aunt Azraella did not mean that [182] there was no hurry about dying! And could it be that she was hearing aright? Aunt Azraella could not possibly be talking in this indifferent way of her doom!

"But I thought," Mrs. Winslow went on, "that I should like to have everything settled. All the money that your uncle left me will go to you three girls, as it should. But I don't seem to care about leaving what came from my family to my own relations. I always liked all the Winslows, and I can't find any particular affection for the Browns in my heart when I search it—there's no one nearer than cousins and two nieces on that side anyway. So I'm going to leave you and Oswyth and Prudence—" Aunt Azraella used the full names, as befitting testamentary intentions—"thirty

thousand dollars each, and I'm going to leave you this house."

"Aunt Azraella!" protested Rob, between laughing and crying, for her nerves were getting the upper hand in this singular interview. "Please don't tell me such things; please don't talk about dying!"

"Roberta, I want you should be sensible," her aunt rebuked her. "There is no reason why people should not face facts and admit them. Within three years I shall be no more, and you three girls will have the bulk of my property. If you marry those wealthy Rutherfords you won't need it—" [183]

"Aunt Azraella, I'm not going to marry the Rutherfords!" cried poor Rob. "And you are not really ill."

"You are not going to marry all three of them, but Wythie will marry Basil, and you will marry the second one, the one that is going to study with Dr. Fairbairn, and very likely Prue will have the youngest," said Aunt Azraella with deadly certainty. "For the rest, I have already told you that I am incurable, and I have suffered a good deal at times that I haven't told any one about. But that is neither here nor there. It doesn't matter about me just now, nor about marrying. What I wanted to ask you was this: I'm going to leave you this house. Now, would you rather have it for yourself, or would you like to have me leave it to you for this cripple home you are getting up?"

"Oh, it's your house; you must do what you like to with it! This is the most dreadful thing to ask me, Aunt Azraella! You know I don't want to take your house," protested Rob.

"I suppose you know, Roberta, that when I am dead it will not be my house, and that I must leave it behind for some one," said Aunt Azraella with the same resolute common sense. "It will be yours, but shall it be for yourself, or for your charity?" [184]

Rob made an effort and succeeded in forcing herself to meet her aunt on her own ground.

"I would rather the house were used as pleased you, Aunt Azraella," she said. "But we must remember one thing: The home for crippled children may fall through. Don't you think you ought to wait to see if it succeeds before you give it this beautiful, big house?"

"You are sensible, as usual, Roberta, when you put your mind on a thing," said her aunt in a tone of relief. "To tell the truth I prefer to leave you the house, but I thought you might like it given outright to this charity, which really is a good one. I shall will the house to you, and you will remember that we have had this talk, and feel free to live in it, sell it, or donate it to charity, just as you prefer. I wanted to please you; that's all."

"Mr. Armstrong is going to hire the Flinders' farm for us to begin on," said Rob, realizing that this was not the proper remark, but utterly unable to say anything else.

Aunt Azraella seemed relieved that she had modified the subject. "That's a good notion!" she exclaimed. "Tell me about it." [185]

And Rob found herself telling Aunt Azraella the story of Mr. Armstrong's call, as if this were the most ordinary visit of the many which she had paid her aunt at this hour between daylight and dark.

Aunt Azraella seemed pleased by the tidings, and Rob rose to go, wondering if the tragic news that had been imparted to her had been heard in a dream.

"I appreciate your coming, Roberta," said Aunt Azraella. "And I appreciate the way you have behaved, after your first shock was over. I want all you girls should behave in your ordinary manner to me right along. I'm not going to be pitied, nor coddled because I've come to where we must all be some day, only most of us won't know it so long ahead. Good-night."

"Good-night," said Rob faintly, not daring so much as to put out her hand.

The crescent moon shone low in the west as she left the big house on the hill to cross the dry fields to the little grey house.

"Oh, poor, hard, shut-in woman! Poor Aunt Azraella!" Rob found herself saying aloud.

CHAPTER ELEVEN [186]

ITS DEADLY INSULT

Wythie was in her "uniform," as the Grey girls still called the plain dark blue ginghams, feather-stitched in white which, renewed as fast as they wore out, were their housework gowns. With her plump hands protected by old gloves, she was sweeping her and Rob's room. A blue bordered handkerchief formed into a dusting-cap added greatly to her picturesque effect as she leaned on her broom and watched Rob coming up the street.

There had been several days in which to get used to the thought that Aunt Azraella was going hence from the big house on the hill, leaving it to Roberta for whatever purpose she pleased to use it. The question had been discussed in family conclaves, between the girls in private and with

their mother and Miss Charlotte. It was an exciting thought that the power to do much was coming into the Grey girls' young hands, though the outlook was not for more wealth than would [187] have seemed to many people just sufficient for their own wants. It was characteristic of these simple-hearted Grey people that they should be quite satisfied with what they already had, and begin at once to plan to help others with their moderate excess.

Wythie leaned out of the window as Rob drew near, and the brisk winter wind promptly removed her cap to deposit it at Rob's feet as she turned in at the low gate, set back for the season against the hedge and out of the way of drifts.

Rob picked it up and bowed low to her sister, holding the cap in a position of salute, while, with the other hand, she waved a letter upward.

"From Mrs. Flinders," she called, and Wythie immediately began to divest herself of her sweeping gloves as she called back: "I'm glad we've heard from her at last. I'm coming down."

She found Rob already hatless by the fireside in the sitting-room, where their mother and Cousin Peace were established with their work, and Polly, with Roberta Charlotte on her knee and Hortense in a doll's rocking-chair at her side, was reading aloud Hans Christian Andersen's Wonder Tales with much satisfaction in her own proficiency.

"Will Pollykins go out to visit Lydia for a little while?" asked Rob coaxingly. "We shall have [188] something to tell her when she comes back, and we want to surprise her."

The quiet child arose at once and went obediently away, taking her family with her. Rob opened her mother's letter the instant that the door was closed behind the small representative of "the Flinders."

"It is addressed to you, Mardy, but I suppose it doesn't matter," remarked Rob as she acted on her supposition.

"Dear Mrs. Grey," Rob read. "I hope you are all enjoying the health at present which we are. He is not better, but remains much the same. I am about as usual. I received your letter which I now take my pen in hand to answer and would say that I do not know of any objections to renting our farm but the contrary because the taxes runs up pretty fast and when it is not worked it goes all to pieces. The hundred dollars which you mention as the price the man you wrote about will pay is more than we could get from any one round there but there is not no reason why you ought to tell him this if he wants to pay that much and we don't mind what use it gets so as we get the money regular. So if he wants it we will let him take it and be a relief off our minds more my mind than his because I got to take the care now he is laid up. What you say about Maimie [189] sounds all right to me. I don't feel as if I could stand in her way if you think musics what she can do best of course she will have her own living to earn some-way. In the matter of education I do not feel as if I had enough myself to speak about it I can make out to spell right I guess because there is always a dictionary and nobody has no need to spell bad but for the rest I guess I had better leave it to you to do what you think is best about Maimie. I hope she knows that she is lucky to have such friends raised up to her when her father's stricken down and tell her to mind what you tell her and study hard. I guess she won't ever be our child again when she has got through studying. But it don't matter if she gets through her life better than we have. Her father would like to be remembered to you if he was just himself, but to-day is one of his times when he is sort of queer in his head. My love to Maimie, and my regards to all the family particularly Roberta.

"Yours respectfully. Rebecca Ann Flinders.

"P. S. Excuse mistakes and my poor writing my hand is sort of cramped from not writing much and doing housework."

"Oh, dear," sighed Rob, wiping away the tears of mingled amusement and pity which had risen in [190] eyes quick to respond to both. "Isn't it funny? Spelled correctly, as she says, but guiltless of punctuation! And isn't it pathetic?"

"Very, when she says Polly will never be their child again—and I'm afraid it is true," said Mrs. Grey.

"But for all that she desires the child's best good; there spoke the mother, revealed in spite of ignorance, as eloquently as mother-love can be expressed," said Cousin Peace.

"This is certainly for Polly's best good," said Wythie. "I wish one were less often half sorry for succeeding in this world! However, we can now write Mr. Armstrong; Polly can be regularly installed as the next heir to his fund, and he can hire the farm, and Hester can begin her home for cripples without much longer delay."

"It seems to me we are getting into charities without any effort on our part," observed Rob. "We live our uneventful, commonplace lives, and a sort of warm gulf stream of the milk of human kindness is at once penetrating us and bearing us away upon its bosom."

"Dear me, Rob, what oratory!" laughed her mother.

"Literary style, gained from composing my stories and telling them to the children," explained [191] Rob.

"Poor little ones!" commented Cousin Peace mischievously.

"Well, it really is queer," persisted Rob. "Hester began it with her vague aspirations, like the little St. Theresa going out to see if she couldn't find some obliging person to martyr her, and then we began to find we could help one or two little miserables so easily that there was no escaping doing it, and now comes Mr. Armstrong, following Mr. Silsby and Dr. Fairbairn's interest in the project, and Aunt Azraella crowns it all. Truly, I knew some people had greatness thrust upon them, but I never knew any one had goodness thrust upon them—I always thought one had to achieve sanctity painfully! Yet, here we are getting made benefactors and saints in spite of ourselves!"

"Don't worry, Rob; it takes more than one home for destitute children, and more than a little kindly feeling to make a saint," said her mother.

Just then Polly turned the handle of the door and looked in timidly. "Please will it bother you if I tell you that Lydia said she should like to have Rob come out in the kitchen? Because Ben Bolt has a man treed, she says, in the orchard," said Polly, without showing any curiosity as to why she had been dismissed. [192]

"A man in the orchard!" cried Rob, springing to her feet, and rushing out after Polly, followed in turn by Wythie, while Mrs. Grey and Miss Charlotte folded up their work to come after them.

Rob almost ran into Lydia in the kitchen door-way, and encountered her reproachful gaze.

"That goat," said Lydia severely, "has got a man penned up behind an apple-tree. He's a real nice looking man, and he was coming here through the orchard, short cutting from the back street. I guess he thinks it's not a very Christian way of receiving a person."

"I don't see why he should look for Christian ways in a goat," laughed Rob. "Poor old Ben Bolt! He knows we have no dog, and Kiku-san can't guard us, so who else is there but him to keep off intruders? I'll go out and rescue this one, however." Rob pulled on her old rubbers, kept convenient in the kitchen, and went out to save the person skulking behind the tree, while old grey Ben Bolt, the family friend whom Prue had rescued from the hands of his enemies, years ago when he was a kid, stood with lowered horns, holding at bay the stranger whom he evidently regarded as a menace to the estate. [193]

Rob ran up and seized Ben's horns. "He really is not dangerous," she explained, struggling with her desire to laugh at the same time that she struggled with Ben Bolt. "He acts dangerous, but he is a lamb."

"Exactly so," observed the stranger, emerging from the position which Braddock's men were so disastrously withheld from taking, and rubbing the frayed lichens from the sleeve which had dung so tenaciously to the apple-tree. "It is a beautiful goat; a very fine specimen. I am devoted to animals myself, but he seemed disinclined to accept my homage. I was told that this was a short cut to Mrs. Grey's house, but I fear it has consumed more time than the longer way would have required. Is this Miss Grey whom I have the honour to address?"

"Yes," said Rob, not considering it worth while to enter into the order of succession in the Grey family. "Won't you follow me to the house? I will guarantee your safety."

"Thank you," said the man fervently. "I have come on a matter of business, and I should be obliged to go around the front way and reappear if I did not go with you now."

"Dreadful alternative!" murmured Rob, holding Ben Bolt firmly while the stranger skittishly circumnavigated him. After he was past she liberated the goat and followed the visitor towards the house, wondering much at his manner, which was a delicate blend of effrontery and timidity, and at his voice and language which were both of the suavest. She decided as she watched him that there was no need of apologizing for taking him in by the kitchen way where Lydia stood holding the door open with her most correct and reserved manner to contradict the active interest in her eye. [194]

"Thank you, miss," said the stranger as Lydia indicated the cocoa mat with a movement of her foot; Lydia was conservative of her kitchen floor.

"I see that the family has assembled to witness my predicament with the bearded monster yonder," he continued with a playfulness that his voice carefully labelled as such. "This is fortunate for me. Permit me to present my card."

Rob, who still stood nearest to this personage, took the card and read:

"Albert Lockwell, Dealer in Antiques. Colonial Furniture a Specialty. Antique furniture, old china, pewter, silver and brass bought and sold. Highest prices given and lowest asked— Fourth Avenue, New York." And in the lower left-hand corner she read: "Mr. Demetrius Dennis." [195]

"That is my name," said the stranger indicating the latter inscription with his thumb-nail backward. "I represent the well-known firm of Lockwell. Please allow the other ladies to peruse the card."

Rob handed it to Lydia to be given over to her mother; the solemn handmaiden carefully "perused" the card herself before yielding it up.

"That, madam, as I have said, is my name: Demetrius Dennis, representing ALBERT LOCKWELL."

He spoke as if his principal's name was capitalized. "We read in the morning papers lately a notice of the entertainment you gave in this town, in which it was stated that your costumes were veritable antiques, heirlooms of the Grey family. My principal is a person of remarkable astuteness; he said at once: 'Demetrius, where there is so many antique garments there very likely may be antique furniture and china. Take a train to Fayre on the first convenient morning, and buy it up.'"

Mrs. Grey gasped at the assurance of this speech, but Rob laughed outright. "Buy up the train or buy up the morning?" she asked. "And is this a convenient morning? I have always found mornings more or less convenient; they answer to begin the day with." [196]

The visitor was impervious to ridicule, and he smiled kindly at Rob's fun-crinkled face.

"It suited me, Miss Grey," he said. "It was perfectly convenient to me. I could not come yesterday, because I went out to Jersey in pursuit of a corner dresser which proved utterly valueless, utterly worthless, I assure you. I am glad to see through the vista afforded me by that door that here I have not come in vain. If I mistake not that room, which I assume to be your dining-room, contains genuine pieces of old mahogany." He stepped forward as he spoke, and before the indignant Greys could interpose he had passed them and gone into the dining-room, ushered forward by Lydia, whose face expressed the deepest admiration for the language with which he was inundating her entranced ears.

"Ah!" observed this curious person with the Graeco-Hibernian name, "Now there is a side-board for which I am prepared to make a liberal offer, and for all the pewter which surmounts it. Also for that corner cupboard, and the blue and white china which it contains. Also for that cloverleaf side table. And here are chairs for which I will make a lump offer sufficient to replace them with moderns quite as good from the point of view of any but a collector. This is your sitting-room, I perceive," continued the invader, pushing on. "Just as I expected! For those high book-cases I am prepared to give as much as a hundred dollars apiece. That card-table, that work-table, that claw legged great sofa—all these things I will take, and give you more than any other dealer in New York. Doubtless you have antique bureaux, chairs, tables, all sorts of antique stuff in your bedrooms. I will just run them over hastily and make a rough inventory, and we will write you, we will write you, offering for everything, calculating each piece individually, but offering in the lump. I assure you we shall give you a good sum—it will mount above a thousand dollars, I fancy, judging from my rapid survey, and I am considered as good a judge of antiques as there is in the city. It is not impossible that you have a tester bed? An old high poster? I will take that at two hundred, if it is in good condition. It is remarkable to find a collection so complete so near New York; I consider myself lucky that no other dealer has superseded me. Now, if you please, the bedrooms." [197]

He turned towards the hall with the same cheerful confidence and rapid movement that he had evinced since, rescued from Ben Bolt, whose intelligence the Greys were rating higher with every word, he had bent his attention upon the errand which had brought him to the little grey house. [198]

But as he started in that direction Mrs. Grey recovered from the stunned state of mind into which the suddenness and rapidity of Mr. Dennis' invasion had thrown her. She uttered the one word: "Stop!" with such force that it arrested the invader. He wheeled suddenly, presenting to the Greys a face of such amazement that Rob burst out laughing, although her cheeks were reddened with anger.

"Mr. Dennis," said Mrs. Grey, consulting the card for the name, "you lose sight of a very important fact. I have not offered my furniture for sale, nor have had the slightest intention of parting with it. Is it your habit to push through houses in this impertinent manner, assuming that your presence, and your appraisals, and offers to purchase are welcome? You will remain, sir, precisely where you are; my house is not open for your inspection, nor are its contents for sale. The reason for the presence here of so many relics of the past, which you seem to consider remarkable, is very simple. This house has remained in one family for more than two hundred years, and its treasures have not been on the market. They are not for sale now. You will withdraw at once. This front door is the safer way; the goat is still in the orchard." [199]

Demetrius Dennis beamed on the indignant lady with an indulgent and approving smile. "My dear madam," he said, "I see that you have an eye for business, and there is nothing that I do so admire as business sense. It is right for you to hold out for as large a price as you can get, and of course the more you seem not to care to sell, the more likely we are to persist and come down with something handsome. Something handsome it will be, I assure you, Mrs. Grey, and that I have told you frankly from the beginning. It has never come in my way to notice that people wouldn't sell in the end if they got what they wanted for their stuff. We shall not balk at a good price, because the collection includes so much that it will be worth our while to take it entire, and I don't mean that any other dealer shall get it."

There was a certainty of common understanding in the man's manner that disarmed Mrs. Grey's indignation as it stirred her sense of humor. It was perfectly evident that he considered himself her benefactor, and felt sure that, after some necessary delays for finesse, the furniture would be his. Whereat not only he would be entirely happy but he would leave the Greys even more so in the possession of a check large enough to furnish the little house over again in shining, highly varnished newness. [200]

Her eyes softened into a laugh of pure amusement, which she prevented from reaching her lips,

but Wythie and Rob were too young to be tolerant of impertinence, and Rob's eyes emitted an indignant flash as she said sternly: "You have heard my mother's order to leave the house. She has told you that its contents are not for sale. You will immediately obey her: there is the door."

"Now, why should you be huffy, my dear young lady?" began Mr. Dennis, reasonably. "Can't you see it's for your advantage to sell, and don't you suppose that I don't want to go back to town and report a failure? I don't generally fail, you know, when my head sends me out to buy for him."

"Nevertheless you have failed this time," said Rob. And gentle Oswyth added as she set the front door back: "Leave the house at once, sir. You are not to discuss the subject, nor be so impertinent as to assume that my mother means less than every syllable that she has uttered." [201]

Here Lydia stepped to the fore. "This gentleman has left his hat in the kitchen. Come back the way you come in, sir, and I will hand it to you."

Demetrius Dennis, who looked much chagrined—even wounded—by the girls' sternness, turned to Lydia with a grateful smile. "No offence meant, I don't see why there should be any taken," he said. "If you insist on keeping the stuff, and on me going, there isn't anything else to be done but to let you keep it, and to go. But you don't know how hard it is for me to believe you'd refuse the offer I'd have made. Say, I'll leave that card with you, and if you change your mind when you talk it over around the evening lamp to-night—as you may you know, as you may—why a postal card dropped to me at that address will fetch me out here right away. You hadn't ought to be angry, madam; it's all in the way of business."

"I see that you consider it so. Another time you would be wiser to hesitate before you intrude. At least find out if you may inventory people's property. It doesn't matter. Lydia, take him safely out beyond Ben Bolt who evidently shares our prejudices against too great a disregard of private rights." And Mrs. Grey's lips twitched at the memory of the picture Mr. Demetrius Dennis had presented on their first glimpse of him. [202]

"I wish you good-morning, ladies," said that individual with a bow comprehensive of the irate younger ones, and the amused elder ladies. Then he followed Lydia to the kitchen in pursuit of his hat, and after an unaccountable delay they saw him crossing the orchard in Lydia's wake, who preceded him as a bulwark against Ben Bolt.

At the rear gate their handmaid lingered long; the Greys saw her engaged in earnest conversation with the Graeco-Hibernian. By this time even Rob's indignation at his impertinence had given way to her sense of the ridiculous, and Mrs. Grey, Miss Charlotte, and the two girls were in the full tide of peals of laughter when Lydia reappeared to rebuke them tacitly by her gravity of demeanour, beneath which gleamed something like self-satisfaction.

"He told me to go straight in to you when I got into the house and say that he wasn't one mite offended, and for you to preserve the card in case you changed your mind," said Lydia. "He's a gentleman, that's what he is," added Lydia, as she half turned in the doorway, as one who would be willing to entertain a motion to linger. [203]

"Is he, Lydia?" asked Rob demurely. "How did he prove it?"

"By not bearing ill-will when you all got angry," said Lydia with spirit. "And by his conversation with me. He's serious-minded; says he neither drinks, smokes, chews nor swears, and considers life too short to be wasted on dangerous pastimes, like such. He's got a lot of serious books that came in an old book-case his folks bought. He's going to come out here some pleasant night and lend me those books—bring 'em with him. I'd admire to read 'em! Some are biographies of good men, and some are sermons; he says some are obituary sermons. He's a perfect gentleman!"

Lydia departed to begin getting a dinner that would inevitably be late at best.

"Obituary sermons! Coming to lend them to Lydia! The test of gentlemanhood!" murmured Rob.

"Are we witnessing the dawn of a romance?" asked Wythie, whose perceptions in that direction were keener of late.

CHAPTER TWELVE [204]

ITS SEPARATE ELL

"Its no wonder they called it spring," said Prue, coming into the house with her jacket on her arm and her golden hair lying damp on her flushed forehead. "The way it is sprung on us is dreadful. It is a perfect dream of a day, but I'm half dead in these winter clothes, and the day before yesterday we had snow squalls!"

She dropped into a chair and threw open the window beside it.

"Sore throat weather, Prue!" warned her mother. "You must not sit in a draught when you are so heated. Come over here, dear, you will be cool enough after you have been in the house a little while. May has a trick of masquerading as July without warning us that she is going to change

her rôle."

"But isn't it delicious?" cried Miss Charlotte, going to the window which Prue had left open as she obeyed her mother, and breathing in the damp, fresh odours of young grass, lilacs, blossoms, and [205] all the haunting, indefinable scents of the spring. Then she half sighed, and stood leaning her head against the window-sash.

Rob came in from the kitchen with a voluminous gored apron embracing her closely from collar to hem, and with her bright hair more than usually ringed in moist tendrils, and with her right sleeve flour-dusted from her cake making.

"Dear me, how warm it is out by the stove!" she exclaimed. "And Lydia expects Demetrius this evening, so she brought me molasses instead of sugar, and forgot to take the draughts off, after her fire was burning up, so the oven is so scorching hot that my cake has to wait till it can get a chance to rise in the oven before it is burned to a crisp."

"I wonder if it is true that Demetrius is going to settle in Fayre?" laughed Prue.

"Perfectly true. Lydia says that he is going to be an auctioneer, and it seemed to me that I had never heard of such a happy choice of a profession," said Rob. "I think that affair is going to be serious."

"It couldn't be anything else with Lydia as one of the principals," commented Wythie on her way through the room with some branches of apple blossoms for the vases, just catching Rob's last [206] words and their connection.

"We don't keep a servant—not even one; we have help," said Rob. "And she is much less helpful help for being so engrossed by Demetrius." She glanced at Cousin Peace as she spoke and instantly perceived the droop of the gentle head, the unwonted melancholy of her attitude.

"Cousin Peaceful, dearest, what are you thinking about?" she asked going over to put her arms around Miss Charlotte, oblivious to the floury record she was making on her cousin's soft grey waist.

"I am half afraid to tell you, for fear you will think me ungrateful, and——"

"Generally horrid," supplemented Rob. "So we shall, but never mind that!"

"You know how happy I am here, in my dear little lean-to room," Miss Charlotte went on, pressing the warm hands closer to her. "So you can't suspect me of lack of appreciation when I say that I am afraid that I want to take my insurance money and build a little home of my own on the site of the dear old one."

"I felt sure you were thinking of that, Charlotte, and dreading to say it," cried Mrs. Grey. "I couldn't anticipate you in speaking, but I have been sorry to see that you were longing for your [207] own home and not daring to say so."

"Do you approve, Mary?" cried Miss Charlotte, wheeling about with girlish eagerness.

"No; I think you are better here, among us all, without any care, and knowing that you are blessing us every day, merely by living," said Mrs. Grey, rising to join Rob at Miss Charlotte's other side. "But I understand the love of place, and the love of home—the feeling that you want your own little nook, and, since you do feel thus, I approve of your building. Yes, I approve of the building; I do not approve of your wanting—oh, I don't mean that! I mean I think you are entitled to your own fireside, but I want to keep you."

"You are the best Mary of all the thousands in the world!" cried Miss Charlotte. "You are so sweetly reasonable! Yes, I love every one of you much more than you know, well as you know my love, and I love this dear little grey house—but I want my home."

"You shall have your own home!" cried Mrs. Grey, while Rob and Prue looked at each other aghast at the prospect of letting Cousin Peace slip away out of their household. "The first thing to be done is to consult on plans."

"I have made some plans myself," said Cousin Peace meekly. [208]

"Oh, you sly, deceiving Cousin Peace!" cried Rob reproachfully, but not surprised to hear that the blind woman had been turning architect, for Miss Charlotte's blindness never seemed to be a deprivation of sight, so sensitive were her fingers and nerves. She now produced from her knitting-bag, which always hung on her left arm, two sheets of paper and spread them out lovingly. "I have been amusing myself with these at odd moments," she said. "I think this will make a charming and inexpensive little house."

Prue came over to look at the plans with the others. They were wavering as to line at times, but they were perfectly correct in dimensions, and were a design for a house most tasteful and comfortable, with all sorts of little nooks and contrivances to enhance the pleasure of living and the beauty of each room.

"It couldn't be nicer!" cried Rob, and immediately added: "Oh, my cake, my cake!" and fled. Her eyes were moist with tears when she came into the kitchen, and Lydia looked up with her serious air to inquire if anything had happened.

"Yes, Lyddie," said Rob. "It's all right, but it makes me heartsick. We've got to give up Cousin Charlotte. She loves us as much as we love her, but she wants to build a house for herself on her old place, and I suppose we must let her, because it is natural that she should hunger for her old surroundings." [209]

"I think," said Lydia with that portentous manner of hers, that made the opening announcement that *she* thought seem little less than the declaration of an ecumenical council, "I think that she ought to do it. I think everybody that can get one had ought to have a home. I have been wondering why Miss Grey didn't do just what she's going to do. As for you, you can't really say you need her, with such a family as yours is. I said to Demetrius the last time he was out that if she only would build and go to housekeeping I should ask her to let us take care of her place, him outside, me inside. For I might as well tell you now, Roberta, and you can tell the rest, that Mr. Dennis and I are engaged to be married."

"I hope you will be very happy, Lydia," said Rob, not quite knowing how to reply.

"He's a man in a thousand, in a million," said Lydia impressively, "for all you took a dislike to him when you first saw him."

"Oh, but I didn't, Lydia! I only disliked his methods of transacting business," cried Rob. "He came too much as the winds come when navies are stranded." [210]

Lydia passed over her denial with the dignified virtue of one who disdained casuistry. "You spoke up to him sharp, but he never laid it up against you," she said. "He has a disposition for which he had ought to be thankful to heaven, and I make no doubt he is. And he never practises any of those small vices which people allow themselves, and which pave the way to entire destruction—I allude to cigar smoking and the like."

Rob remembered the ashes in a certain jar in the sitting-room, left there by Basil and Bruce's cigars and Bartlemy's artist pipe, and was silent, examining her cake in the oven to hide her quivering lips.

"I am glad that he is a good man, Lydia, for I'm sure I don't see what you would do with an imperfect one," she said, and Lydia was gratified to hear the quaver in Rob's voice which she attributed to emotion. "And so you are going to be married, and want to live with Cousin Peace? Can your Demetrius do gardening?"

"He thoroughly understands all kinds of gardening," returned Lydia. "There are few auctions in Fayre, so between times he would be gardening, and I should do the housework. It would be a lucky arrangement for your cousin and—and us." And immovable Lydia faltered over the latter touching pronoun. [211]

"And what would become of us without you, Lydia?" asked Rob. "Have you thought of us?"

"My mother would come to do for you," said Lydia, "and she knows how to do everything better than I do."

"Is she—younger than you, Lyddie?" asked Rob.

Lydia gave Rob one of the glances by which she frequently reproved frivolity. "A mother is never younger than her child," she said sternly. "But my mother is livelier than I am, and she is only middle-aged—forty-three."

"How can your mother be only forty-three?" cried Rob involuntarily.

"I am twenty-four, and she was nineteen years old when I was born," said Lydia. "It seems to me I smell that cake."

"So do I," said Rob, taking it out of the oven. "Well, we'll see about your mother, and all the rest of the plan when the time comes. Cousin Charlotte has not even begun to build. I must hurry off, or I shall not be ready when the guests come." [212]

Rob ran out of the room, Lydia's voice pursuing her into the hall. "If she knows she can get Mr. Dennis and me she may hasten; her Annie that she had has gone away, and she would likely build quicker if she knew there was some one she could count on." Lydia called after her, and Rob burst in upon Wythie at her toilette in their bedroom with the surprising news of the past hour.

"Oh, dear," sighed Wythie while she laughed at Rob's account of Lydia's announcement, "how can Cousin Peace want to leave us and how can we let her go? Yet, of course, it is natural that she should cling to that spot where she was born and has always lived, and natural to want her own home. But that dear lean-to domestic chapel will be a sore loss to us! It seems to me that this has been a winter of uneventful events that count for a great deal."

"I suppose that is partly because we are at that age when everything seems significant," said Rob with great astuteness. "It will make a lot of difference to me just now if I can't get ready in time to be down at the station when the train arrives." And she frantically tried to find the button which was, naturally, on the other side of the band of the skirt, which she had put on wrong side out. [213]

"'Or madly squeeze a right-hand foot into a left-hand shoe,'" quoted Wythie mildly as she went to rescue Rob from her plight. "There is time, Robin, if you only wouldn't try to take it all at once."

"Robins are always flustering birds," said Rob emerging, flushed, but grateful, from the skirt which Oswyth had righted. "But you know it would be hard not to be on hand to witness the arrival of the first instalments."

This was "the spring opening," as Rob called it, of "the separate ell" of the little grey house. In other words the Flinders' farm had been made ready, after trying delays, to receive the four crippled children with whom Hester's experiment was to begin, and they were to be brought to Fayre by a delegation from New York on the mid-afternoon train. Dr. Fairbairn had had an inspiration, so natural that every one wondered why it had not been part of the plan from the first: this was to install Mrs. Flinders as housekeeper in her own house. It involved the presence of her paralysed husband, but Polly was to remain with the Greys, an arrangement so much to [214] the child's advantage that her mother gladly agreed to it. So the Flinders were already installed on the farm, which, after much discussion had received the name of Rob's suggesting, and was called Green Pastures.

"There is something so peaceful about it," said Rob, "and when we teach the children the child's own psalm they will take it as referring directly to themselves when they say: 'He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.' And if ever the attempt did grow into something important I for one would rather have it spoken of as Green Pastures than as the Hester Home for Incurables, or some such forbidding name—I hate the institutional sound!"

So Green Pastures it was, and a busy time its friends had had making it a real clover pasture for its little guests.

There was not to be a formal opening to which the public was invited; it was too simple and modest an attempt to be inaugurated ceremonially, and the youth of its founders made their elders desire to see its first beneficiaries installed in a way harmonious with that youth and inexperience. But on the other hand it was impossible to let the day go by without some special notice; the plan had grown too important for that. So the Baldwins and Mr. Armstrong were [215] coming out from town, bringing the children; the Rutherfords were coming home for the occasion, and Mrs. Silsby, Aunt Azraella and Miss Charlotte with Mrs. Grey were to have a tea in Mrs. Flinders' former best parlour after the children had been fed and tucked away in the little white enamelled beds provided for them.

A rosy-cheeked young woman with experience in a children's hospital, had been engaged to look after these first arrivals, and stood ready to receive them in her white cap and apron when Wythie and Rob and Prue had left Green Pastures at noon, having satisfied themselves that nothing was wanting, and having hovered over the spotless, little waiting beds with something painfully sweet and tender stirring in their womanly girl-hearts.

"I haven't done anything for this except sympathize," said Wythie ruefully as she walked down the street to the station with Frances and Prue, all three radiant in festive garments. Rob hastened to overtake them, putting on a new pair of gloves as she came, for which, in spite of propriety, there had been absolutely no time to delay in the house.

"What has any of us done more than that, except Hester and Rob?" asked Frances. "Rob has [216] earned money for it by her story-telling, and Hester has sacrificed for it, and founded it, but we have only encouraged it——"

"And danced and sang for it," added Prue.

"Your mother has done a great deal, and your father has given money enough to supplement all deficiencies in this beginning," said Wythie. "However, I am not envious; I only wish I were more useful."

"I think there isn't a bit of difference in the credit," said Frances, not merely sensibly but rather profoundly. "We all were ready to do what we could, and it is the will that counts, not opportunity. Hester and Rob are not like us—we are not brilliant like Rob, nor intense and tremendous like Hester; we are background figures, Oswyth."

"Well, of all things!" expostulated Rob. "Why we lean on Wythie like—like—oh, like gravity! I don't mean seriousness, because for that we should have to lean on Lydia, but gravitation gravity. She is our pillar of reliance, and our pillow of soothing in the little grey house. You know that as well as I do, Francie. And as to you, you founded my story-telling, and you are always a rock of common sense and efficiency."

"I'm afraid I shouldn't like too efficient a rock, Rob; it sounds formidable. But you needn't try to [217] console me; I don't need consoling. I accepted our relative positions when I was five years old, and it doesn't annoy me now. Besides, though mysticism and occult influences are not much in my line, I do have a half belief in the power of strong intentions and profound feeling to set in motion waves that bring about the end for which we can only feel and long. I can't express it clearly, but I mean I half believe that our united interest has a kind of power for good; it's like wireless electricity, used as a force, instead of to carry messages."

"Mercy upon us, Frances!" cried Rob, pretending to be stunned, though she perfectly understood what Frances meant. "I feel as if you were the chela and I were Kim! Aren't they mahatmas or something, who send down influences? You're an Indian mystic—I hope not an Indian fakir."

But Prue halted in her walk for a moment, holding her golden head high. "I know exactly what Frances means," she said, "and I believe it, too. Only I believe one all alone can make what she

wants come to her, without any union of minds."

Wythie turned to look with amazement at the tall girl whom she still regarded as her baby sister. [218]
She did not speak, but Rob uttered her thought for her.

"That it is only another way of saying that you feel that your will is very strong, my Prudy, so strong that you can't imagine yourself balked. But many a strong willed person has tasted bitter defeat: take care what you set your will upon," she said.

Prue tossed her head, but did not reply, and the whistle of the train half a mile away quickened the girls' steps and silenced their tongues.

It was curious to see the arrival of the party whom they had gone to meet. Mr. Baldwin handed down his wife and daughter; Mr. Armstrong followed, and then came the three Rutherford boys and Lester Baldwin, each bearing in his arms a child whose thin hands were clasped behind his neck, and whose wizened face looked dully upon the scene upon which they were appearing.

"I feel as if I were taking part in a tableau representing the Romans carrying off the Sabine maidens," said Bruce as soon as he was within speaking distance.

Rob laughed. "The Sabines didn't need robust warriors to steal them," she said, "if they looked [219]
like this. Aunt Azraella has sent Aaron with the carriage for the children, because it is more comfortable than these station things, which the rest of us are going to take."

"Wythie, Hester, Rob and Frances had better go up with the children," said Mr. Baldwin. "They will ride more comfortably in their laps."

"Of course they will," said Bruce. "Come on cushions—aren't you to be temporarily regarded in that light?"

Hester took on her lap the only little boy of the pathetic group, the child whose discovery had inspired and directed her vague dissatisfaction towards this charity, and over whom she had been keeping watch ever since. Wythie, Rob and Frances received the three little girls without a word, and Bruce's heart shone out of his eyes as he caught a glimpse of the moisture dimming Rob's laughing ones, and saw the sweet, motherly pity on her merry lips.

The children could not be won to talk; they lay looking gravely out on the green and blossoming world into which they were being introduced, but no expression of any sort of feeling escaped them.

"Hester, Hester, I beg your pardon that I ever thought you exaggerated," said Rob as they neared [220]
Green Pastures. "I am thankful that I helped you a little, and at last I understand that you were not too earnest."

"You are a splendid girl, Hester Baldwin," said Oswyth emphatically.

"I don't feel like a girl, Wythie. I am a happy young woman; I have found something to do in the world, and I have found my place. There isn't a dissatisfied corner in me now, and when I first knew you I was all cravings and emptiness."

Hester's earnest eyes, alight with joy, confirmed her words, and the nobility of her face far transcended mere beauty. In their hearts her three friends believed that Hester knew herself, and that she was to be one of those devoted women who find their life in losing it, and their happiness in turning aside from all personal happiness to minister to distress.

The wan children ate their light supper with gratifying appetites, and keen appreciation of Mrs. Flinders' buttermilk cookies and the fresh strawberries. Then they were handed over to the care of their nurse, and the friends to whom they owed their new home drank tea in the westerly room, flooded now with the long rays of the sinking sun.

Rob took her cup into the window and stood looking out on the peaceful Green Pastures into [221]
which these waifs had been gathered. Something stirred within her, the appeal of suffering childhood to a woman, however young that woman may be.

Mr. Baldwin came quietly up behind her. "Dear Rob," he said, "I am so proud of my girl, so happy to see how deep and fine is her nature that I want to tell you that I realize what your friendship has done for her, and that it was a fortunate day for Hester that brought to my office a brave, frightened little heroine in her black garments, and carrying her bumping suitcase."

Rob's lips quivered; she felt overwrought. "I have done nothing, Mr. Baldwin; it was all in Hester herself."

"All in her, but how much you have helped to bring it out, merely by being yourself, a high-minded, simple, wholesome, brave girl, you don't know. It's atmosphere and character that count, Robin, Bobs Bahadur, and we none of us realize how we mould others for good or ill when we breathe the air they breathe," said her fatherly friend. "Here comes Bruce after you; I must give place."

Bruce came up as Mr. Baldwin slipped away, and Rob turned back to the contemplation of the [222]
sunset.

"Say, Rob," Bruce began boyishly. "You know you call this house the separate ell of the little grey

house, I shall soon be graduated and reading under Dr. Fairbairn, and I mean to devote myself to this branch of practice, as you know. I feel as though the opening of Green Pastures meant the opening of my way before me. Don't you think, Rob dear, you might tell me that you're going to help me, that you'll be—be—why, be Rob," Bruce broke off with sudden helplessness and shyness.

It was a new thing to find Bruce stammering, and appealing to her, and Rob had been deeply moved by the clinging hands of the suffering little creatures whom they had brought home. She lost all control of herself.

"I don't see what makes you follow me here, into this window, to ask for help, Bruce Rutherford!" she cried. "Of course I can't help you; of course I don't even know what you mean!" added poor Rob, usually so scrupulously truthful.

"I wanted to keep the birthday of this house in which I mean to work by getting a word from you," [223] said Bruce aghast in his turn at Rob's change of demeanor.

"Well, of course; what word?" cried Rob. "I have given you lots of words."

"Why, Rob!" began poor Bruce reproachfully.

And just then Frances came up with her face aglow, and her eyes shining through unshed tears.

"Bruce, Rob!" she murmured. "Lester took me out in the garden and—He said he wanted to celebrate Hester's triumph by getting her a new cousin—He meant me, Rob!"

"Yes, he's been meaning you for some time," said Rob grimly. "What did you say?"

"What could I say?" said Frances simply, "but one thing?"

"Oh, just listen to that!" growled Bruce, and walked away.

Frances looked from his retreating back to Rob's perturbed face. "Rob!" she cried, "what have you done?"

"Nothing, nothing in this wide world!" cried Rob hysterically. "I should like to know why I should do anything? I hope you will be very happy, Frances, and I'm sure you will, because Lester Baldwin is a nice fellow, and if you don't mind marrying him, why you're sure to be happy." [224]

And Rob walked off in the opposite direction from the one Bruce had taken, leaving Frances to accept this dubious congratulation from her oldest friend, and to comfort herself with the reflection which she had often heard her grandmother make, that "heaven was full of days," and that Bruce and Rob would see another dawn.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN [225]

ITS GAINS AND LOSSES

"It will be a miserable summer," thought Rob despondently, keeping her face away from the range of Wythie's eyes as she stood before the glass brushing her hair for the night while her sister lay peacefully on her pillow, waiting for Rob to lie down beside her. Oswyth's and her mother's discretion and consideration oppressed Rob. They must have noticed that Bruce went home alone that night for the first time since Battalion B had been added to the assets of the little grey house, but they seemed not to see it. Rob, annoyed with herself, with Bruce, with fate, with the world in general and growing up in particular, suspected Frances of having given them a hint of her suspicions as to Rob's bad behavior that evening when she announced to them her own happiness. For Wythie watched her sister with a gentle gaze that Rob felt in her spine, but, contrary to their girlish custom, did not seem inclined to gossip over the happenings of that [226] night. She let perturbed Rob alone so considerately that Rob longed to complain of her cruelty. Rob felt very much as she had felt when, in her childish days after some misdemeanor her mother had "left her to her conscience," as the good Mardy used to say, a process that was harder to endure than the whipping which she had never received would have been.

It proved not to be a miserable summer in the least. Bruce went back to college, and returned to Fayre his old self, unchanged. Rob, alertly suspicious, guessed that Basil had advised him to manage Rob thus, and that the advice had originated in Wythie. She felt quite certain that the time was only postponed in which she should have to face the disagreeable duty of wounding the friend whom she loved best in the world—so she put it to herself—for there was that in Bruce's eyes and beneath his easy comradeship which told her that a frustrated attempt to have his way would not be final to him.

But after a little while, allowable to her discomfort, Rob lost her dread of Bruce, and there was no constraint apparent between them, and no more romance in the atmosphere of the little grey house than Wythie's placid happiness with Basil, and Lydia's comedy of betrothal to her [227] loquacious Demetrius.

In the meantime, the soft air of June was stirred by the carpenters' hammers rapidly putting up

Cousin Peace's new house, and visits to watch its growth made serious inroads upon the busy Grey household's time.

It was going to be a little cottage with remarkable effect upon its neighbour and elder by two centuries. For not only had Lydia's plan to take Miss Charlotte under her wing, and to bring Demetrius to supplement languid auctioneering by caring for Miss Charlotte's garden been accepted, but Miss Charlotte proposed taking Polly Flinders to live with her. The child and the blind woman had grown so fond of each other that Polly hung evenly balanced between her desire to remain under the same roof with Rob and to go to Miss Charlotte, while the latter pleaded to the Greys that she needed Polly, while her cousin, rich in three girls, could afford to give her up.

It was not decided, but there was sufficient likelihood of Polly's going to the new house to make Rob suggest that it be called Anemone Cottage, "and that won't mean the frail little spring anemone, Cousin Peace," she said, "but the sea anemone, with tentacles sucking in everything it can reach." [228]

"It is going to suck you into its depths, my Robin, just as my first house used to do, for its brightening," retorted Miss Charlotte.

College Commencement had passed—"commencement had ended," Bartlemy said—and the Rutherfords were all back in Fayre for the long vacation. Basil wrote every morning, to test his powers further in his chosen vocation; Bruce read and drove with Dr. Fairbairn every day; Bartlemy painted with industry, so that the long June days were far from idle ones. And Commodore Rutherford, "their long lost father," as Bruce called him, was coming home at last from the East to see the sons whom he had left tall boys, and was to find young men. There was a feeling of coming events in the air; with the supervising of the new house, the constant coming and going of Hester Baldwin, the absorbing interest of the increasing prosperity and success of Green Pastures, Mrs. Grey found her girls harder to secure for home usefulness than they had ever been before. Lydia complained feelingly of the difficulty she experienced in finding time to prepare the household linen which, though she would have no use for it in Miss Charlotte's house, she evidently regarded as equally indispensable to a lawful marriage as a license. [229]

Besides all these distractions which disturbed the even currents of life in the little grey house, Aunt Azraella was rapidly growing much more ill; it was plain to them all that the term of life allowed her by the doctor was to be greatly curtailed. Aunt Azraella had not been the sort of person to which young affections are likely to cling; but death is never less than awful, and the shadow of Azrael's wings, drooping visibly over the woman who bore his name, modified the sunlight of that summer in the little grey house. The Greys allowed no day to pass without many of its hours being spent by one of them up in the big house on the hill. Altogether it was a time of many interruptions.

Rob had told her first series of stories to the Fayre children, and was launched on her second set continued late into July. She was winding it up with great relief, though her audience gave her attention most flattering, considering the heat, and that they were all at what Prue called "the wriggling age."

The dear old wainscotted room was shaded into comparative coolness, and a great bunch of mignonette sustained Rob through her last story with its fragrance close to her hand. Over by the window sat little Polly Flinders, looking out dreamily upon the warm stillness of the afternoon as she listened to Rob. The child never joined the other children who flocked close to Rob's side and hung on her knees; her love for her idol was too exclusive to share with these more prosperous little ones, too sacred to reveal to their eyes—Polly kept her revelations of it for Rob's knowledge alone. [230]

Now she looked around so suddenly that Rob halted in her story, and asked: "What is it, Polly?"

"Your Aunt Azraella is coming," said Polly, and as she spoke Mrs. Winslow's figure passed the window, and paused at the rarely used door which led from this room out on the yard.

"Open the door, please, Polly," said Rob, wondering why Aunt Azraella should choose this entrance on her story-telling afternoon.

Mrs. Winslow entered, and seated herself near the door. "Go on, Roberta," she said. "I will wait; I wanted to see you alone, so came this way."

"Almost through, Aunt Azraella," said Rob. "So you see, children, as we were saying," she continued, "Godfrey de Bouillon was a great soldier, a wonderful leader of men, but that which we remember first when we think of him is not his high courage, or brilliant mind, but that he refused to wear a golden crown in Jerusalem, where his Lord had been crowned with thorns, and that he put away from him the honour and name of king, and would be called but the Defender of the Holy Sepulchre. Thus Godfrey, the hero, shows us that greatness of name and fame is less than greatness of soul, and his humble piety rings through the ages more loudly than the clash of his battles. We shall none of us be great in the other ways in which Godfrey was great, but we may try to have a little of his greatness of soul, and turn away from gain, and the glitter of worldly glory when conscience tells us that it is higher and nobler to be poor and lowly. And this last story of the crusaders shows us, what the lives of all real heroes show us, and that is that he is bravest who knows when to say No, and that the highest courage is to dare for the sake of right. It shows us that the greatest hero is not he whom the world honours, or who cares for its [231]

praise, but he who fights against meanness and cruelty; loving purity, truth and right better than anything that the world can give him. If we try, perhaps, like Godfrey of Bouillon, when we are [232] tempted we can refuse gold and high sounding title, and greater glory if to get it we should have to be less worthy of the Master whom, when He came to show the world the beauty of holiness, they crowned with thorns."

Rob's voice trembled as she ceased, and she buried her face for an instant in the mignonette at her side. The chivalric girl was stirred into profound emotion at the thought of lofty deeds; she thrilled and quivered at the presentation of the highest ideals, and responded to the beauty of renunciation with the full force of her own great heartedness.

The children crowded around her to bid her good-bye with as much eagerness and fervour as if this had been a life-long parting instead of the end of her stories for the summer. She kissed each flushed, upturned little face, and when the last had withdrawn, turned to Aunt Azraella with a tired sigh.

"It's lovely work entertaining them, Aunt Azraella," she said, "and beautiful to see how they care for it, but it is exhausting. Why, what has happened?" she added, seeing for the first time the expression on Mrs. Winslow's face.

"I am much worse, Roberta," said Aunt Azraella. "I felt so queer at noon that I sent for Dr. [233] Fairbairn, and he says my disease has taken a sudden turn for the worse. I shall probably die within two weeks—less time."

Rob dropped upon a chair and gasped, turning pale under the shock.

Mrs. Winslow went on in the same hard, even voice, as if she were announcing the most ordinary tidings. "The doctor said I must go to bed, but I made up my mind I was going to walk down here whatever he said; for the last time, you know. If a body's going to die, she is going to die, and it doesn't make any difference what you do. So here I am, I'm going all through this house, and you're not to say one word to any of the rest about what I've told you. Then you come home with me, and I will go to bed, for I don't believe I can keep out of it any longer. I want you to stay with me while I last. Now pull yourself together, Roberta, because you've got plenty of backbone when you need it, and I don't want your mother to know this is a visit to say good-bye to this house. I've always taken more interest in it than in any other place, except my own house, and more in your family than in my own relations—I like that Mayflower strain in the Winslows and Greys, and I like the way they forget all about money; we Browns always thought a good deal about money. [234] Now, come along, Roberta, and keep your face natural, as well as your tongue still."

Roberta arose to follow her aunt as that indomitable woman strode ahead of her to bid good-bye to the little grey house. She could hardly realize that her uncle's widow was really under sentence of death. It was so ghastly like her to take it in this way, like the gladiator that she was. "*Morituri te salutamus*," thought Rob, as she fell back to see Mrs. Winslow throw open the sitting-room door and say: "Good-afternoon, Mary," in her usual tone and manner, though her face betrayed suffering.

"I should like to go over the house," announced Aunt Azraella. "I want to see every room in it."

Mrs. Grey arose with a look of wonder; she, too, saw the change in her sister-in-law's face, but she had long since been taught that Mrs. Winslow disliked sympathy, so she made no comment, going at once to escort her over the little grey house, speculating the while on her reasons for wishing to see it.

Aunt Azraella made her tour of the rooms, pausing a nearly equal time in each, and scanning their every detail as if to impress them upon her memory.

"It is a pleasant house, Mary," she said when they reached the lower hall again. "It has something [235] about it that I don't understand, but it makes it more homelike than other places. My house will be better for Roberta; young people ought to have modern houses, and she will be able to afford to keep up the big house in good style, if she marries that second Rutherford boy. I want her to come up and stay with me to-night. I am not as well."

"I thought you were not as well, Azraella, but I feared to ask you," said Mrs. Grey. "Of course, you may borrow, Rob."

"Come up to-morrow and I will tell you how I am then," said Aunt Azraella. "I don't believe in complaining. Come, Rob." She led the way out the door; Rob ran up-stairs to snatch a few necessities for the night, glad to hide the face which she knew revealed her feeling on hearing her aunt's assumption that she was to marry Bruce.

She was not gone five minutes, and took her place at her aunt's side on the flagged walk where she was awaiting her, the only one of the little group in the doorway who understood the significance of Mrs. Winslow's long look up and down the little house which had seen so many [236] depart from the light of its twinkling window-panes.

"Now, then, Rob," said Aunt Azraella, and nodded over her shoulder at her sister-in-law, Miss Charlotte, Wythie, and Prue, with little Polly, peering out under Wythie's encircling arm. Roberta felt the arm tremble which she drew within her own, but otherwise Mrs. Winslow gave no sign of the tragedy for which this call stood.

At her own house, after the difficult mounting of the hill, Aunt Azraella's indomitable will refused to sustain her beyond the attainment of its end. She sank, half fainting, into the faithful arms of Elvira, who had been suffering agonies of anxiety since her mistress had taken her way and gone down for that last visit, against the doctor's prohibition.

"She's got to be got to bed, Rob," said that devoted woman, who for so many years had been Mrs. Winslow's patient and affectionate house-mate in the old relation that forbade the word servant.

In that final effort Mrs. Winslow's granite will had broken forever, when Rob and Elvira laid her in her ample bed, in her large, orderly and bleak chamber, she laid herself down to die without a struggle.

She suddenly seemed very ill. When Dr. Fairbairn came up that night he stood looking long at his [237]
patient as he leaned with folded arms on the black walnut footboard of the bed, decorated with a bunch of grapes and its leaves. His face wore a look that plainly declared his work done.

Rob did not leave her aunt that night. Mrs. Winslow's eyes followed the girl speechlessly; both Rob and Elvira saw that they begged Rob not to leave her. So, even when she slept, Rob kept her post, and at two o'clock Aunt Azraella woke to mental activity.

"Rob," she said, "there is something that I want to say to you, now, while we are alone, and before I get worse. I have made my will."

"Ah, Aunt Azraella, don't bother about such things now; just rest," protested Rob.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Mrs. Winslow with her accustomed energy. "Because I am done with my property, is that any reason that I should not make it available to the next one? This world, and its goods, too, still look important to me, Roberta; it is a good or a bad place while you are in it, according to what you have or lack, even if you don't stay in it much above seventy years; I am leaving it at sixty. I don't intend to be less practical because I'm dying, Roberta Grey. Now you [238]
listen to me. This house is yours; I've left it to you, as I said I should, and money to each of you girls. There's a niece of mine, Myrtilla Hasbrook, that may or may not turn up after I'm gone to tell you how I promised her the house and it ought to be hers. Now remember! It isn't hers, and she has no right to it. I've left it to you because I want you should have it, and supposing I did mean to give it to her once, that's not saying that I can't change my mind, is it?"

"No," said Rob, groping her way through vague fears, as her aunt paused for a reply. "Won't you tell me about this Miss Hasbrook, Aunt Azraella? Does she need the house?"

"She's my sister's daughter, and she isn't Miss, but Mrs. Hasbrook to begin with," said Aunt Azraella. "She's a young widow. As to needing the house, she needs almost anything. Myrtilla's one of the sort that hasn't any faculty. She married at seventeen, and now she's a widow at twenty-nine or thirty with four children. When I promised her the house I told her she could use it to take boarders, and get along; she's got her husband's life-insurance, and a little from her mother, but not enough to support four growing children. She's a gentle, harmless thing, but she [239]
hasn't gumption. Now, I've seen what there is in you, and I've made up my mind you're the one to keep up this house the way it should be, so I've left it to you. I only want you should understand, so if Myrtilla should come here and say anything—which it isn't at all like her to do, but she might —you're not to get any of your high flown, Grey notions, like your father, and give it up to her. For I'm certainly in the full possession of my faculties and I say it's yours. Now I'm going to sleep; it tires me to talk to-night."

Rob smoothed the sheet under her aunt's chin and turned the lamp a little lower without speaking. She was relieved to hear Mrs. Winslow's even breathing in a few moments, for she wanted to feel that she was alone to think.

She sat with her changeable face very grave, resting on the hand that her knee supported; she was thinking hard. The outline of the picture and the history of this hitherto unknown Myrtilla Hasbrook, the young widow to whom fate had been so hard, she was perfectly well able to fill out from her knowledge of Aunt Azraella's mind. She pictured her as gentle, shrinking, unfit to cope with difficulties, the sort of person whom Rob, out of her own sensitive soul and early hardships, [240]
most pitied, and whom she was to be the instrument of disappointing and further impoverishing!

No, she would not have the house! She started erect with the fulness of her determination. If she had any influence over her aunt-in-law, Mrs. Winslow, herself, should make right this intended injustice. She, Rob Grey, could get on perfectly with what she now had, and with the legacy that she could justly receive from her aunt out of the ample fortune her Uncle Horace had left her—but not the house!

She did not want to bother her mother with her refusal of this legacy, certain as she was that she should refuse it in any case, and she had a feeling that she did not want to pose as a heroine of renunciation in the eyes of her own family, especially Prue. When it was all over, some day she would tell her mother and Wythie all about it. She cast about in her mind for some one to help her to induce Aunt Azraella to change her will, and she thought of Bruce, Bruce whom she had abused, but who had never failed her when she needed a friend.

Bruce came in the morning early, sent by Dr. Fairbairn to administer certain remedies.

After the doctor-that-was-to-be had performed his task Rob followed him down the broad stairs [241]
and out into the dewy sweetness of the midsummer morning. She told him her story. "And you

wouldn't have the house if you were I, would you, Bruce?" she ended.

Bruce looked at her queerly. "If I were you I suppose I should do precisely as you do, being the same person," he said. "But I doubt that many who were not you would act thus."

"But, even if you were yourself, wouldn't you feel as I do?" persisted Rob.

"I think we generally agree, Robin," said Bruce quietly. "I should feel as you do, yes. It comforts me in saying so to know that I could not change your mind were I to try. But it is my duty to point out that you are throwing away a valuable piece of property, which, lying only two hours distant from New York, is bound to increase in value, and to which most people would cling tenaciously. Also, that there is no obligation upon you of defending this unknown young woman."

"But you would act precisely as I want to act, Bruce," said Rob. "You like to have me do it, and you know that we all think that enough of this world's goods does not mean great wealth, and that I have enough without this. You want me to try to persuade Aunt Azraella to carry out her [242] first plan—I see it in your eyes."

"Yes, Donna Quixote, I want you to act precisely in the chivalric spirit that inspires you, and I would rather see you—what you are," Bruce stopped himself, and went on more indifferently, "counting obligations binding which to many would not exist at all, than to see you richer than you are by millions. By all means make your aunt leave this house to her poor widowed niece. You will not want."

Rob flushed, half in gratification, half in annoyance at the remembrance of Bruce's own probable wealth, and what these last words might imply. And as she did so she remembered her words to the children on the preceding afternoon when Aunt Azraella had come in as she was finishing the story of Godfrey de Bouillon. She was glad, with a warmth at her heart, that Bruce was also knightly and had the inward vision which revealed to him duties and ideals to which the majority of mortals were blind.

"Good-bye, Roberta," said Bruce. "If I can help you to persuade your aunt to disinherit you, call on me; we'll manage it between us. Goodbye, Donna Quixote."

"Good-bye, Sir Bruce, the defender of the destitute," retorted Rob, and turned to run back into [243] the house with a light step and lighter heart. For with the wisdom of the noble folly of her training Rob was glad that she hoped to turn from herself her aunt's rich gift.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN [244]

ITS RENUNCIATIONS

The days were filled with visitors and Rob had no opportunity to present her petition to Aunt Azraella. Wythie and Prue relieved her at this strange dying bed, and Mrs. Grey was rarely absent. It was Rob, however, Rob, and not Wythie, to whom Mrs. Winslow turned for comfort in those hours in which she lay facing eternity with thoughts which could be conjectured, but which she never expressed.

In the old days she had found Rob unmanageable, too quick of speech and impatient of mind, and Wythie had been her favourite of the three Grey girls. Now she turned to Rob's high courage and bright cheerfulness as to a tonic. It was another Rob, an older, more controlled and wiser Rob, too, on whom she was leaning. Mrs. Grey saw with great rejoicing the development of her daring, high-minded girl, who needed but this touch of womanly gentleness which she was gaining to [245] make her very near the ideal of American girlhood.

"The end may be suffering," Dr. Fairbairn had said. "We shall be obliged to use morphine, probably; if there is anything that you think she would like to attend to get your sister-in-law about it now, Mary."

Mrs. Grey knew of nothing, but Rob, hearing, resolved that she must bring Aunt Azraella to change her will without further loss of time.

The brief sketch that Mrs. Winslow had given the girl of her young widowed niece had been enough to convince Rob that the promise of the house upon which she must be relying could not be broken for the benefit of Roberta Grey. But letters had been despatched to the various relatives of the dying woman, and Browns of varying degrees of kindred had been arriving in Fayre. For testamentary reasons, if not for more sentimental ones, Mrs. Winslow's death was an event in the Brown family.

Among the arrivals had been Myrtilla Hasbrook; she was in the house with her baby of four, as Rob plotted for the restoration to her of a bequest of which she had no idea that she had been deprived.

It seemed to Rob when her eyes first rested upon Myrtilla that she could have painted her [246] portrait equally well before she had seen her as afterward. She was of medium height, medium colouring, with a pale, gentle, resigned face, and a slender, drooping frame. Goodness, the

patient, uncomplaining goodness of the type of woman who has strength to endure forever, but none to remedy matters, shone from her sad eyes and quiet lips. Rob knew in a flash of intuitive pity just how such a woman must wear herself out to provide for her children in her poverty. How she would weep of nights lest that poverty prevent her from doing her duty by them. The young widow looked younger than her years, and Rob's great heart went out to her in a pulse of knightly protection.

"You poor thing!" she thought. "Indeed, I will never add one straw to the burden on those thin shoulders! If Aunt Azraella won't make a codicil to her will I'll give you the house anyway. But I should hate most dreadfully to appear in the light of a Noble Benefactor!"

That night Rob kept watch alone at her aunt's bedside. The dim light that deepened the darkness burned on the small table on which sat the alcohol stove and the collection of glasses and bottles inevitable to a sick room. Mrs. Winslow had slept, but at midnight she became wakeful, and Rob [247] felt that her opportunity had come.

"Aunt Azraella," she began, coming close to the bed with a timidity new to her. "Do you think it would harm you if I talked to you a little while? I want to ask a favour of you when nobody can hear us, and we are so seldom alone!"

"You can't harm me, Rob, because we know exactly what end we are travelling to, and if you want to ask something of me there may not be much more chance," said Mrs. Winslow with her customary stalwart sense.

Rob perched herself lightly on the edge of the bed. She longed to take into her own one of the hands lying near her on the coverlid, but its self-reliance was so apparent, even then, that she dared not venture.

"I'm afraid you won't like what I have to say, Aunt," Rob began. "It's about this fine house which you want to leave me."

"Which I have left you, once for all," Aunt Azraella sharply corrected her. "Give me a teaspoonful of my cordial."

Rob obeyed, resuming her place when she had done so. "I know that you have willed it to me, Aunt Azraella, but I want you please, please to alter that will, and give the house to Mrs. [248] Hasbrook. I can't take it."

Rob spoke with decision, and her aunt saw that she had considered, and had spoken out of a mind fully made up, saw it with dismay, for she had reason to know that Rob's decisions, once reached, were likely to be as inflexible as her own.

It was in a voice almost pleading that she cried: "Rob, Roberta, don't ask me to do that! I want you should have the house; I won't die happy if you haven't it, and I have a right to do what I please with it. Myrtilla has no claim."

"Yes, she has, Auntie!" cried Rob, slipping to her knees beside the bed and bringing her bright face close to the grim one on the pillow. "Dear Aunt Azraella, she has the claim of needing it so very, very much! She looks so sweet and patient and worn that it would be horrible to know that disappointment awaited her. I have all, more than I need, and she has those little children. Think of it, Aunt Azraella! And we shall know, you and I, that you wanted to give it to me, so that I shall always feel grateful, knowing that it was mine as far as your desire went. And nobody else need know anything about it. I couldn't live one week, feeling that because of me that poor girl was [249] losing the home she needed. Dear Aunt Azraella, you can die happy giving it to her, because you know the good you will do, while I could never live happy, owning the house. You have left it to me absolutely, to be used for Hester's children, instead of the Flinders' place, or for my own use. Then listen, Aunt Azraella: To-morrow morning add a codicil to that will and give the house to Myrtle. If you do not I must tell you truthfully that I shall hand it over to her the moment that it comes into my possession. Will you, oh, will you do this for me, Aunt Azraella?"

"Do you think you leave me much choice?" demanded her aunt.

Rob almost laughed; the remark was so exactly in Aunt Azraella's familiar tone.

"No, I don't; yes, I do," she said. "You can force me to give your niece the house, and I don't want to. It would be horrid to be regarded as—oh, no decent person would want to seem that kind of heroine," protested Rob incoherently.

Aunt Azraella understood, and liked the young creature looking so enthusiastic, so flushed and lovely in the dim night light, better than she had ever liked her before. She even went so far as to lay one hand lightly on the rippling hair.

"I wanted you to live in my house, Rob," she said, and Rob instantly melted at this glimpse of an [250] Aunt Azraella whom she had not known.

"Ah, dear Auntie, don't think me ungrateful; I love to think that you would rather it were I who had your home. But you have given it to me—that is enough for us to know. Now give it to Myrtle, for my sake, and let it be our secret," she said.

"Our secret? When I am gone?" asked Mrs. Winslow.

"Yes, into that world which holds no injustice," whispered Rob.

Mrs. Winslow was silent, and Rob waited, tears in her eyes, with the hand which had taken Aunt Azraella's hand after it had touched her hair, trembling eagerly.

"You see," Rob murmured when her aunt still kept silence, "it would hurt Myrtle if you took the house from her, and she had to receive it from me—and she has not deserved hurting."

"If I don't do this you will be made to see that the house is yours and that you can keep it," said Aunt Azraella slowly.

"Never, Aunt Azraella!" said Rob, "I shall give this house to Myrtilla Hasbrook; won't you do it for me?"

Mrs Winslow lay still, her head half turned from Rob. Then, suddenly she faced her. [251]

"Yes, I will," she said. "But I hate to."

Rob sprang to her feet with an exclamation of delight. "Thank you, thank you more than I can say, dear Aunt Azraella! You are good to me, and I shall never forget."

"I hear the hall clock striking three; I took my medicine by that, this one is slow. Give me my drops. I wonder if any one ever heard of undue influence brought to bear on a dying woman to take away a gift she had made the person influencing her? You have a good deal of Sylvester Grey in you after all, Roberta; it's lucky you've got enough Winslow to save you from being all visionary and impractical," said Rob's uncle's widow with something between admiration and disgust in her voice.

In the morning Mrs. Winslow repented of her promise. She sent everybody from her room while she talked to Bruce Rutherford of the matter.

Rob dared not speculate on what Bruce told Mrs. Winslow; he kept his promise to Rob and urged the change of will—that was all that she knew—and, after all, it was enough.

Mr. Dinsmore came up that forenoon, and was closeted with Aunt Azraella.

When Rob brought her aunt her broth at noon the sick woman looked up at her with an [252] inscrutable look. "I have kept my promise, Roberta; Myrtilla has the house," she said. "You're a foolish child, but maybe yours is wise folly. I suppose I should not be able to admit that much if I had not come to where you can look through."

More than that she never said, and in a day came the suffering that Dr. Fairbairn had foreseen, and with grim patience, and with the help of morphine Aunt Azraella waited the end.

It had come, and the Greys were back again in the little grey house, Myrtilla Hasbrook was installed in the big one, with her four little children to banish effectually its orderly primness under Aunt Azraella.

To Rob's unspeakable chagrin the secret of her generosity had leaked out; perhaps Aunt Azraella had meant it to be known, for she had acted upon Rob's thoughtless suggestion of a codicil, leaving the original bequest of the house to her to be read on the opening of the will, and she had so framed the codicil that it more than hinted at its being, the result of influence—and whose that influence save Rob's?

Rob turned thorny at her betrayal, and Wythie interposed her soft self as a fender for praise for [253] her sister. The matter ceased to be discussed, and only the young widow's loving eyes told Rob that in spite of herself she was regarded as the Noble Benefactor—capitalized—which she had determined not to be.

This was to be the autumn of renunciation for the little grey house. Cousin Peace's dear little nest was built, and she and little Polly Flinders were to take possession of it as soon as it was made ready. And Lydia was solemnly prepared to espouse her Demetrius, and her mother was arriving to take—though perhaps not to fill—her place in the Grey household.

"Demetrius and I consider it wrong to indulge in worldly display at such a solemn event as entering into the holy bounds of matrimony," said Lydia, whose language grew more and more impressive as she profited increasingly by the companionship of Demetrius, and as she approached "the bounds" of matrimony. "I shall wear a brown suit throughout, with a brown hat, and no ornament but a brown feather. I'd like to ask you girls to the ceremony, but we consider it right to make it private. I've asked my mother to get here in time for it, and my friend Ella M. Barnes is going to stand up with me, and his brother, Lysander Dennis, is going to come out to [254] stand up with him, and that's all there'll be, except the minister's wives, or somebody for the witnesses." Rob with difficulty restrained herself from suggesting that the minister's wife was probably not plural, and her mother asked instead: "Where are you to be married, Lydia?"

"At the minister's house, the Methodist minister's, because Demetrius' is willing to waive the Congregationalist, which is his sect," said Lydia.

"I should like to have a wedding supper for you here," said Mrs. Grey. "You have so long been an inmate of the little grey house."

"No, I don't want you should," said Lydia firmly. "I don't care about wedding suppers. You've given me my outfit, and that's enough. I'd rather you used the money in a good cause. If you wanted to do any more for me—you might subscribe, the whole family, to that temperance paper

I set so much by; I'm getting up clubs."

"We will wait, then," said Mrs. Grey, controlling her lips. "We would rather do something more personal for you, Lyddie; there may be a chance later."

The three Grey girls hung out of the upper windows, watching with breathless interest Lydia [255] departing to her marriage. Demetrius had come out from town to espouse Lydia in the glory of deeply creased pearl grey trousers, a white vest, stately Prince Albert coat, and a snowy satin tie, all topped by a silk hat. Fortunately the bride had secured Ben Bolt against an assault on this wedding raiment. The groom and bride-elect went out arm in arm from the little grey house, Lydia dignified in her uniform brown and audibly starched skirt. It occurred to the admiring girls, hurling slippers at her from their windows, that Lydia's mind was more distracted by her superiority to wedding finery than it would have been by all the glory of veil, wreath and bridal white.

After the wedding Lydia's mother returned to the grey house in Lydia's stead. The happy pair had gone on a wedding journey to Chautauqua, which it appeared both had longed to see; on their return they were to go to the new house to superintend Miss Charlotte; the little grey house would know Lydia no more.

Her mother proved to be a person who at once announced her daughter's likeness to her father, because she bore no resemblance to her mother. Her name was Rhoda, and she was rounded at every point, with an almost African tendency to sway her plump person, and a cheerful readiness [256] to laughter. She was, as Rob had hoped, several years younger than Lydia, although she had lived two decades longer; age being, as, of course, every one knows, not a matter of years.

Timidly the Grey ladies confided to one another after Rhoda had been installed in Lydia's deserted room, that they foresaw something like relief in the possession of a lighter character in their kitchen. Rob said that she had learned to overlook herself, with charity for her own shortcomings, but that Lydia had made her dimly conscious that, ignore it as she would, she was on the Index. Wythie added that, good girl though Lyddie was, it would be restful not to feel as though one's most decorous street gown were a tarleton spangled skirt and a bright pink bodice.

"It is a funny wedding," said Prue from her own room. "I wonder whether people like that are really happy."

"They think they are, Prudy, and that does just as well," laughed Rob, but Wythie and she glanced at each other. Prue was a young lady, though she was but seventeen, and both her sisters feared that their hope for her was not to be fulfilled.

Bartlemy's fondness for her was unmistakable, but Arthur Stanhope, the acquaintance of the [257] Twelfth Night entertainment, came more and more frequently to the little grey house, and Bartlemy's artistic eye did not appreciate Prue's marvellous beauty more keenly than did this newer friend. It was impossible for her mother's daughter to care for any one for the sake of his wealth, but Prue was young, and splendour and wealth had always held for her a glamour that it had not possessed for the other two girls.

Might it not be that Arthur Stanhope's immense fortune might clothe him in a charm that Prue, innocent of worldly intent, might mistake for love?

Well, Arthur Stanhope was trustworthy; Prue would not choose ill in choosing him, but Wythie and Rob were Bartlemy's advocates, though Rob glowered at a hint that Bruce deserved at least as well at her hands.

Only one year more and then would come the first break in the Grey household, for then Wythie and Basil would be married. She was twenty years old herself, poor Rob, rebelling against the fulfilment of their beautiful girlhood.

Two weeks after Lydia's wedding Miss Charlotte's tiny house received its final enrichings, and the last of her possessions had been carried by Battalion B from the little grey house to the new [258] home. It was a day of tremendous excitement, for not only was it to see Cousin Peace's establishing, but at its close, Commodore Rutherford was at last coming to Fayre.

October winds were blowing high as Wythie, Rob, and Prue followed their mother and Cousin Peace down to the house which awaited them on the spot where Cousin Peace had lived all her serene life. Polly had been taken down first, "to make it seem homelike," Cousin Peace said, and to be there to welcome her. The boys were there also, and Frances; while Myrtilla Hasbrook, with her four children, had preceded the hostess to her home, and was there ready for the modest housewarming which this installation was to be. Mr. and Mrs. Demetrius Dennis had proved their title to look after Miss Charlotte by the shining order of everything, within and without, and by the odours which wafted in from the little kitchen.

Mrs. Grey, Miss Charlotte and the girls came into the square hall, which was also the living-room, and their faces brightened at the wood-fire on the hearth, and the sunshine pouring through the deep recessed windows, with their half curtains fluttering in the breeze which the fire necessitated admitting.

Polly ran to meet Miss Charlotte as if she had been parted from her for a month, instead of less [259] than an hour. Then she turned to Rob and flung her arms around her. "I wish I had you both in one," she said.

"Like two out of a set of Japanese boxes?" suggested Rob. "It's much nicer to have us separate. Besides, Cousin Peace and I would be certain to quarrel as to which should be the outside one. You haven't gone away from us, Polly-kins—this little house is only the lean-to room, leaning a little further. And isn't it the dearest little home?"

There was no mistaking that Polly thought so. Miss Charlotte drew a long breath of profound content as she turned her face, from point to point, precisely as if she saw, whereas she was inhaling the room, if one may so express it.

"We are authorized, Miss Grey, to present you with this house, yielding up to you all claim and title," said Basil, with a tremendous bow, and as if the property had been his until that moment.

"And I have made a poem for the occasion, which I will now recite for you," added Bruce. "Usually it is Basil who is regarded as the literary member of Battalion B, but I have usurped his [260] office. You will please notice that it is not my fault that the rhyme of my poem halts in one place—the only place, in fact, for the poem is not long. If the English language were ever pronounced as it is spelled the rhyme would be perfect, which you will at once perceive after I have recited it. Ladies and gentlemen: My poem."

Bruce also bowed deeply, turning from side to side, then proceeded to recite slowly and impressively:

Miss Grey,
The key!

and handed Miss Charlotte the key to her own front door.

"You perceive," said Bruce as soon as he could speak for his audience's applause and laughter, "that the spelling of those two words is identical; evidently the pronunciation of one or the other should be changed. There was not time after the composition of the poem—which consumed hours—to decide which it should be."

"If you had written your poem in Irish brogue it would have settled itself," observed Rob.

"Now we heroes of Battalion B are going down to meet our long lost father," said Bartlemy. [261] "Come Bas and Bruce; there's not too much time."

The three tall, stalwart young fellows tramped out of the house and down the walk bordered by the old-fashioned shrubs which had sprung up again since the fire.

"How proud of them their father will be!" said Mrs. Grey, watching them with as loving a look as if they had been her own boys.

Polly and the little Hasbrooks were already friends, and Polly bore the four away to display the charms of her new home.

"It's as nice as it can be, and I'm glad you have it, Cousin Peace, but only think what renunciations the little grey house has had to make lately—you and Polly, Lydia—I suppose I can't include Demetrius——"

"Are those the only renunciations, and is it only the little grey house which has renounced, Rob dear?" asked Myrtle Hasbrook significantly.

"But, as I was about to say when this lady rudely interrupted me," continued Rob frowning at Myrtle, fearfully, "consider what we have gained: A new house to make a supplementary home; a [262] new kind-of-cousin-through-our-aunt-in-law; up at the big house, little Doris and Ted and Bobby, besides dear little Betty to pet and look after, and——"

"Our father, dear Grey people," broke in Basil's voice, completing Rob's sentence.

The group around the fireplace of the new house turned towards the door.

They saw the three tall Rutherford boys, and with them a man in navy uniform, as tall as his sons, smiling at them with his handsome bronzed face.

"I need no introduction to the Greys. I have known you all so long through these great boys of mine that it feels like coming home, merely to meet you. It will take all of my two years' leave of absence to tell you how grateful I am for all that you have done for my boys. Dear Mrs. Grey, I am your humble debtor," said Commodore Rutherford, bending over the motherly hand which had wrought so much good to his sons, with a something caught in other climes added to his cordial frank heartiness of manner. "And which is Oswyth, my daughter Wythie?" he asked looking unerringly straight at Wythie's blushing and happy face. "My little girl, you dear, little old-fashioned, sweet faced little girl, I verily believe that Basil's love is not blind." And he kissed [263] Wythie tenderly, half lifting her as he touched her cheeks.

"Come to supper in my new little house, and insure its prosperity by its happy beginning," called Miss Charlotte's musical voice from the dining-room.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN [264]

ITS FIRST WEDDING

All winter Wythie had hemmed damask and stitched linen, like the old-fashioned little soul that she was. Not Oswyth Grey, the first, in her generation could have burned with more housewifely zeal for home-and-hand-made furnishings for the home to which she was never to go from the little grey house than did this Oswyth, set down, a sweet anachronism, amid the age of sewing-machines and ready-madeness. The long winter days were too short for the dear little woman, expert needlewoman though she was, in which to prepare for the home to which she was to go in June when Basil was graduated.

The Caldwell place—now the Rutherford place—was going through thorough renovations. The Greys had always known that the Rutherford boys were provided with enough money to remove them beyond anxiety as to the future. It was precisely like their unworldliness to accept this fact [265] vaguely, and it gave Wythie something approaching a shock to discover that Basil was rich, measured by her simple standards.

"It won't matter in the least how poor are the books which he writes, Wythie; he will be able to live while they are writing, and then publish them himself and buy up the entire edition. So aren't you glad that his mother left Basil such a pretty little fortune?" asked Rob, energetically creasing the hem of the napkin for which she had offered her help.

"I think Basil will write nothing but poetry for twelve months," added Prue. "So he will need every penny. I don't consider the Rutherford boys' fortune riches."

"It is enough to keep up that big Caldwell place with two women and a man servant, and to live tastefully and other-fully; I call that rich, Prudence. What would you have?" said Rob.

Prue arose, tall and graceful in her eighteenth year, as a young goddess, and walked to the window where she stood looking out, her hands clasped at the back of her head with its crown of golden hair. The sunshine lit her up into a splendour that had nothing to fear from its most illuminating ray, and Wythie's busy hands paused, with her needle held at the full length of its thread, to look at her anew with an overwhelming sense of her fitness for a brilliant setting. [266]

"I would have," said Prue slowly, without turning around, "I would have an income that was equal to these boys' principal. I would have great spacious rooms, filled with the most charming, exquisitely costumed people. I would have a retinue of well-trained servants that would keep me from feeling one jar of the wheels of living. I would have a life full of big interests, not a little, limited life like ours here. I would have the world, my sisters." And Prue extended her arms with a regal gesture that seemed at once to hunger for it and to seize it.

"Oh, Prue, Prudy!" expostulated Wythie in genuine distress. "After all our happy years in this dear little house! After all our blessed mother has taught us of the beauty of simplicity and unworldliness!"

Prue turned then to look at her elder with a tolerant smile. "Don't be so shocked, my dear, little, contented Mouse," she said. "You look as though I had announced my desire for something criminal. I don't want the world that we renounce in baptism; I don't want it in a sordid, vulgar, mean way. I want a big stage and on it I'd like to play a big part, and I'd like to use the power it [267] gave me for glorious things. There are more ways of being good than humdrum ones."

"You are ambitious, Prudence, and Mardy says that ambitious women are not likely to be happy ones," insisted Wythie.

"Then I must be unhappy. I can't make myself like you, Wythie, satisfied to live, like Kiku-san, purring by the fire, nor like Rob, throwing herself into whatever lies at hand, and spending herself for a tiny circle," said Prue. "I'm going out into the world and it shall not be the worse for having me. I'm going to be part of a great scene, and I don't mean to be a blot on it."

Rob had let her napkin fall and was watching Prue as closely as Wythie was, sharing her presentiment of misfortune for their beautiful youngest, but seeing farther.

"Don't look so troubled, Wythiekins," she said. "Prue must dree her wierd, like the rest of humanity. She never was the wren we were; she wants to be an eagle and soar against the sun. I can understand her better than you do. I have my restless moments, but I think there is an instinct in me that is prescient; I know without having tasted, that the fruit of ambition does not nourish. Prudy will flash out into her bigger world, and she will learn that nothing matters, [268] nothing counts but love and the inner things. I'm not two years older than you, my little tall sister, but I'm right, as you will see. It isn't only that Mardy thinks this; I feel it, or nobody knows what mad things I might do, for I'm fearfully impatient at times. It won't harm her, Wythie; the only difference is that what you and I know Prue must be taught by experience and disappointment."

"You talk like all the prophets melted into one," said Prue, impressed in spite of herself, for Rob's flashing dark eyes saw far, as her family well knew.

"Nothing that ends can satisfy any one with a mind, and much more with a soul, Prue. It is simple enough to understand, if once you realize that. Your world is too brief, dear Prudy. If you go forth to conquer it you will turn back some day to the narrow field you had here, and see that it was intrinsically a wider one, reaching farther, than that which you mistake for greater," said Rob.

"You talk like an old woman, and you are as inexperienced a girl as I am," said Prue.

"She talks like what she is; a creature of insights, and that is not a matter of years; Rob has always known," said Wythie, warmly. "'Knowledge comes, but wisdom lingers.'"

"Mercy upon us, Wythie, you and Rob ought to go about like Dinah Morris in 'Adam Bede,' in a cap and kerchief preaching unworldliness," cried Prue petulantly. "I shall take the world into my hands, not into my heart, and I'm going to make it give me its best gifts." She tossed her head as she spoke, and Wythie and Rob felt that her beauty made hers no idle boast. [269]

Rob arose and, putting both arms around her, kissed Prue as her mother might have done. "Go your ways, dear," she said. "We fear nothing for you but that they will be harder ways than ours, and that in the end its youngest child will look back longingly at these peaceful years in the little grey house."

Prue broke away and quickly left the room, annoyed, moved, excited.

Rob went back to her seat and picked up her napkin, absently, examining it closely, as if the future lay folded in its hem.

"This means the death knell to poor Bartlemy's hopes, Wythie," she said. "This means Arthur Stanhope and his million."

"Ah, yes, I know that," sighed Wythie. "But, of course, it doesn't mean that Prue will marry for money!"

"No, but—well, we can't be sure, but I'm afraid that she doesn't realize the influence it has had on her mind," said Rob. [270]

"Arthur Stanhope is very nice," suggested Wythie.

"How often have we assured each other of that?" laughed Rob. "We don't seem at ease about it. But he is, really, very nice, only he doesn't strike me as particularly forceful—and then he isn't, Bartlemy!"

"Oh, that's really the whole trouble," mourned Wythie. "Our dear, big Bartlemy! And I was so sure that not a link of the triple alliance would fail!"

Rob looked up quickly, but Wythie had not the most remote intention of teasing, so she resumed her creasing with heightened colour, and Wythie hemmed on, lost in thought.

The Grey girls went to the commencement, and saw their Battalion B dismissed from their beloved Mother Yale with honours for which all three, each in his way, had worked hard. The last train brought them back to Fayre: Wythie tucked under Basil's father's arm, who seemed hardly less fond of his little almost-daughter than Basil, while Basil looked after Hester; Lester Baldwin devoted himself to Frances, and Rob and Prue fell to Bruce and Bartlemy's share, just as they had always done. [271]

"Mother Grey, here are our alumni!" cried Commodore Rutherford, his voice resounding through the stillness of Fayre at midnight as the party came up the flagged walk.

"I think it sounds pretty bad to say: 'I am an alumnus,'" said Bartlemy. "Much as I coveted the title it sounds zöological to me."

"Dear boys, I congratulate you with all my heart," said Mrs. Grey. "I feel a little of Mr. Peggotty's wonder when he found Davy 'a gentleman growed.'"

"I hope you are not struck by finding us gentlemen? We've been tolerably growed ever since you've known us," said Bruce.

"It was a delightful day? Not a blemish in it?" asked Cousin Charlotte, who had come up with Polly for the night to pay tribute to the alumni.

"It was the most beautiful, faultless day one could imagine," said Hester.

Basil began to count on his fingers. "Ten days from to-day I can easily imagine far more beautiful," he said, with a rapturous look at Wythie.

"Rhoda has made us chocolate, dear Alumni," said the Grey mother. "And we're going to drink your health from the cup from which Washington pledged the Grey of that day." [272]

She did not care to discuss that ten days distant celebration, glad as she was that Wythie was to be so safely happy.

It was such a very short time to keep the circle in the little grey house unbroken, and those ten days sped like swallows over the old roof.

There had been stirring discussions as to the manner of Oswyth's marrying; only one thing had been settled from the first: Wythie insisted on a perfectly simple wedding, and on being married in her beloved little home.

When it came to inviting and omitting, the matter grew difficult. The Greys suddenly realized how long was their list of friends with a claim, once they admitted the claim of any outside the most strictly limited circle of relatives and intimate friends. Hester and Frances must be present, yet

why not with them the Fayre girls and young men with whom Wythie had played from the day when her shoes were guiltless of heels and more than liable to bend around the ankles?

It ended in asking so many people that it was "a question as to how they could be nearer present than under the apple-trees," Prue said, and her remark solved the problem. It was June, and all [273] the doors and windows of the little grey house could be thrown open to its warmth. Like all early houses the grey house had many doors, letting its guests step forth under its trees with but a brief delay upon broad flagstone steps. Wythie was to be married in the big wainscotted room in which her father had spent most of his dreaming days. Hester, Frances, Rob, and Prue, with the help of Bruce and Bartlemy, with Lester, had covered the walls between wainscotting and low ceiling with mountain laurel, and the effect was most beautiful.

The old clergyman who had baptised and catechised Wythie was to marry her, and Dr. Fairbairn was to give her away. Rob and Prue, in pale green gowns, were to be Wythie's bridesmaids, the other two Rutherfords supporting Basil. Wythie had begged that Polly might be flower maid, not in a bridal procession, since there was to be none, but carpeting with rose leaves the place where she and Basil were to stand while the Fayre young people sang the Lohengrin march without accompaniment.

Wythie had stood out for sentiment, and her wedding-gown was a frail muslin of the first Oswyth's, wrought with that other Oswyth's needlework, made, so tradition had it, for her own [274] bridal which was never to be. Over it fell from the crown of Wythie's fair head to her little feet a priceless old veil worn for three generations by many brides of the Winslow race. Her only ornament was Basil's gift of his mother's pearls, on the back of whose clasp he had had engraved the poem which he and Wythie had read in the garret on the day of their betrothal, the stanza written to the Oswyth of long ago.

Wythie, ready for her bridal, stood for the last time before the mirror of the room which she and Rob had for so long shared through their happy childhood, their anxious, yet happy young girlhood, and through the perfect sympathy of their dawning womanhood and grown-up love. It seemed to Wythie, as her hands smoothed her frail old gown, that in some mystical way her dream had been fulfilled, and that in her that earlier romance was perfected.

Then she turned to her dear ones. Prue stood tall and beautiful in her mermaid-tint of robe, smiling, glad of Wythie's joy, yet moved. But Rob's cheeks were crimson in her effort for self-control. Say what one would, this was separation, and though the new home was so near she was giving up her Wythie. Mrs. Grey smiled at Wythie bravely, saying as she met her imploring eyes: [275] "My darling, you have been all that a girl could be to her mother; I am glad to give you to Basil to be all that a woman can be to her husband."

But Wythie threw herself into her arms, crying: "Don't give me, Mardy; I can't be given. I must still be a daughter of the little grey house."

"Now, Wythiekins, don't be a goose! We couldn't get rid of you if we would," said Rob sternly. "It's lovely to have a brother. There's the chorus, the wedding march. Trot along Wythie!" And she hurried the little bride from the room, imploring all the powers that be to help her to drive back the sob then choking her and all succeeding sobs.

There was not a formal entrance. Before the guests realized that they were coming, Oswyth and Basil stood in their places on Polly's fragrant carpet, with Rob and Prue and Bruce and Bartlemy on either hand, and with Mrs. Grey, Commodore Rutherford and Cousin Peace as near as they could get, and with Polly looking up into the clergyman's eyes with such a solemn face that those who were not too deeply interested to notice her, wondered if she were going to forbid the bans.

A few words, the promises asked and given, and Oswyth Grey was Oswyth Grey no more. Young [276] Basil Rutherford, carrying himself proudly, humbly erect, turned to lead down among his friends his little wife.

Rob did not know how the next half hour passed; she helped Wythie into her travelling gown and for one, long moment, the sisters clung to each other. For whatever happiness the future held, this was a sort of parting, and the little grey house had given up its eldest daughter.

Mrs. Grey followed Basil and Wythie out on the steps, tears in her eyes and smiles on the lips which kissed and blessed Wythie clingingly. A crack of a whip, Myrtilla Hasbrook's baby Betty upset a basket of rice, and Wythie was gone.

Rob, seeking for a spot in which to hide till she could be sure of herself, came upon Polly crying her eyes out in the hall closet, with Bruce trying to comfort her.

"Oh, Rob, oh Rob!" sobbed Polly. "The only thing that I can think of to make me bear it is that I'm so thankful it isn't you!"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN [277]

ITS DENIAL AND ITS GIFT

Bartlemy was painting Prue. Not that there was anything novel in this; he had been painting Prue at every opportunity since he had first known her, but this attempt was an ambitious one, not a portrait, nor a study of the single figure in some pretty pose as usual, but a larger canvas and a difficult composition.

Under the splendid trees of the hill place where the little Hasbrooks and their mother were reigning what Aunt Azraella might have considered a reign of terror, Prue posed for Bartlemy with the four children around her whose eager hands she was filling with daisies. The picture was to be called: "My Lady June," and on it Bartlemy built high hopes of early fame. It was progressing slowly; neither bribes, threats nor prayers could keep Ted and Bobby Hasbrook still long at a time; Doris was an ideal model, but lively little Betty was as reliable as a butterfly, and [278] Bartlemy had to take what he called "snap-shot strokes" on her restless little figure.

The picture bade fair to be something well worth doing if Bartlemy proved equal to his own conception. Prue, lovely beyond words in her floating white draperies, swaying downward to the children as she enriched them with the dower of June, was like the incarnation of the summer-time, so exquisite that the young artist had to fight to keep his hand steadily at his work, and his mind from wandering from Prue as a model to the Prue whom he daily feared more and more beyond his reach.

Basil newly married and engrossed in his happiness, Bruce working hard under Dr. Fairbairn's strict requirements left Commodore Rutherford very much to the society of his youngest son, between whom and the big sailor there sprang up a beautiful intimacy of friendship, founded on their differences. Bartlemy was sufficiently an artist to talk of himself quite simply, and he and his father had discussed the probability of Prue, at some future day, making him happy as Wythie had made Basil.

"You are only a boy, my great son, but I think you know perfectly well what you will want when you are ready to take it, and though you are so young I should be delighted if beautiful Prudence [279] cared enough for you to wait for you. It would not necessarily be long; you have as much to start upon as Basil has," said this comrade-father, wise in reading the set of tides and winds. "But, my son, though Prue is fond of you in her frank sisterly manner of established custom, it is Arthur Stanhope whom she will marry, and not my boy, who must find his consolation in the galleries of Europe as many another disappointed artist has found it before him."

"Not without a try at a better fate, father," said Bartlemy with a certain compression of the lip that meant determination.

Prue, bending forward that day, under the glorious trees, amid the waving grass, and holding out the daisies to wriggling Bob and Ted, felt the determination and preoccupation of the painter's mind, and dreaded a scene that would be painful to them both. So she chatted on in a ceaseless flood of varying topics, wondering if this really could be only Bartlemy with whom she felt so ill at ease.

"See here, boys, I'm going to chloroform you the next time," cried Bartlemy at last. "How do you think I can paint a perpetual motion—let alone two motions? Oh, say, Betty, now don't jump out [280] of the picture like that, not even if you do want to reach that tassel grass!"

"Betty, Betty, try to be quiet!" begged Prue. "Poor Bartlemy! he can't paint, and you will have spoiled our beautiful picture!"

"It's so hot!" sighed Betty.

"Yes, and what do we care for pictures? You can get better ones'n this'll be at the grocer's, swapping for soap wrappers," grumbled Bobby.

"'N Doris wants to finish Tobias' collar, though she's too polite to say so," added Ted.

"Doris is a comfort, a model model," said Bartlemy. "We might as well let the kiddies off, Prue; they've stood it as long as they can, and the rest of the time they would be no good. I've got what I wanted most to-day, and can work it up without models for a day or two."

The children had scattered at the first suggestion of dismissal, all but Doris, who paused to pick up some tubes and a brush which Bartlemy had dropped before walking sedately away to resume the collar which she was making for old Tobias, who found his declining years sunshine-flooded by the coming of this little maid.

Bartlemy set his boxes in order, and folded up his easel, then he looked up at Prue, who said [281] hastily: "I think I'll go on up to the house and see Myrtle Hasbrook for a little while."

"No; don't, Prue. Let me tell you what I was thinking," said Bartlemy. "I was thinking," he continued, disregarding Prue's gesture of dissent, "that I should like to paint you as Romola."

"Romola? Among these Connecticut hills?" laughed Prue.

"No, indeed, but Romola in Florence," said Bartlemy. "Get an old Florentine costume, and the Florentine background, and wouldn't you make a dandy model for Romola?"

"It's not very easy to get the Florentine background—" began Prue.

"Perfectly easy," said Bartlemy eagerly, interrupting her. "Prue, I'm going over this autumn. I have enough money to afford never to sell a picture—as much as Bas has. Come with me to

Florence; let me show you, let us see together for the first time the pictures we all dream of, and let me see the people in the galleries turn away from the Titians, and the golden hair which Henner paints to look at the golden-haired American girl, more beautiful than any of them, my pride, my model, my inspiration, my——"

"Bartlemy, wait!" cried Prue in distress, hardly knowing this eager, earnest pleader for her old chum. "I may go to Italy, too—not this autumn, but by spring. We are such old friends that I can tell you, and you'll understand, though I would not have any right to speak of this to any one else. Perhaps you may paint me as Romola in Florence, if we meet there. I want to go to Europe to stay for a long time—on my wedding-trip. Arthur Stanhope—Oh, Bart dear, please don't look so hurt. He hasn't told me that he cares for me, not yet, but I know that he does care and will say so, and I shall go to Italy with him, not with my dear old chum, Bartlemy. But I'll see you there, and you shall paint me as Romola, Bart dear. I'd love to be painted as Romola, not Romola in black and serious under Savonarola's influence, but radiant, beautiful, golden-haired, young Romola, as she was when Tito found her." [282]

"And you'll always care for me; why don't you add that, Prue—it's what girls say in novels when they don't care a hang for a fellow," muttered Bartlemy.

"Oh, I do care for you, I shall always care for you," protested Prue eagerly. "I didn't say it because I know you are sure of it! Aren't you my special property, the member of Battalion B that belonged to me, just as Basil and Bruce belonged to Wythie and Rob?" [283]

Bartlemy looked up at the girl with a new anxiety that made the noble lad forget his own misfortune for an instant. She spoke like a child, with entire unconsciousness of the sting this assurance must bear for Bartlemy.

"Say, Prue, you are fond of Stanhope? You—you aren't making a mistake, are you? Because if you are I should think you would see what all this is to me," he said. "I don't understand how you can help knowing that kind of caring doesn't comfort a fellow much, not if you've felt the other kind of love yourself."

"I'm not making a mistake, Bart dear. I'm as fond of you as I can be, but Mr. Stanhope is ever so much older than I am, and it's quite, quite different. We are chums, Bart, and we shall be always, shall we not?" Prue held out her hand with a cheerful kindness that made Bartlemy catch his breath as he took the little white thing that seemed to understand as well as the girl's brain did what she was denying and what she was offering him.

"It isn't likely that I shall change much to you," he said, and even Prue saw the mute misery he was trying to hide.

"It's only because I am pretty and you are an artist, Bartlemy; if it wasn't for that and my being the youngest, the one you always walked and talked with most, you would not care more for me than for Rob—everybody admires Rob. You mustn't imagine that you are unhappy, Bart dear, because that would distress me beyond anything. You won't mind, will you? And if we should be in Florence we'd have the nicest times, don't you think we should? I mean if we met there? Because we're like Joe Gargery and Pip: 'Ever the best of friends,' aren't we, dear Bartlemy—chum?" And Prue smiled, radiant in her beauty with the breeze dappling her faultless face with the shadows of the branches. She thought privately that she was showing wonderful skill and insight in the difficult task of adjusting her best friend and first lover, tactfully giving him the clue to their future intercourse. [284]

Bartlemy seemed less pleased with the interview. He was wise enough to see that no mere protestations on Prue's part could so effectually deny him hope of winning her as did her careless indifference, her childish lack of understanding of how hard it was for him to stand there with her smiling at him, forever out of reach.

"I think I'll go home, Prue," he said a trifle unsteadily. "You're going up to Mrs. Hasbrook. Good-bye, Prue." [285]

"Good-bye, Bartlemy? Well, till to-night then. We shall see you after tea. Good-bye," said Prue still smiling, but with a troubled look creeping over her face as she watched Bartlemy gather together his painting tools and walk slowly down the hill without looking back. For she guessed that the picture would never be finished; that for the young painter of whom she was, in her insufficient way, so very fond, "My Lady June" would remain but a sketch upon the canvas, symbol and reminder of his first romance.

Bruce went alone to the little grey house that evening. Bartlemy remained with his father till late at night, and when they parted with the handshake which spoke them friends as well as father and son, it was arranged that Bartlemy should at once go away to begin the European study to which he had been looking forward throughout his college days, though then he had not meant to go alone.

Commodore Rutherford was to go with the lad as far as England, possibly into France. It was all so sudden that the Greys had hardly time to adjust their minds to the fact that Bartlemy was going before he came to say good-bye. Basil and Wythie were at home and this first real break in the sextette of beautiful comradeship, as well as their disappointment in its cause, threw a shadow over the other five who without Bartlemy would be so incomplete. [286]

Wythie and Rob kissed the tall boy with tears which they did not try to keep back, and the dear

Grey mother held him close.

"Good-bye, my dear; good-bye, dear Bartlemy," she whispered. "I am so sorry, but I fear we can do nothing but be sorry. Learn to be happy; one disappointment in the beginning of life will not harm, but will strengthen you, and remember we all love you, and shall watch your every step with anxious pride."

"Good-bye, Mardy Grey. The little grey house has given me much, but it has denied me its best gift," said Bartlemy. He looked once more at Prue, standing a little aloof, pale, sorry, ashamed, but not relenting, and last of all he took her hand without a word. The door closed behind him, and with his footsteps down the flags died away the last echo of the unbroken tramp of Battalion B, which had brought cheer to the little grey house for more than four years.

"For just you and Basil can never be the battalion," said Rob reproachfully to Bruce, as if it were his fault. [287]

Wythie and Basil went away to their new home and Bruce went with them. Bartlemy was to start on a train that stopped on signal at Fayre at half-past three in the morning. It was a dismal going away, and the Greys remembered how much they should miss not only Bartlemy but the kind Commodore whose very voice was a cordial. He would return in two months, leaving Bartlemy abroad to study.

"Of course time, and the work he loves so much, and the glorious pictures and architecture he is to see for the first time, will heal Bartlemy's wound, Rob," said Mrs. Grey, as she and her second daughter lingered after Prue had gone soberly up-stairs, leaving them to themselves. "And Rob, only fancy! I have had a letter from Arthur Stanhope in the last mail to-night announcing his coming here to-morrow, avowedly to ask little Prudy to marry him. I must take to cap and spectacles, for she is my baby—yet after all, she is eighteen."

"To-morrow! The very day poor Bartlemy sails! It is altogether too much like that game you used to play with us when we were babies, sticking bits of paper on your finger-tips, and crying: 'Fly away, Jack, fly away, Jill! Come again, Jack, come again, Jill!' I do think he might have waited! Yet how could he know?" cried Rob. [288]

"It is a good letter, manly, straightforward—I left it up-stairs, or I would show it to you," said her mother with a half laugh at Rob's vehemence. "He says he will not assume that I know that he wants to marry our Prue, though he feels sure that we must have seen how profoundly he admires her. He wants me to receive him to-morrow with the intention of asking her to marry him. I suppose I must say yes, Rob?"

"I suppose you must, Mardy. Really, I can't feel about Prue's marrying as I did about Wythie's," said Rob. "Though I do feel very badly that it isn't dear old Bart."

"And I feel much more about it, in a certain way," returned her mother. "Wythie's marriage held no risk; it was the natural and lovely outcome of a charming romance, but Prue, foolish, ambitious, beautiful Prue is going into a different world from ours, and I am less sure of her fate."

"She wouldn't be satisfied in our world, Mardy; she never was. So isn't it best to be glad that another has opened to her?" suggested Rob.

"Wise Robin!" smiled her mother. "I suppose it is." [289]

Mrs. Grey had telegraphed to Arthur Stanhope her permission to come, as he had asked her to do. A box of rare and costly flowers preceded him, and Prue was making herself ready to receive him with triumph in her eyes, and without a shadow of doubt or regret to confirm her mother's fears. But she was so young; did she really know what she wanted? Mrs. Grey could not answer her own question. It lurked behind the eyes smiling at Prue in the glass as the girl made herself ready to receive her coming fate. She turned to meet the eyes with a little laugh of satisfaction, pardonable to the possessor of such beauty as she had just been contemplating.

"I think we weren't half sympathetic enough with Lydia in having a young man come out from New York to see her—it's really very nice, Mardy," she cried, shaking out of its box a single pink rose from among the many long-stemmed beauties filling the room with their odour. "I suppose you and Rob, and Wythie, if she were here, would rather have one of those old-time blush roses from the bush some one planted ages ago," Prue continued, "but I wouldn't; I'd rather have this magnificent thing that came from a hot-house after ever so long cultivating and selecting to make it what it is." [290]

"Only that you may be good and happy, Prudy; that granted, your mother will not quarrel with you for loving the splendours of a world that never for a moment has appealed to her," said Mrs. Grey gently.

"Kiss me then, you dear, sweet mother," said Prue. "It's a pity I'm not like you, but I am a worldly Prudence—oh, I never thought of it before! Why did you name me Prudence if you did not want me to love this world's goods prudently?"

"It has always seemed to me imprudent to love them, Prue. But here's your kiss, my baby, and all good attend you, darling."

The faint blush tint of her floating gown, deepening into the pink of the rose he had sent her seemed to Arthur Stanhope, as Prue glided into the room, like the dawn, for he saw that she had

come to fulfil his dreams.

It was moonlight, and Rob, sitting chin in hand by the window which Wythie had loved best in the room that had been theirs, saw her younger sister walking in its rays, and knew that she alone was now wholly the daughter of the little grey house.

The next morning saw Prue stirring early in a rapture of plans and gratified desires which the [291]
day was not long enough to allow her to tell to her mother and to Wythie and Cousin Peace who came in to wish joy to little Prudy.

The girl walked on air and the air was rainbow-tinted. Arthur's aunt, one of the leaders of the best social set in New York, had sent a loving note to the girl whom he had chosen, asking her to come to her at Newport for August, and then to go with them to the Berkshires, to her other house, for the supplementary season there.

"Only fancy," cried Prue, lifting her arms in a rapture that seemed to call upon all the world to witness and to share it. "I, I, Prue Grey, who used to go to school shabbily clad, who had to look at goodies in the shops till my mouth watered, I am going to Newport, to the Berkshires, to walk on velvet and to eat off of gold plate like a queen, and to take my place among everything and everybody I want! Oh, it is a dream! It can't be true!"

"But your blood is the best in the land; you talk as if you were a beggar maid, and Arthur Cophetua!" cried Rob indignantly.

"He is giving me everything I want," said Prue. "He thinks he is not worthy to untie my shoe, so [292]
don't be afraid that he undervalues me."

"Wouldn't you rather be all alone, just with him this summer when you are first engaged?" asked Wythie timidly. She really felt afraid of this new Prue who swept everything before her like an empress.

Prue laughed. "You dear, sentimental little Wythie-goose!" she cried patronizing her favourite sister. "Of course I wouldn't! I wouldn't rather anything were anyway but just as it is! But I'll tell you what Arthur says—he says I'm so pretty he would not dare to let them all see me unless I had first promised—Oh, no; I won't tell you, either—it's silly!"

"We might conjecture what you had omitted—let me see—three words, I should think," remarked Rob.

"Dear little Prudy, I hope you will be happy every minute of this life that you think is to prove fairyland to you," said Cousin Peace gently.

Suddenly Rob seemed to shake herself mentally. "I really don't see why we all have an ill-concealed feeling that Prue is liable to be anything but happy!" she cried. "It is all because we love Bartlemy, and our thoughts are following him across the deep. Of course you will be happy, [293]
Prudy, and of course it is fine to be going to Newport and way stations, dancing and looking lovely with nothing to distract your attention from newly-found bliss, 'with the world so new-and-all,' as Kipling says. You are going to enjoy your little eighteen-year-old self till you won't believe it's you. And Arthur is a nice fellow, who has behaved beautifully all through this trying period, and I'm glad you are to be set in such a way as to show our jewel to her best advantage. We are envious old foxes, looking at your grapes! Ask us, Wythie and me, to your splendid mansion—when you get one—and you'll see how worldly we shall be, too!"

Prue laughed, but she did not need Rob's consideration. She had been too engrossed in the wonderful splendour awaiting her to be sensitive to the misgivings of her family. And after all why should she not be happy who had always longed for luxury, and to whom poverty in the old days had been more irksome than to her sisters?

"I'll ask you," she said, "to my fine mansion, to my box at the opera, to drive behind my splendid horses, to dine with my brilliant friends. Oh, girls, won't it be lovely?"

Prue ran down-stairs to meet Frances and Hester, whom she saw coming, and to tell them of her [294]
glories before any one else could take the edge off of her tidings.

"I wish she realized more, were less young. She seems scarcely different than when her father bought her that little blue silk parasol in her third year, and she refused to eat except beneath its shade," said Mrs. Grey.

"She was not unhappy after she got used to the parasol, although it no longer held her spellbound, Mardy," said Rob, the philosopher. "Why should she be unhappy after she has grown accustomed to a million? Prudy is so happy now that her parasol would not interest her. Let us believe that by and by she will be so much happier than now that this beginning too will be forgotten in greater bliss."

"Prue is one of the Grey girls, your daughter, Mary; I am sure wealth will not spoil her, and only think, with her great beauty and her great wealth what royal opportunities she will have for doing good!" added Cousin Peace. "Dear little golden-haired Prudy! She is only very young, and that will be but too soon corrected in her."

"Walk up the street part way with me, Robin; my husband will be waiting lunch for me," said [295]
Wythie with such a happy smile that Rob remarked, as she snatched a parasol:

"Dear me, how fine that sounds! Happiness seems to be a drug in our market. I'll come, Mrs. Rutherford; Hester and Frances will have to listen to Prue a while but they won't mind."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN [296]

ITS ADAMANTINE DAUGHTER

"'It's we two, it's we two, it's we two for aye,'" sang Rob to a slight, inconsequent tune of her own making. "We are the only Grey girls left, Mardy, the only reliable daughters of the little grey house. What with Wythie so very young-matronly and preoccupied in her home, and Prue shining at Newport and writing us of the cotillions and general splendours, and of admiration enough to turn any head, I begin to feel like Holmes' Last Leaf."

"Why, that's a rather dismal ending to a speech that began in such a contented little chant," said Mrs. Grey, looking up from her desk with her pen marking the point half-way up her column of accounts at which she had suspended addition.

"Oh, no; it's not a withered, dun leaf; it's a flaming maple," returned Rob. "But it is queer to be the spinster Miss Grey, with one's sisters married and gone—gone at any rate, and as good as [297] married. The house is quiet, and—and—well, spacious."

"Lonely, Rob?" suggested her mother.

"No, Mardy; not lonely with you, but I feel, as near as I can express it—shrunken," said Rob thoughtfully. "I miss the girls, of course, but there is something sweet about this solitude of two, as the French say—like being an only child."

Mrs. Grey looked at Rob consideringly, wondering how long she could keep this daughter, if not the one dearest to her motherly heart, certainly the one that she could least well spare. The girl's face was not less brilliant, but it was quieter; the quick tongue had learned the curb, and there was a softer, more womanly look around the sensitive lips which always seemed ready to laugh or to quiver because the upper one was so short. "Wythie is as pretty and sweet as a dove, and Prue is rarely beautiful, but to my eyes Rob is the prettiest of the Grey girls, the one whose face has most power to charm," thought the mother for the unnumbered time as she looked at her. She dared not allude to Bruce. She believed and hoped that sooner or later Bruce's quiet persistence and devotion would win from Rob its reward, but the girl sprang to arms so quickly at a hint of [298] such a possibility that her mother dared not suggest now that Rob, too, might slip away from the little grey house.

Instead, she asked: "Aren't you going up to see Wythie a moment before you go down to Charlotte's?"

"Yes; Wythie wants advice on the curtains for the Commodore's room," said Rob. "Much as we all like and enjoy Commodore Rutherford, I wonder if Basil and Wythie don't half dread his coming back? Love is selfish; not one bit noble, no matter what the poets say. Wythie flies to hug me when I come in, but I always feel sure that she likes to have me shut the door and leave Basil and her to themselves."

"Why, Robin!" remonstrated her mother.

"Oh, well; it's all right. We made up our minds to that, I suppose, when we let her go. She loves me just as well as ever, but she isn't my Wythie altogether, as she used to be—she's my exclusively-and-happily married sister. Home is home, Mardy, and every one, who doesn't belong inside it, no matter who she may be, is an outsider. Very likely I shall feel just the same when I have been longer alone with you."

"If ever you marry, dear, I shall pray you to come here to live, and let me have a corner in your [299] home, otherwise the little grey house would be left bereft, indeed. Would you mind letting your Mardy Grey stay with you, and should I be an outsider?" asked Mrs. Grey.

"You are the very inside and core of my heart, Mardy, as you well know, and those are the only terms upon which I would marry—if I could marry. But I won't marry, Mardy; I never, never will! I don't want to. I want to be Rob Grey, just nobody but Rob Grey of the little grey house to the end." And Rob dropped a kiss on her mother's glossy brown hair as she went out of the room to get her hat for her call on Wythie. "You could not be any one better or more beloved," her mother called after her, and resumed her accounts.

Rob went up the street in the bright September sunshine, wondering at her vague dissatisfaction, which made her feel unlike her usual blithe self. It was worse than foolish, she told herself, but Wythie's blissful contentment had a bad effect upon her mind.

Basil faithfully retired after breakfast to the room which had been set apart for his use and wrote till luncheon, resisting the strong temptation to watch his girl-wife busying herself about her [300] morning household cares. So Rob did not expect to find Basil when she came in by the side door, and followed the sound of Wythie's voice to the library. She did not expect to find Bruce either, yet there he was, at the hour when he was usually busiest, for Bruce was working in earnest at

his profession, and Dr. Fairbairn told enthusiastic stories of his assistant's natural gift for healing and of his untiring industry.

Rob halted a perceptible instant on the threshold before entering; she had avoided Bruce of late, feeling an electrical atmosphere surrounding him.

The "Hallo, Rob!" with which he greeted her sounded safe enough, and Rob returned it cheerfully as she entered.

It was a beautiful room, high ceiled and dignified, and its appointments were perfect. Rob looked around it with new satisfaction, seeing anew, as she did at each visit, how quietly fine and tasteful was Oswyth's home.

"I'm so sorry that I made you come up here first this morning when you were in a hurry to get to Cousin Charlotte's, Rob," said Wythie. "You know I thought Frances was going to town on the 1.53 train, but she went this morning, so I had to decide the curtains for myself and give her the [301] sample. I took the autumn-tinted fabric. Basil says he is sure father would prefer it, and I want the room to be what he likes, although he won't be in it long, and nobody knows how soon he will get back here. Aren't you going to stay with me, or haven't you settled Cousin Peace's problem?"

"If you're going down to Miss Charlotte's I'll take you there safely, Rob. I've got to meet the doctor at the new family's, four doors below her," said Bruce rising.

Rob flushed; she had been long trying to avoid these solitary interviews with Bruce, and now Wythie had made it impossible for her to escape this walk without being downright rude. She arose with a reluctance that every muscle betrayed, and said: "I suppose I must go if you don't need me, Wythie. Cousin Peace is waiting for me; I told her I would hurry down as soon as I had seen your samples once more."

"Basil and I are going to drive over to the lake this afternoon; be ready by three, and tell Mardy," said Wythie nervously. Her experienced eye detected a look in Bruce's that spoke of determination, and in Rob's an expression of defiant fear.

She watched them off down the long walk under the heavy trees that shaded the approach to her [302] new home, clasping and unclasping her hands in a panic of foreboding. It took all her strength of mind to keep her resolution not to disturb Basil during his working hours; she longed to rush to him and say what she could now say only to herself and the carved chair upon which she was kneeling by the window: "Oh, dear, oh dear! He is going to tell her he cares for her, and she is going to be horrid! Oh, Rob, how can you, when he is such a dear boy, and you know you will never look at any one else! it isn't like Prue. Oh, I wish Basil were here!"

Wythie's forecast was proving entirely correct. Bruce walked down to the gate without a word, and Rob kept at his side with a most forbidding expression on her face, which seemed to have had all its ripples and sunshine frozen in Wythie's library.

For a few paces down the street Bruce preserved this silence, then suddenly he halted, and turned on Rob fiercely. "Look here, Rob," he said. "You've been trying to keep out of my way, and I suppose you think I'll take that for my answer. But I won't! Are you going to marry me?"

"No, indeed I am not," retorted Rob with equal emphasis. [303]

"Why not?" asked Bruce, walking on as if disposed to argue it.

"Because I do not want to," said Rob, evidently not inclined to discussion.

"But you care for me," insisted Bruce.

"Do I? Well, I shall not very long if you bother me about such things," said Rob.

"I want you, Rob," said Bruce with a break in his voice that softened Rob a little.

"I wish you wouldn't; it is so unpleasant," she said.

"Rob, dear, from the first moment that I saw you I cared for you in a boyish way. And now that I am a man you have grown to be so much a part of every hope I have, every thought I think, every effort I make that to tear you out of my life would leave a crippled Bruce Rutherford forever. I don't mean to appeal to your pity, of course, but it's the simple truth that my future lies at your mercy. It's not going to be with me as with Bartlemy. I don't mean that Bart wasn't in earnest and that Prue did not hurt him, but he has the artist nature, and he'll pull through. I'm a fellow of one idea, and it wouldn't be easy to uproot me and make me grow in new soil. Somehow, I can't [304] imagine living without you, Rob. What's the use of my telling you all this, when you know me better than I know myself, when I've never had a secret from you in all these years of our fine friendship? You know what it will be if I have to try to limp along without you. You helped Hester with the Green Pasture's; why do you want to cripple me worse than that poor little chap you've got there is crippled? Can't you imagine what it means to me even to think of losing you, Rob?"

Bruce held out his hands with an appealing gesture, and Rob saw them, the strong well-shaped, true doctor's hands, tremble.

"Oh, don't Bruce," she begged faintly. It was harder than she had thought it would be, and all the courage and defiance with which she had set out had ebbed away.

"Then why, why are you treating me as you do?" demanded Bruce. "There isn't another fellow whom you know and would rather have—there's no Arthur Stanhope in the way of this Rutherford wooer. And I'm sure you love me, Rob, though you don't know it, or won't admit it."

This was an unfortunate remark for Bruce. It sent Rob's head up in the air again, and awoke her spirit of resistance.

"I freely admit being fond of you, Bruce, but you are not satisfied with my affection. You want me [305] to marry you, and I don't want to marry. Of course there isn't any other I want—but that would be quite as true if you omitted the other:—There isn't *any*body I want, you or another. I tell you I don't want to marry; I'm sick of hearing of marrying—Wythie, Frances, Bartlemy, you, even Prue, all wanting to marry some one! Hester is the only sensible person. Won't you please, *please*, Bruce, try to be reasonable? Can't you see how unpleasant it makes things? I have to dodge you for fear you'll make love to me, and we used to be so happy and affectionate and comfortable! It's all your own fault. For pity's sake believe me, Bruce, and let's be happy again! I won't marry, I can't marry, I don't want to marry, and all you are doing is spoiling a chumminess that is as much nicer than sentimental fussing as roast beef is nicer than white of egg, beaten to a stiff froth." And whimsical Rob stopped to laugh at her involuntary quotation from the cook-book, though her eyes were brimming.

Bruce looked at her and to her great relief his face cleared up, though she might have felt less cheerful if she could have read his mind.

"You're only a fledgling still, Roberta," he said to her manifest annoyance. "You are unable to [306] diagnose your own symptoms; as a physician-to-be I think I know you better than you know yourself. Very well, then; so be it. I will stop pestering you, and you shall get back your old-time comrade as near as I can recall him. Of course we are both going to remember that we are man and woman, even though we are young ones, not boy and girl any longer, and of course you cannot quite forget that I love you. But there is no help for that; we'll go back to the old ways as near as we can. So don't dodge me any more, Roberta, and I'll curb my impatience."

Rob looked at Bruce sidewise and most doubtfully. "You mean mischief," she said. "You always did when you were too good and yielding."

Bruce laughed outright. "I mean beneficiently—to us both," he said. "'You'll love me yet and I can wait your love's protracted growing.' We always loved our Browning, you know. Here is Cousin Charlotte's gate. Run in, little Robin, and don't worry. If I had lost you I couldn't meet the doctor down yonder and go on with my work—I'd be—well, never mind all that! We're not to talk of these things, and I hope I'd be man enough to live my life to some purpose if I lost my eyes, and [307] limbs—or even you! But it would take time, to face my maimed life. It seems queer to find you, clear, decided, sane Rob, trying to fight against happiness, and not understanding yourself! Good-bye, Robin dear. When you see me again it will be your old chum Bruce, so don't run away from him. Good-bye."

Bruce took one of Rob's hands—the left one nearest him—shook it kindly, raised his hat and walked swiftly away, leaving Rob to go slowly into Cousin Peace's pretty house with a new sensation of bewilderment and defeat subduing her into a person whom she did not in the least recognize as confident Rob Grey.

Lydia opened the door and Rob amazed her by exclaiming: "Why I forgot all about you, Lyddie; you're another!"

"Another what, Roberta?" Lydia asked with her customary gravity.

"Another who has lately married. It doesn't matter; I had been reckoning up how many seemed to have been stricken with the epidemic; that's all," said Rob.

"What you are meant to do, you do, Roberta, and it's not an epidemic," returned Lydia. "It is a state of great blessedness when the brethren dwell together in it in unity."

The sound of a piano ceased from within and Polly, growing taller and with an awakening look on [308] her pale face, rushed out to greet Rob with the ardour of her intense and hidden nature. Rob folded the little girl in her arms with more than usual tenderness.

"Dear Polly, did Cousin Peace think I had broken my promise? I had to go to Wythie's first, you know," she said.

"No; we weren't looking for you so soon; I thought I should get through practising before you came," said Polly. "Maraine is waiting for you."

Maraine was the title by which Rob had solved the difficulty of what Polly should call Miss Charlotte, "for, though she was not really your godmother—I doubt your having a godmother, Pollykins,—she is near enough a fairy godmother to deserve the name," she said.

"Very well; take me to her, Polly," Rob said now, and followed Polly to Miss Charlotte, whose soft voice and gentle, unseeing face, raised to smile at her, fell on Rob's perturbed spirit like the balm which she always found Cousin Peace.

"What has happened, Robin dear?" asked Cousin Peace instantly. "What troubles you?"

"Nothing worth talking about, dearest peaceful cousin," said Rob. [309]

"Bruce came down with you, Polly said. Did he tell you what has been discussed, and does it frighten you?" asked Miss Charlotte.

"He told me nothing except—Oh, why are we talking about Bruce?" Rob burst out in an hysterical cry that revealed to Miss Charlotte all her troubles.

"Only that it was Bruce's plan which I was to lay before you—Hester wanted me to tell you without waiting for her to-morrow, when she comes out. Bruce thinks that in the course of his reading he has stumbled upon the cause of the lameness, the worse than lameness, of our one boy at Green Pastures. He worked on his idea secretly till he felt that he had his theory and proposed course well in hand, then he laid it before Dr. Fairbairn. The old doctor is most wrought up about it. It involves an operation, which, if Bruce is right, will cure that poor child. The old doctor has called upon several surgeons; some of them laugh at Bruce, with the intolerance of older minds for young ones, but a few—and they are the more important ones—agree with Bruce that, young and undiplomaed though he is, he has hit upon an actual discovery. They are [310] discussing performing the operation on the child—for Bruce could not be allowed to do it, of course—under Bruce's direction, in a sense. It is not fully decided, but very nearly. Curious Bruce did not speak of it himself!"

"Not a bit; it is just like Bruce to let other people tell even his best friend of his triumphs—and, Cousin Peace, I was not very nice to Bruce," said Rob, with a glow of pride in the clever student, and a humility new and bewildering.

"Oh, dearest Robin, don't be blinder than I, and fail to recognize happiness when it knocks at your door!" cried Miss Charlotte, laying her hand on Rob's. "Bruce deserves the best at the hands of all of us—Bruce is my boy of boys, you knew."

"There's not another boy on earth equal to him; we all know that, not even Basil and Bartlemy, but that doesn't make one love him, does it?" cried Rob.

"It makes us all love him, Robin, and we will let him feel it, quite simply and honestly, as is his right," said Cousin Peace softly. "Whether or not the operation is performed, and whether or not Bruce's theory is correct, the mere fact that he formed it and is clever enough to have thought of it has already won him honour in the eyes of his future associates and it has given him a place [311] among those of his profession who think and discover. Isn't that a great thing for a student to have accomplished?"

"It is fine, Cousin Peace; don't think I am not glad," said Rob feebly. "Is Polly going on well with her music?"

"Better than we expected; she is a faithful little Polly, and works hard," said Miss Charlotte, with a smile that rewarded Polly for aching muscles in back and untrained little fingers. "Mr. Armstrong is coming out especially to see Polly on Saturday. He is greatly interested in her. What about Prue?"

"She goes from glory to glory, revelling in admiration, luxury and all the honey-pots of the world open in a row, pouring their sweetness over her," said Rob. "Mardy will not let her marry till spring, you know, but I suppose she will be with Arthur's aunt a great deal this winter—this aunt took Arthur's mother's place when she died, you remember, don't you? So it is really like letting Prue go to her future mother-in-law. Mardy can hardly help it. Besides, Prue is nearly beside herself with happiness, and the only fly in her honey is that she can't afford to dress like the girls she meets, but even that trouble will drop off when she is Arthur's wife. Isn't it strange that Prue [312] should have got what she wanted, when she aimed at something so far beyond her reach, apparently?" And Rob sighed unconsciously.

"It is a great joy to know that all three of you dearest girls are finding such perfect joy," said Cousin Peace, while Polly climbed into Rob's lap at the sound of the sigh.

"Hester has done a nice thing, did you know it?" asked Rob, as if anxious to get the conversation into safe waters.

"Hester does nothing but nice things," said Miss Charlotte. "What is this particular one?"

"She has persuaded her father to rent three rooms in Myrtle Hasbrook's house for the Baldwins to use when they come to Fayre. Since Green Pastures is succeeding and is a permanent institution Hester made her father see they ought to have a place in Fayre that was their own. By taking Myrtle's rooms they add enough to her little income to secure her. I think Hester is really a magnificent girl!" Rob spoke with warmth, and Miss Charlotte as warmly assented.

"But my dear Robin made it possible," she added, with her loving touch on Rob's hair.

"Oh, I didn't want the house; it wasn't good in me to refuse it," said Rob, rising to go. "The little [313] grey house and Mardy, isn't that enough to satisfy any girl?"

"It is a great deal, but it is natural to want to round our lives, Robin," said her cousin. "I am a happy and blessed woman, dear, and my life was marked out for me when my eyes were closed to all visions, except those of dreams. But I am a happier woman for having my little Polly. Each life has its meaning, every one her limitations and she is a blessed woman to whom the whole meaning of life comes, offered in such love and honour and security that she may take it fearlessly, and through it reach up to the highest ends. To go without bravely and cheerfully

when that is one's vocation is noble, Rob, but to receive, gratefully, on one's knees, and to enjoy the fulness of all living is not a thing to turn from, dearie, for in its highest form it is the lot of few."

"You who never married are the best, the most peaceful, the most comforting of women. Even Mardy has had a hard life, in some ways, and does not seem so lifted above sorrow and loss as you," said Rob.

"I am blind Charlotte Grey; set apart, not lifted up, dearie," returned her cousin, who rarely spoke of her misfortune.

Polly looked from one to the other. "Miss Charlotte is the sky, and you are a green field, full of flowers, Rob," she said. [314]

"Little singing Polly!" said Miss Charlotte. "A green field for sweet human joys and nourishment! That is the very point, my children."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN [315]

ITS GLAD SURRENDER

"Why does my Robin sit with her 'head under her wing, poor thing'?" asked Mrs. Grey. For Rob had been very silent and distraught for a few days, which was equivalent to being another person than Roberta Grey.

"I think it must be because it's the fall of the year and that my spirits go down with the leaves," said Rob rousing herself. "The thought of the operation on little crippled Jimmy has haunted me—I shall feel better to-morrow when it is over. Or worse," she added as an afterthought.

Mrs. Grey had a suspicion that this did not fully account for Rob's depression. She had heard from Wythie of her fears of Rob's bad treatment of Bruce that morning when they had set out together for Miss Charlotte's, but she was far too wise to ask a question or to hint at a more personal trouble in Rob's mind than the operation pending for little crippled Jimmy. She reflected [316] that there was a remedy for this sort of complaint less difficult than a surgeon's knife, a remedy more likely to be taken when not recommended by onlookers.

Hester and her mother were staying up on the hill, occupying the rooms which Hester's tactful kindness had secured for them in Myrtle's house, thus giving the young widow just the additional income needed to smooth her hard path.

Rob went up to get Hester to go with her to Green Pastures on the morning when the experiment was to be tried which, if it should succeed, would restore Jimmy to his place among fully living people. And which would bring high honour to Bruce, whose theory of Jimmy's trouble was to be worked upon—perhaps this thought, not less than interest in Jimmy, sent Rob's feet rapidly on her way.

They were to operate at nine that lovely late September morning; by half-past ten the girls felt that they might venture to Green Pastures without being in the way. They could not talk on their way over, but hurried along in silence, eyes dilated and breath quick as the thoughts of both concentrated on what might be awaiting them at their destination.

Green Pastures looked cheerful as they neared it. It had undergone improving and enriching at [317] the hands of its young founders, and the old, barren look that it wore in the purely Flinders days had been merged in beauty of flowers and cultivation. Aunt Azraella had endowed it with a fund for keeping it in order, since paralysed Mr. Flinders could never work about his farm again, and Aaron, who had for so long made the hill house conspicuous in Fayre for its well-kept grounds, and who still looked after it for Myrtle, was responsible for the outward well-being of Green Pastures, also.

No one was in sight as Hester and Rob reached the gate, but when its latch clicked there swung around the corner on her crutches one of the children whom it sheltered, and who bore down on the girls with the speed in which she surpassed her comrades in misfortune.

"Oh, say," she called in that New York Eastside accent which is altogether incommunicable by printed signs. "Say, dey's been woikin' at Jimmy an' he's t'rough. Got his senses back all right. He's doin' fine. But, say, ain't it fierce? De knife slipped an' jammed de doctor, de young one, dat frien' er you's. Stuck him right in de hoit. He's huyt somethin' fierce. I heayd he wouldn't git over it." The child's eye gleamed with the fire of the born romancer, but neither Rob nor Hester saw it, [318] nor stopped to remember that this was Nellie, whose tendency to fabricate troubled them more than her lameness.

They clutched each other, and the colour went out of Rob's face, leaving her so ghastly white that Hester put her arm around her and half carried her into the house. Mrs. Flinders was not in evidence, and they pushed open the door of what had been the Flinders' living-room, but which had been appropriated to the children for a play-room because of its generous morning sunshine.

There, in the flood of September's sunny warmth, in the window sat Bruce, the other two little girls, one on each knee, resting their heads confidingly on his shoulders while, his arms around their thin bodies, he busied himself with constructing something of cardboard for their amusement. Bruce's eyes were bent upon his work, but his face looked peaceful, with a certain strength and proud confidence in the lines of his mouth that told the story of that morning's work. The whole scene was so full of peace and security that Rob's brain reeled, and Hester uttered a glad cry.

At that Bruce looked up smiling, but his face changed as he saw Rob's deathly look, and he set [319] the children down quickly and gently, crossing over to the girls.

"Rob, what is it?" he cried, horrible visions of something tragic in the little grey house or in Basil's home flashing upon him.

Rob put out both hands and seized the lapels of his coat; a faint suggestion of ether about him made her shudder. "She said you were stabbed—in the heart—" gasped Rob. "Bruce, Bruce, I should have died, too!"

Bruce steadied her and turned to Hester for an explanation. "It's that dreadful, horrible little Nellie!" she cried. "She met us at the gate and told us that the knife had slipped and had stabbed you in the heart. I think we must amputate her head!" And Hester, gently disengaging herself from Rob, and with a look at Bruce, ran out of the room. Rob stood with bowed head still holding Bruce's coat, shaking with sobs beyond her control.

The colour mounted to Bruce's temples as he realized that at last Rob knew her own mind, and had surrendered. He did not speak for a moment, but stroked her hair from which her hat had fallen, and which the September wind had whipped into more rings and ripples than usual, [320] steadying himself against the great rush of gladness with which he realized what all this meant.

Rob made a strong effort at self-control, feeling miserably for her handkerchief as she sobbed: "You wouldn't like to have a friend stabbed in the heart yourself, Bruce. And it shocked me."

Bruce laughed outright. "Don't apologize, Rob dearest," he said. "I don't mind." And he wiped her eyes with his own handkerchief in a paternal manner.

"She is a limb, that youngster, to frighten you so, but somehow I can't feel just indignation yet. I never thought I should admire a lie so much," said Bruce. "Look up at me, Rob, and let me see my wife."

"There isn't anything to see," said Rob faintly. "I am numb."

"Poor darling!" said Bruce. "It was a cruel thing! I won't bother you now, dear. Let me put you over in the rocking-chair in the sunshine, and then I'll hunt up Mother Flinders and get her to bring you a cup of hot milk, and I'll give you something to steady you. Dear heart, you didn't know that you cared like this, did you?"

"I didn't," said Rob feebly. "People always care most when you're dead."

"That's bad," said Bruce, "because I am alive, and hope to keep on living. There's enough [321] strength left in you to make a feeble fight against capitulation, isn't there, Bobs Bahadur?" And Bruce lightly kissed the tumbled, reddish brown hair curling up against his arm. "Now sit here, all comfy, my Robin, and I'll bring you something that will set you up again, your old self. Do you want Hester?"

Rob shook her head. "Come back yourself, Bruce, only you, else I shall begin again believing it was true," she said simply, and Bruce left her with a throb of wondering delight that this could be independent Rob.

Bruce hastened back with his restorative, and Mrs. Flinders followed soon with the hot milk. "That is considered the best kind of a restorative after an operation, and you underwent a severe amputation, Rob," said Bruce, holding the cup to her lips, while Mrs. Flinders looked on with grimness, concealing her pleasure that what everybody wanted had come to pass.

"Give me the cup, Bruce; I'm quite able to feed myself, besides it is so hot you would scald me," said Rob, taking it from him. "I am ashamed, Mrs. Flinders; I never went to pieces like that before, but you see it came so suddenly!"

"Of course," assented Mrs. Flinders with entire gravity. "And cripple or not, I think that Nellie [322] ought to be spanked—she can run on her crutches fast enough and lie fast enough to afford a good spanking."

"But not for this offence," pleaded Bruce. "Wait till she lies once more, and then spank her; the beneficent little humbug!"

"If Hester can't make them little angels, as well as improve them physically, Green Pastures is going to prove a pasture full of nettles to her," said Rob, with a return of the laughter to her eyes.

"I have not told you, Rob—your condition drove it from my mind—" began Bruce wickedly, "but the operation on Jimmy is a success. My theory was the right one, and the boy will be able to run about, on crutches maybe, but vastly improved. I really believe that he will be only slightly lame, and not need crutches."

"That means everything for you, doesn't it, Bruce?" said Rob proudly.

"It means a good deal," said Bruce quietly. "Now, Robin, let us fly to the little grey house. I am off duty this morning, and I want to take you home."

"Wait till I find Hester, and smooth my hair," said Rob, going in pursuit of her friend. [323]

"I'm so glad, dearest Rob, I'm so very glad! I don't think I'm going to be a sour maiden lady with no sympathy for romance. I have wanted so much to see you wake up to what you really felt," said Hester, arranging the pins in Rob's wayward locks.

"I think now that I must have known all along, and that is why I behaved so badly," said Rob meekly.

Hester laughed. "I think so too," she said.

"I wish you were not the only one without a share in this epidemic of happiness! France and Prue will be married by spring, even I am doomed, and only splendid Hester, the great-hearted Hester, is left out," said Rob, her arms over her friend's shoulders as she looked into her eyes with joy beginning to illuminate her own.

Hester shook her head. "I am glad and sympathetic; I am even able to understand what it means to you all, but for myself I am satisfied. I would rather help the child waifs than have my own little ones to look after; rather feel that I was doing for others than have the dearest of love to look after me," she said. "I have always been different from other girls, Rob, and my vocation is to [324] be alone, though not lonely. Or, at least, not too lonely. Down in the bottom of my heart I am lonely, but I suspect that there is a lonely spot in every human heart, and that all human beings—or at least most of us—are a little hungry all their lives."

Rob did not answer, except to kiss Hester as she turned away. "You certainly are not much like other girls, my splendid Hester," she said. And she ran away to find Bruce.

"I thought you were never coming," he grumbled as she entered, already claiming her in true masculine fashion.

"Good-bye for to-day, Mrs. Flinders," said Rob, turning back a radiant face to the drab woman regarding her with incredible sympathy concealed beneath her flat chest.

"Good-bye, Roberta, and good luck to you; half you deserve would be enough to set you up for two lives. I'm sorry he can't sense the news I'll tell him, but I'll tell him just the same. He's set a lot by you ever since he got over being mad because you made him do the right thing by you when he run your place on shares, and that's ever since you was good to Maimie. Goodbye, Roberta."

"Mardy, Mardy Grey!" called Bruce in the doorway of the little grey house. "Come and see my [325] beautiful wife!"

Mrs. Grey flew in from the kitchen where she was consulting with Rhoda, and that jovial person was so startled by Bruce's salutation that she followed to peer through the door at the strange lady.

"Rob!" cried her mother, and Rob ran to her, letting herself be gathered in the loving arms and drawn down into her mother's lap in the rocking-chair, half laughing, half crying.

"Oh, Bruce, dear Bruce, I am truly thankful this foolish child has come to her senses at last," cried Mrs. Grey, contriving to hold out a hand, to Bruce and to pull him down for the kiss which she gave him with her heart on her lips.

"Yes, ma'am," said Bruce dutifully. "I thought you would be glad to have such a well grown son who could mend bones and administer drugs when anything happened in the family. To tell you the honest truth Rob came to her senses with such a rush that she gave me no choice today but to accept the offer which she practically made me."

"Bruce, you wretch!" cried Rob. "Mardy, that dreadful story-telling Nellie Something, up at Green [326] Pastures, told me that the operating knife had slipped, and that Bruce was stabbed fatally—wouldn't you have been sorry, too, if that were true?"

"I don't understand, but I can safely say yes, I think," said her mother. "Never mind, Rob; what you ought to be ashamed of is having tormented Bruce for so long. You won't take her away from me, Bruce? The one stipulation I make is that you live here. Even that I can't insist on, but I do hope you will let me keep Rob?"

"Why, Mardy Grey, there isn't a spot on earth I love like this little house of yours, and somehow I couldn't imagine Rob anywhere else. Neither of the other girls ever seemed so much a part of the home as Rob is," said Bruce.

"To tell the truth I feel just as you do about it; it seems to me more suitable that Rob should be here with you than that Wythie and Basil should live with me—of course Prue will not live in Fayre," cried Mrs. Grey. "Rob was her father's 'son Rob,' you know, and she seems as much a part of the little grey house as its lichens. Dearest, best and bravest of daughters! I am glad that you know her as I know her, Bruce. Rob could be very unhappy in the wrong hands."

"If these prove the wrong ones, or less than wholly pledged to her welfare, may they wither away!" said Bruce with such entire earnestness that there was nothing singular in the words, nor in the gesture with which he held out his firm brown hands. [327]

Rob raised her head from her mother's lap, "Let's get commonplace at once!" she cried. "I refuse to remain at such an altitude another moment. Mardy, what's for lunch?"

There was ample, fortunately, for even the newly betrothed proved to be unromantically hungry. During the course of luncheon it suddenly flashed upon Mrs. Grey that that night the family, which included the Baldwins, Dr. Fairbairn, and Myrtle Hasbrook, had been invited to the little grey house to listen to the reading of Basil's first novel, of which he had written the final chapter two days before.

"It ought to be good," said Bruce. "He worked on it under the stimulus of his newly married bliss."

"Like the man in Stockton's story, 'His Wife's Deceased Sister,'" added Rob. "I hope he won't share that unfortunate author's fate. Wouldn't it be queer if Basil had written one of the six best selling books occurring in the list of sales in each city in the country in varying heights in the column, but always one of the six?" [328]

"O Phaebus, forbid, Rob!" cried Bruce. "Basil isn't forced to write for money; he can afford to do good work."

"We will have our dearest people here tonight, and we will not only hear Basil's novel, but let them share our new happiness," suggested Mrs. Grey with a smiling look for Bruce's implied criticism.

"That will be a good way of announcing it," said Bruce, taking his hat. "I've got to go now to join the doctor. Mayn't I tell him myself?"

"Yes, and come with me to tell Wythie and Basil; it isn't fair to leave them to learn about it with the others—nor Cousin Peace. What a pity Prue is away!" said Rob, jumping up to go with Bruce. "I'll just look in a moment upon Cousin Peace on my way home from Wythie's, Mardy. And oughtn't I order a stirrup cup for our friends?"

"A stirrup cup, Rob?" repeated her mother.

"Yes, why not, if I am going to ride away from Green Pastures to Gretna Green? Only we may not quite elope," said Rob. "I mean nothing more startling than some refreshments, Mardy."

"Oh dear, oh dear," sighed Mrs. Grey in pretended distress. "The moment a girl is engaged her memory for details fails. Is it possible, Roberta, that you have forgotten that you and I made cake all yesterday afternoon, ordered cream, and prepared for the celebration of Basil's novel?" [329]

Rob laughed, and hastily ran away; she really had completely forgotten, and it was embarrassing. She went from Wythie's raptures and Basil's profound delight, to Cousin Peace's not less genuine though quieter pleasure, and to little singing Polly's unexplained tears—"Singing Polly," they called the child often now, for her voice was becoming daily a more wonderful possession.

The evenings were already growing long, and early that night the curtains were drawn close around the little grey house, and the lamps lighted.

Wythie and Basil came down early, to find Bruce already there. The two brothers, very like in features and colouring, though differing in expression, and almost the same height, stood beside the fire, looking happy and handsome in their white linen—they were the sort of men to whom evening-dress is vastly becoming.

Each thought regretfully of Bartlemy far away, who had missed his prize out of the treasures the little grey house had to give. But it was good that the Commodore had arrived that day, and good to see the beaming satisfaction with which he regarded his two splendid sons, for whom no father could wish a better fate than to have won the two elder Grey daughters. [330]

Wythie and Rob had lain down for a little talk, in the old fashion, on the bed they had shared from childhood. The little talk lengthened out into a longer one than they realized; Mrs. Grey startled them by warning them that it lacked but fifteen minutes to eight o'clock, and that Rob would surely be late.

Wythie helped her to dress in a hurry, just as Rob had always dressed. It was very like old times. Rob could not realize that this was Mrs. Rutherford, not Wythie Grey, helping her, and that her own days of girlhood were numbered.

Frances and Lester came, and Mrs. Baldwin and her husband, to the sound of whose voice Rob's heart went out as she heard it, for he had been her father's chum, and she longed for her "Patergrey's" blessing that night. Hester, Cousin Peace, little Polly, Myrtle, good old Dr. Fairbairn—the sisters recognized these as the knocker repeatedly sounded and the guests came in. [331]

"Only Bartlemy and Prue lacking! If only Prudy could have been as comfortable and conformable as we, Wythie!" said Rob as Wythie dropped over her beautiful hair the white skirt which she was so late in donning.

"It will be all right as it is, Rob dear. We won't regret anything to-night," said Wythie. "But it would have been lovely to have been the three Mrs. Rutherfords!"

"Well, we each could have been only one of them," said Rob. "Just hook my collar for me, Wythiekins, and then run down, for it makes me seem much later when I keep you up here, too."

Wythie did as she was asked, altered a pin in her sister's hair, laid against its unruly beauty the ferns and buds which Bruce had brought her, fell back to look at the effect, and found it so satisfactory that she seized Rob in an ecstatic embrace and then flew down-stairs, remembering for the first time that this had been intended to be her triumph through Basil's genius, and that nobody thought of the novel now.

Rob lingered for some last touches, then looked long and steadily at herself in the glass, holding up the hand that wore upon it the diamond which had been Bruce's mother's. Then she kissed the [332] ring, and leaning forward, kissed the girl in the glass: "Because Bruce loves you, my dear Rob," she whispered. Then she went slowly down-stairs. There was no one there who was not familiarly dear to her, yet she hesitated on the lower step, half shy and frightened. Some one caught a glimpse of her, and said "Here's Rob!" The conversation ceased, and Bruce sprang forward to lead her in. They halted in the doorway, and the loving eyes of her kindred and friends fell on Rob. They saw a tall young creature, all in white, beautiful colour coming and going in the oval cheeks, great, flashing brown eyes ready to laugh or to cry, the sweet, sensitive, coaxing short upper lip quivering, a creature all compounded of mirth and love and tears. Not Prue in all her regal beauty could have looked as Rob looked at that moment.

The Grey mother's heart went out to her in a throb that included all the child's merry, impetuous ways, the young girl's chivalrous courage, the dead father's reliance and help, and, later, the sweet, cheerful, brave, high-minded young woman upon whom she herself had leaned since her day of widowhood, went out in unspeakable love and pride to Rob.

She rose and joined the girl still hesitating a moment's space in the doorway. Taking her hand [333] she turned back to her guests, and said with a thrill in her voice:

"Dear people, here is the next mistress of the little grey house."

END

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