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Author: Phoebe Allen

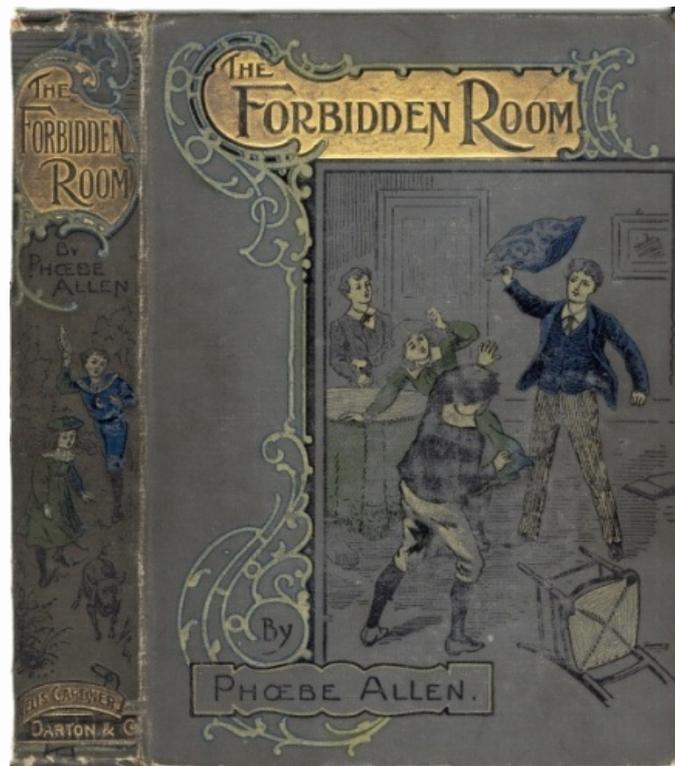
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE FORBIDDEN ROOM; OR, "MINE ANSWER WAS MY DEED"



Every attempt has been made to replicate the original as printed.

Some typographical errors have been corrected; [a list follows the text](#).

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(etext transcriber's note)

THE FORBIDDEN ROOM.

OR

"MINE ANSWER WAS MY DEED."



“Don’t you call that a pretty picture?” said the farmer.”
See page 184

THE FORBIDDEN ROOM: OR “MINE ANSWER WAS MY DEED.”

BY
 PHŒBE ALLEN.

AUTHOR OF “PLAYING AT BOTANY,” ETC., ETC.

“YOU SAID YOUR SAY.
 “MINE ANSWER WAS MY DEED.”
“Idylls of the King.”

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY J. JELlicOE.

LONDON:
 WELLS GARDNER, DARTON & CO.
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THE FORBIDDEN ROOM,

OR

"MINE ANSWER WAS MY DEED."

CHAPTER I.

"BOYS AND GIRLS, AND ALL SORTS."

NEVER within the memory of middle-aged Libbie, the dairymaid, had there been such a bustle of preparation within the walls of Gaybrook Farm, as on a certain June day, not many summers back.

From early dawn—which means somewhere between three and four o'clock—old Mrs. Busson, the farmer's wife, had been awake and astir.

From the lumber-room in the attics, to the parlour, with its high-arched fire-place, filled in to-day with boughs of green and big bowls of June roses, and from the cheese-room, under the roof, to the brew-house in the yard below, every nook and corner in the roomy old farm had been visited, on some pretence or another, by the time that noon and the dinner-hour arrived simultaneously.

"And yet," declared Polly, the rosy-cheeked "odd-girl," "though the Missus hasn't been off her feet for all these hours, she's as fresh as a sky-lark."

"Ay, as brisk as a bee amongst clover," chimed in old Simon, the shepherd. Leaning against the wall of an outhouse, his dim eyes followed Mrs. Busson's quick movements as she flitted from dairy to larder, finally disappearing into the garden, as nimbly as though she were seventeen instead of seventy.

"And what's it all about?" asked Simon, slowly; "I forgets again."

Polly sighed. Already three times that morning she had given the explanation to the old man, and the importance of being his informant was wearing off.

"What's it all about?" repeated Simon.

"Don't you mind, Simon; I told you that the Missus' ladies, them she was nurse two years ago, are coming down with their children to stay some while at the farm. There! if they were all live princes and princesses the mistress couldn't fuss more about them. My word! Simon; the cakes, and the pies, and the jams, and the junkets are

something to see."

"Is it boys or gals that is coming?" asked Simon, with a note of alarm in his voice. "Be they young, or the middlin' *mischieevious* age?"

"Oh! that I can't tell yer; they be all sorts, I think."

"Mussey me! boys an' girls an' all sorts," cried the old shepherd; and, as if to make preparation at once against the approaching foe, he whistled to his equally ancient dog, who was making an exhaustive examination of a bare veal knucklebone, and tottered towards the meadows.

But Simon's heart was not the only one which, amongst all the pleasant stir of preparation at the farm, was filled with alarm at the thought of the impending visitors.

One Gaston Delzant, a small, black-haired, black-eyed French boy, aged seven, was literally trembling within his patent leather shoes at the prospect of the coming guests.

He had not been long in England, and though the healthy life at Gaybrook, and Mrs. Busson's fostering care had worked wonders in strengthening the feeble little creature, Gaston still looked, as the burly farmer declared, "just a poor little snip of a frog-fed Frenchy."

"Don't talk that sort of unfeeling way, Busson, before the child," his wife had admonished him, "for, don't you make any mistake, though he's slow to speak, he understands sharp enough all that he hears."

Indeed, so far as poor Gaston's peace of mind was concerned, this was only too true.

He understood so perfectly all that the maids said, as they interchanged their fears that the young gentlemen from school would tease him out of his senses, that on the day of their arrival, Gaston was wildly planning some means of escape from the farm.

But perhaps the general fragrance of cakes and pies which filled the house and imparted a flavour of festivity to the atmosphere exercised a reassuring influence on Gaston, for after all he abandoned his intention of taking refuge in a remote barn, the paradise of owls and bats, and remained instead to face the enemy.

And here it was approaching in very earnest.

The clock was still striking four, and Mrs. Busson was giving her last look to the tea-table, when the sound of wheels became audible, and presently, through a cloud of dust from the high road, emerged the two Noah's-ark like vehicles, popularly known as the "station conveyances."

"Boys and gals, and all sorts, I should say it war," muttered Simon, looking from behind a quick hedge, whilst with one delighted cry of "Bless their dear hearts, there they are to be sure," the mistress of Gaybrook Farm flung wide her doors and flew to greet her guests.

Every part of her trim little person, from her lavender topknot to the toes of her neat pattens, was so quivering with rapturous glee that as she sped down her flower-bordered pathway, she seemed the very embodiment of smiling welcome.

Yet, although Mrs. Busson's appearance was hailed by a round of vociferous cheering from the new arrivals, her bright face clouded suddenly as she glanced from one carriage-load to the other.

"Why!" she gasped; "wherever is Miss Agatha—Mrs. Durand, I should say?"

"Left behind, left behind," came in a chorus of voices. "We've all got to take care of ourselves, Mrs. Busson, and we're all going to be the most awfully good lot that ever were."

By this time the two flies had been drawn up behind each other, and such was the general bustle and tumult of the alighting that when the last of the "awfully good lot" had actually descended from the carriage, Mrs. Busson found herself holding her head with both hands, in order to make sure that it was still in its place.

As for Gaston, he had made a clean bolt of it, and now from behind the case of a tall Dutch clock, which stood at the foot of the stairs, peeped furtively at the invading host.



The contents of the first fly.

CHAPTER II.

"WHO'S WHO."

THE contents of the first fly did not seem so alarming, at least not as to numbers, for it only contained three occupants, human occupants that is.

On the front seat was a rather demure-looking girl of fourteen, whose general air of youthful anxiety suggested that she was more or less in charge of the party. Beside her was a dark-haired boy about a year younger.

"'Fat, flabby and fractious,' that's what you ought to be labelled," one of his boy cousins had declared at starting, and, though it was an ungracious remark, and not likely to improve Andrew Durand's temper, yet even in the excitement of arrival, he still did not look, well—quite the reverse of his cousin's description.

Not only had he taken the lion's share of the front seat of the fly, but he had almost monopolised the back one too; first, with his feet, which he had comfortably disposed in a line with his indolent overgrown person, and secondly, with his innumerable possessions.

Amongst these was a canary in a cage, a guinea-pig in a box, a huge butterfly net—its extra long handle making it an undesirable addition to luggage—sundry tin cases, with unpleasantly sharp corners, a geological hammer and various tools of a kindred nature, a violin, along with divers other items, which contributed to form the pile of non-squeezable luggage, beside which poor little Marion, the third passenger, had to accommodate herself as best she might.

"Nonsense, she has heaps of room for her size," Andrew had ruled at starting from the station, when the others had remonstrated with him; "How much more can an infant like that want?"

Marion, commonly known as Marygold, perched herself very contentedly on the edge of the seat, and, always ready to make the best of a situation, announced cheerily:

"I 'spect I'll manage somehow, for all my hair can sit on the air," and certainly the cloud of golden hair that surrounded the sweet-tempered little face did seem the most important part of her very small person.

Fly No. 2 was more closely packed. It contained Jack and Phil Kenyon, schoolboy brothers of eleven and ten; their cousin, Diana Durand, who was ten years old yesterday; Tryphoena Kenyon, always called Phoena, who was just a year younger than Di; and last of all, six-year old Hubert, the youngest of the Kenyons.

He was so small that, when the cheering began he jumped up on the seat, for he felt that otherwise he might be overlooked, and he flung his hat so frantically into the air that the latter fell into the road and he himself toppled into Di's arms.

"Here, hurry up, Miss Annie," cried Phil, coming to the door of the first fly; "don't you see that your old go-cart's stopping the way? I say, can't you give a hand to Faith and help her with all that pile of rubbish? You don't mean to tell me that she's been nursing that bowl of gold-fish all the way from the station?"

"Oh! it's all right," began Faith; but Phil went on:

"What a muff you are, Andrew, to want all these blessed playthings, and here's poor little Marygold squeezed to a jelly." Then, calling Jack to his aid, Phil began to grapple with Andrew's manifold possessions in good earnest, to Mrs. Busson's great satisfaction. Their cousin, meanwhile, stood by giving directions which no one heeded, and grumbling at the way in which his property was handled. Even Hubert was more helpful, whilst Marygold, in the exuberance of joy at being relieved from her cramped position, was so eager to render assistance that in her zeal she tipped nearly all the water and the inmates too out of the gold-fish bowl.

"I think, Mrs. Busson," said Faith, her soft voice sounding like a dove's note amongst the chattering of many starlings, "if you will show me Andrew's room I'll put away some of his things, and get him to rights first of all."

"Oh! yes," jeered Jack, "take the precious baby to his nursery, and let him have all his toys. Shall we come and help you, Fay?"

But Faith gave him an imploring look, such as might soften the heart even of a schoolboy on teasing bent, and, following Mrs. Busson, she disappeared into the house.

The others were content to remain in the old-fashioned roomy porch. Here they made friends with Dragon, the watch-dog, and Thief, a very talkative magpie, who, in his big wicker cage, embowered in purple flowering clematis, made a perfect picture.

"And now, please," said Mrs. Busson, reappearing presently, "I'll have to be told who's who, not but what I can see that you two"—looking at Jack and Phil—"belong to each other, and that you're Miss Julia's boys—Mrs. Kenyon, as I ought to say."

"Right you are," cried Phil, whilst Diana of the ready tongue added:

"And Phoena and Hubert are Aunt Julia's children too."

"Ah! to be sure, I can see you have your mamma's eyes," said Mrs. Busson, taking Phoena's pale face between her hands and looking into the child's grey thoughtful eyes. "And so your papa and mamma are still in India, are they? And you go to school, do you, as well as your brothers?"

"Oh! no," said Di; "only Jack and Phil go to school. They'd be there now if scarlet fever hadn't broken out."

"Yes, it was awfully slicey for us," chimed in the brothers, "for, as we didn't catch the fever, we got off that and the lessons too."

"Yes," said Hubert, "it was jolly fine fun for them."

Whether their natural protectors considered the arrangement "jolly fine fun" too, our readers may perhaps gather from the letter which that week's Indian mail carried to Mrs. Kenyon, touching the matter:

"My dear Julia, how true it is that troubles never come singly. The outbreak of fever at your boys' school was tiresome enough, as it forced us to begin the holidays for the children at home sooner than was intended, and upset all our arrangements for the summer; however, we resigned ourselves very happily to the inevitable, and I had made

arrangements with dear old Pattie for receiving us all at the farm, and we were actually starting thither this morning, when a wire from Edinburgh arrived at breakfast, summoning me to my mother-in-law. She is very ill, and old Mr. Durand begs me to come at once, so I am obliged to let the children go down to Gaybrook without me.

"There was, moreover, such indignation when I proposed sending Sarah in charge of the party—your boys resenting the idea of having a nurse tacked on to them so bitterly—that, after consultation with Faith, who is as trustworthy as if she were thirty instead of thirteen, I decided to let the young people take care of themselves; besides, I knew, what my young rebels did not, that Pattie has already secured a very efficient nursery-maid in disguise, namely, her niece, Ruth Argue, who used to be nurse at the Rectory, and who is to be at the farm as long as our party is there. And so, about an hour ago, they set off, a merry troop on the whole, though poor Fay looked rather oppressed by the sense of her responsibility, whilst Andrew, I regret to add, looked decidedly peevish. If Fay were not there I should feel rather anxious about him. No doubt your schoolboys will do him good with their wholesome chaff, but unfortunately his aunt, with whom he has been at the seaside, has so spoilt him and allowed him to think so much of his health, that I'm afraid he is not likely to prove an acceptable companion. I hope he will soon be strong enough to go to school, for then he will lose his priggishness, but there is no question that he is very clever, and takes real interest in subjects that most boys don't care about. I sometimes think if only the others would try and learn a little from him about natural history, for instance, instead of always jeering him when he mentions it, it would be better for all parties. Altogether, if I could only have kept Andrew with me, I should feel happier about this expedition. Still, they all started, rich in good intentions of showing consideration both to Mrs. Busson and each other, so we can only hope that they will fulfil one tenth of them.

"Always your affectionate sister,

"AGATHA DURAND.

"P.S.—I forgot to mention that the children will find a playfellow at the farm, the grandson of old Madame Delzant, who, you remember, used to live at Gaybrook. Both his parents, neither of whom lived in England, are dead, and when old Madame died, some months ago, not long after the child had arrived in England, Pattie took possession of him, and is keeping him till it suits an uncle in Paris to come and fetch him. I am wondering whether the presence of this small stranger will conduce or otherwise to the harmony of the party."

CHAPTER III.

NOTES AND QUERIES.

WHETHER the new-comers would contribute to the harmony of *his* life, was troubling Gaston's mind, when he emerged from his hiding-place behind the clock, and made a cautious survey of the intruders.

"They don't look very cruel," he thought, peeping through the crack of the parlour door and eyeing them anxiously as they sat round the tea-table, "still I'm glad that I shall have my tea by myself."

It certainly was a very happy party that was gathered at Mrs. Busson's well-spread board, at which the hostess was presiding, helped by the very efficient "nursery-maid-in-disguise."

Mrs. Busson was quite in her element, flitting round the table, and encouraging her guests to try one dish after the other. But it was hard work to satisfy their curiosity on a hundred points, as well as their healthy appetites.

Such a shower of miscellaneous questions assailed her patient ears:

"Has the grass been cut yet?"

"Dear! yes, the mowing machines have been at work all this day in the long meadow, and there will be plenty of new-mown grass to make hay of to-morrow."

"And who's asking about butterflies? Oh! yes, there's plenty of them."

"Ah! but are there any *Hipparchia Janira* out yet?" asked Andrew.

"Never heard of that kind of creature," was the reply, whilst Phil interrupted with, "Oh! he only means an old cabbage-butterfly."

"That's all you know," began Andrew, indignantly, "but I'll tell—"

"There, there," broke in Mrs. Busson's soothing tones, "if you did say the name wrong, it's no wonder, but there's abundance of butterflies of all sorts to be had here, that I do know, so I wouldn't worry my poor little head about the name of any particular one," she added, in blissful unconsciousness of Andrew's disgust at her misplaced consideration and of the other boys' keen delight thereat.

Meanwhile, Diana, who liked to have a finger in every pie, was eagerly enquiring as to the day for cheese-making.

"Oh! that'll be the day after to-morrow, and the next day there'll be a grand jam-boiling. The girls are gathering the gooseberries already."

"And what is it you want to know, my dear?"—this to Marygold.

"Will the bees be swarming soon?" enquired that small person.

"Well, that I can't say for certain; we've had a fairish number already, but maybe there'll be a swarm yet, and then you shall make bee-music, that you shall, to your heart's content."

"And—and—" asked Hubert, who between his struggles with a huge bit of cake and attempts to make himself heard was as scarlet as a field poppy, "is there a nice little pond, where I can catch fish with nice pinky wriggling worms?"

"Yes, bless his dear little soul, there's a pond to be sure, and perhaps just a fish or two in it," replied Mrs. Busson, proceeding to empty half a pot of blackberry jam on to Hubert's plate. "Well, and what is it you are going to ask?" she added to Phœna, who had hardly eaten any of the good cheer as yet; but though she was so silent, her small white face, with its starry eyes, had been full of thought.

"I want to know, please, are there any glow-worms about here?" she asked.

"Bound to be some soon, if there are none yet," was the reply, "I've seen many a one down on the bank in the

water-meadow of a summer's evening, when the twilight's wearing through."

"Oh!" burst from Phoena, her face all aglow, but Andrew cut her short.

"What do you know about glow-worms?" he asked, in a tone of unmitigated contempt, "what's the Latin name for them?"

"She doesn't know, and she doesn't want to know," cried Jack, "so you can keep your mouldy old Latin for yourself."

"Or talk it to Dragon," put in Di, whose tongue had unfortunately a rather sharp point, "for it's only *dog*-latin, so Phil says."

Without condescending to note this last insult, Andrew resumed his attack on Phoena.

"You had better leave glow-worms—in fact, all insects—alone," he remarked, "until you've learnt something about them. When I've time, I can teach you a lot about them; in the meanwhile, you may carry my insect boxes for me when I go on my entomological expeditions."

"There, if you young gentlemen want to hunt *insects*," broke in Mrs. Busson, who felt that the atmosphere was becoming rather storm-laden, "I do wish you'd hunt the garden slugs, they're just *ruinating* all our green-stuff."

"Oh! we'll ruinate them," cried the schoolboys, but Andrew added, "They are, of course, most destructive garden pests. Now I wonder if any of you know how many teeth a garden slug has."

"Never had the pleasure of accompanying one to a dentist's," said Di. Whereupon there was a general laugh.

"There's nothing to laugh at in your ignorance," cried Andrew, "a garden slug—"

"Look here," cried Jack, "if you talk of that disgusting brute again, I'll—" but remembering his manners, he stopped short.

"Well," persisted Andrew, "it has no less than twenty-eight thousand teeth."

"What a lot of toof-ache it must have," said Marygold, feelingly.

"But, Andrew," questioned Phoena, seriously, "which garden slug is that? Is it the grey—"

"It's the garden slug, I tell you," said Andrew, impatiently, evidently not appreciating Phoena's thirst for further knowledge.

"Yes, but there are several kinds," said Phoena, growing eager now.

"There's the—"

"Oh, Phoena, do look at your cup," cried Faith, from the other end of the table, "you'll upset your tea in another minute."

But the warning came too late.

Carefulness at meals, or indeed at any other time, was unfortunately not dreamy Phoena's strong point, and before Faith had finished speaking, the whole contents of her hitherto untasted cup had overflowed its borders and was trickling in a whitey brown streamlet down the table.

"There, there, my dear, never mind," exclaimed kindly Mrs. Busson, "it's the first cup of tea you've ever spilt in my house, and I do hope it won't be the last, by a long way."

And as Ruth set to work to repair the damage, Andrew profited by the diversion to ask for some lettuce for his guinea-pig, and thus change the slug subject. He felt he had gone far enough in that department.

CHAPTER IV.

"IN THE ROSY SUMMER WEATHER."

THERE was something in its irregular rambling style of architecture that gave to Gaybrook Farm, as Di expressed it, a particularly "holiday-house" look.

Nobody quite knew how old it was, but the various additions to the original building, which had been evidently made at different intervals, suggested the handiwork of several generations, and seeing that, as Mrs. Busson was fond of saying, "Busson's great grandfather had been born there, and that Busson himself was no chicken, the farm must have been standing, well over a hundred years at any rate."

But though so strangely irregular, it was a very substantial pile of buildings.

The red, pan-tiled roof of the main portion seemed, as it were, to run up-hill, and from under this the first floor projected, supported by heavy black beams.

It was in this part of the house, in low ceilinged rooms, with little old casement windows, and long window panes, that Mrs. Busson had arranged to bestow her visitors.

For this end of the house, "the up-hill part," as Hubert called it, comprised all the living rooms of the family. There was the large house place below, with the roomy parlours on either side, the best bedrooms above, and the attics another storey higher.

Beneath the lower roof of the building, which was thatched and much weather-worn, were all the various farmhouse offices.

Foremost amongst these was the kitchen. Oh! such a kitchen it was. Flanked by the store-room and larders, and a dairy a little further on, which opened out into a spacious back yard, and with the baking and brewing-houses, and the wood and the wash sheds, it formed a regular little quadrangle.

Over the kitchen was a long, low room, filled with linen-presses, and fragrant with lavender and dried rose-leaves, for Mrs. Busson held fast to old traditions in these matters of household economy; whilst almost adjoining was a huge apple-room, and overhead the vast cheese-loft.

Between the linen room and the apple store was another chamber door (if that door had never been there, this story would never have been written). To judge, however, from the cobwebs which hung like a thick grey mist about its cracks and hinges, that door must have been long, very long unopened.

"Now mind, you girls," Mrs. Busson had cautioned her hand-maidens, before the children's arrival, "whatever

happens, you never let the little gentlemen and ladies go trying to get in there."

Unanimously, the girls promised obedience.

But that same evening, directly after tea, their mistress reiterated her commands.

"Whatever you do, don't drop a hint to Master Andrew of what's in that room," she said, "for I'll be bound he'd be up to some mischief, and so, I suspect, would Miss Phoena too, if they only guessed."

"Very good, ma'am," said the trusty Nell (she was cheese-room maid), "chances are, if we manage well, they'll never so much as notice the door. Young things are mostly for getting out of doors."

And at starting, it seemed as if Nell was likely to prove a true prophet.

All through the next morning, in spite of the oppressive midsummer heat, the children were flitting about in all directions.

"Like so many sunbeams at play," Mrs. Busson declared.

Early dawn had found Jack and Phil out in the hay-field, tossing the new hay with more energy than skill, and it had needed all Fay's gentle persuasions to induce Hubert to attend to the most necessary details of his hurried toilette, before rushing out to join his brothers. As for Di, whose swiftness of foot, combined with her ruddy locks, had long ago earned her the title of "Scarlet Runner," she too was up with the sun, or very nearly, and had found her way to the little stream which ran through the Crow-bell meadow, and was wading in its shallow waters in search of water-cress.

Little Marygold, her whole person, saving her head, concealed in a holland overall, was standing knee-deep in a tangle of sweet-briar, honeysuckles, climbing roses, and a score of sweet, old-fashioned blossoms which grew together to the left of the flower-garden, in a patch of rank disorder, under cover of which the "posy-border" melted into the orchard beyond, without making a too rude transition.

Marygold was supremely happy, searching the foxglove bells and the dew-brimmed cups of the lilies, in the fond hope of discovering some of those belated fairies, who, she firmly believed, took their night's rest in these flowery shelters.

"There must be some somewhere," she cried, in her clear, piping voice.

"Oh, Phoena, do come and help me to look for them."

But though Phoena was not forthcoming, she was not far off.

For though she had left the house, intent on reaching a certain sainfoin field, whose brilliant blossoms gleamed bewitchingly in the early sunlight, her wanderings had been arrested after the first few yards. The sight of a wounded snail, crawling slowly, slowly even for a snail, along the ash-strewn path, which led from the back yard to the kitchen garden, had checked Phoena's progress, who, wherever anything was sick or sorry, was a veritable sister of pity. Moreover, having lately heard about the snail's marvellous faculty for mending its damaged shell, Phoena thought this was a favourable opportunity for seeing how this feat was performed. So, with the help of sticks and stones, she forthwith made it a hospital beneath the shade of a laurel bush. Converting her handkerchief into an awning above the sticks, Phoena conveyed her interesting patient into these specially prepared quarters, exhorting him to set to work at once on the repairing of his shell. She would gladly have foregone her breakfast for the pleasure of watching him, but she feared by so doing to draw public attention to her "anxious case."

Accordingly, she reluctantly obeyed the summons of the loud breakfast bell, with the result, alas! that on her return, she discovered that the thankless snail, after the way of some vagrants, had decamped!

Out of the whole party, Andrew was the only "slug-a-bed," and even he managed to be ready to go out by nine o'clock, having secured Faith's attendance on himself as bearer of his butterfly net and sundry other things necessary to the success of his expedition.

"I say," cried Phil, catching sight of the net, "can't you leave those poor beggars in peace for to-day at least?"

"Yes," chimed in Jack, "and I call it awful hard lines on Fay; I bet she doesn't want to go swinking after you all this hot morning. As it is, she's had to feed your old gold-fish already, and clean your precious canary. Why don't you strike, Fay, and tell Miss Annie to look after his own toys?"

"Because Fay always wants peace at any price," put in the Scarlet Runner, more promptly than pacifically. "But I wouldn't do—"

"Never mind, Di," broke in Faith, knowing well how swiftly such gathering clouds might develop into storms, "we're only going out for a little time, because I must come home and write to mother."

"Oh! you good Faith," came in a chorus of heartfelt applause.

The heroism involved in writing a letter to-day roused general admiration. But steady-going Faith generally put duty before pleasure; sometimes, it must be owned, to her companions' regret, notably to Di's. For the latter had been known to declare that she wished the man who had invented such worrying words as "duty and obedience" had been stung to death by hornets. But then, as Di's long-suffering nurse had remarked more than once during that young person's earlier career, "Miss Diana was a handful."

CHAPTER V.

BOAR HUNTING.

THAT first morning at Gaybrook passed like a flash of lightning. There was so much to be seen and explored. From the poultry-yard, where its scores of feather inmates held a world of delight, to the water-meadows, which formed the limit of the farm boundaries, and were so designated because they were intersected by the little river Gay.

Here an old punt proved very attractive to the elder boys, when they tired of the hay-field. To the copse, adjoining the water-meadows, Di retired, partly to practise a little climbing in private—an exercise, which to her regret, she could not well pursue in the London Square garden—and also animated by the hope of surprising some big nest—a pheasant's perhaps.

Phoena was lost to sight amongst tall rows of peas and French beans in the garden. "Probably preaching

sermons to the bees," Phil declared. Hubert and Marygold agreed to join forces. They started by conscientiously trying to secure a "personal interview" with everything in feathers in the farmyard, Hubert doing his utmost to work the scarlet-wattled turkey-cock into an ungovernable rage. That pleasure exhausted, this young pair next betook themselves to a vast apple-orchard.

This new ground promised scope for endless adventure; it suggested such a wide field for enterprise.

In many places the high rank grass was over Hubert's head, once Marygold's brilliant locks entirely disappeared, so that, as she reminded Hubert, it must be like those jungle places in *Injia*, of which his father had told them so many stories.

"You don't think," said Hubert, a little apprehensively, "that there are any wild beasts hidden about under the grass to spring out and eat us, you know?"

Marygold didn't feel quite sure.

"Suppose we go and ask Mrs. Busson," she suggested, standing still.

But Hubert dissented.

"No, don't let's," he said, "because p'raps she'd be afraid for us then, and say we had better not come in, and that would be a pity."

Marygold thought that on the whole Hubert's advice was sound.

"Besides," she added, with some vagueness of speech, "I expect we'd have time to run if any came. Lions roar ever so loud, and tigers' eyes gleam ever so far off. Besides, you know in the book at home with a man riding a camel on the cover, it says there are no more wild beasts in England."

Reinforced by these reflections, the small adventurers plunged boldly into the grassy sea, hand-in-hand for the first few steps, but very soon Marygold broke away with a cry of delight from Hubert. Her sharp eyes had discovered a glorious find, the first of many to follow.

It was a currant bush that she had espied, half-buried under the rank growth of grass, the clusters of fruit showing redly amongst the coarse green blades that went near to hiding it altogether.

The children's glee knew no bounds.

"I b'lieve," cried Marygold, her voice piercingly shrill with excitement, "that we've found 'Laddin's garden with the trees bearing the wonderful fruit that was jewels, you know."

For now, in addition to currant-bushes, red, white, and black, Hubert had lighted on some raspberry canes with ripening fruit too.

"Don't you know," went on Marygold, "that in the fairy-book it says, that the white, red, and yellow fruit were really pearls and rubies and topaz and—"

"I expect," broke in Hubert, whose utterance was somewhat impeded by the handfuls of fruit, which he had been diligently cramming into his mouth, "I expect that it's really a sort of buried-alive garden, for it is quite real fruit, Marygold, and *raver* sour."

"I'll tell you," was the reply, "it must belong to the fairies, and Mrs. Busson can't know anything about it."

"'Spose we keep it all a secret," said Hubert.

"Oh! but you always say that," said Marygold, reproachfully, "and then you *never* do. No, let's say that we've found a garden but we can't say where."

"Yes," cried Hubert, "and let's get a cabbage leaf and put some of the fruit in it, just to show them that it's all true."

The idea was a charming one, but it was not carried out. For on their way to the kitchen garden, Hubert pulled Marygold back.

"Look! look!" he gasped, pointing to the end of the big orchard, "there *are* some wild beasts."

Following the direction of his frantically waving arm, Marygold descried the black backs of some dozen little pigs, bobbing up and down in the high grass and looking like a shoal of porpoises leaping in the sea.

"They're only pigs, little pigs," said Marygold; but fired by a spirit of adventure, Hubert dashed off in pursuit, declaring that "of course, they were big, wild boars."

But he was treading unknown ground, and although he was not "infirm and old," like the minstrel in his poetry-book, he was young and not very steady on his feet, and presently the stump of one of those "buried-alive trees" proved fatal to his further progress. With a sudden yell he tottered and fell downwards amongst the grass.

Marygold, who had followed on his heels, was quickly helping Hubert to rise, questioning him anxiously as to the extent of his injuries, when from the depths of a dry ditch, which skirted two sides of the orchard, an odd little figure suddenly appeared and slowly advanced to the scene of Hubert's disaster.

There was a droll mixture of curiosity and anxiety on Gaston's small sallow face as he approached this detachment of the dreaded invaders.

Libbie had given him his breakfast in the dairy that morning, when she found that he was too nervous to face the new-comers; and since then Gaston had betaken himself to the shelter of the big ditch in this remote orchard, making sure that there, at any rate, he would be left to his own company and that of the little pigs.

For the latter he entertained quite a warm affection.

But Hubert's cry of distress had lured him out of his retreat, and having satisfied himself that he was bigger than either Marygold or her cousin, his fears for his own safety abated.

"Ah! where have you *harm*?" he asked, scanning Hubert carefully, who was still gasping heavily from the shock of his sudden downfall.

"Are you the little French boy?" asked Marygold, by way of answer.

"I am Anatole Jules Gaston Delzant," was the reply, "And I am more big than you," he added, as he drew himself up to his full height beside Hubert.

The latter, who was entirely diverted from his injuries by the sight of Gaston, was quite ready to make friends, all the more so when he learned that though the French boy was



She found them in hot pursuit of the pigs.

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nearly two years older than himself, he was not inclined to treat him as a baby.

And so in a wonderfully short time the three children became firm allies, and when the dinner-bell rang and Ruth came in search of her charges, she found them in hot pursuit of the black pigs; Gaston having greatly increased Hubert's keenness for this sport by his accounts of the boar-hunts in France.

"What a pity that dinner has come so soon," said the children.

CHAPTER VI.

"IN THE CUCKOO COPSE."

THAT mid-day meal was a very merry one. Everybody had so much to tell, and each had had such delightful experiences in his or her own particular line.

True, Di had not found a pheasant's nest, but she had practised her climbing to her satisfaction, if not to the benefit of her garments, which showed sundry tattered traces of the results of her morning's occupation. The boys, according to their own account, had tried their hands at everything in turn—haymaking, boating, fishing; whilst Marygold and Hubert were so voluble and persistent in detailing their marvellous adventures, that even Andrew was forced to allow them a hearing, although he had tried hard to hold forth about some marvels in natural history with which he had meant to impress his companions.

"Shut up about your old crawlers and creepers," said Phil, "let's hear what the infants have to say."

Jack actually dropped his spoon, laden as it was with cherry-tart, to call again for details of the boar-hunt.

"By-the-way, where is that little French beggar?" asked Andrew, with infinite condescension. For Gaston was not at table.

Though encouraged by his playfellows and urged by Ruth, he had come as far as the threshold of the parlour, one peep through the doorway at the big boys waiting to take their places at the table, had put all Gaston's courage to flight, and with a murmured "Ah! but I cannot, I cannot," the poor little waif had returned to his shelter in the orchard ditch.

"I expect he's stopped behind to have some spree with the pigs," said Phil, turning to begin a whispered conversation with Jack.

Poor Mrs. Busson—to say nothing of poor Mrs. Busson's black porkers—would have trembled to hear how those two boys were plotting to organize a jolly good boar-hunt all for themselves. As for Gaston, he would certainly have sought a yet deeper ditch and a more remote orchard if he had heard the tone in which Andrew announced after dinner, that he meant to take an early opportunity of "sampling that French frog."

Happily, however, for all parties, the effects of that singularly hot day, coupled perhaps with the very hearty dinner, made themselves felt even by the adventure-thirsty infants; so that all, from Andrew downwards, readily fell in with Faith's suggestion that they should adjourn to the shade of the Cuckoo-copse on the other side of the water-meadow.

"Mrs. Busson has had two splendid swings put up there," she announced, "on two of the biggest oaks, and there's a lovely stretch of moss and bracken under the trees, where we can all sit and lounge about as we like."

And so, greatly to Mrs. Busson's and Ruth's relief, the whole party, refreshed, but likewise subdued, by their plentiful repast, presently decamped together to the Cuckoo-copse.

Phil and Jack, however, carefully assured Libbie that she might depend on them to drive up the cows from the long meadow in time for milking.

"No need to call Jerry, the cowman, from the hay," they declared.

"There, I do hope," cried Libbie, seeing the children troop off, "that they won't have broken any bones before milking-time comes."

"Hold your tongue," said Mrs. Busson, "I'd a deal sooner break all my own. Just you go down in a minute, Ruth, and take a birds'-eye view of the little dears, to make sure they are going on all right."

Ruth did go, and brought back a very satisfactory report.

"They've all settled down as quiet as lambs," she declared, "Miss Fay's needle-working, Miss Di seems writing a letter, Miss Phoena's got a book, and all the young gentlemen look like going to sleep."

"Bless their dear hearts, they must be just a picture for good behaviour," said Mrs. Busson fervently; and so they were, at any rate at the moment when Ruth saw them.

"Beware of the bluest sky," says the old adage, and the picture of good behaviour in the Cuckoo-copse was alas! not painted in durable colours. Di was the first to break the sleepy silence which had reigned at most for ten minutes.

"I say, boys," she began, "isn't this just the sort of copse to make exploring expeditions in?" and, heedless of Fay's imploring look, signifying that she would do well to let "sleeping *boys*" lie, Diana proceeded to demonstrate how twenty travellers at least might set out in as many different directions, without interfering with each other's field of enterprise.

"Oh! yes, oh! yes," cried the younger children, "let's start exploring."

"P'raps we'll find some more buried gardens," suggested Hubert.

"Or *earfmen*, little earfmen," shrieked Marygold.

Even Phoena dropped her book, fired by a sudden desire to hunt an ant's nest.

"Oh, blow the ants," said Jack, "I want to find a jolly old fox burrow, and dig out the cubs."

"Plaguey hot work in this weather," remarked Phil, with a yawn, "a hornet's nest, that we could blow up this evening, would be better."

"Oh! but I'd like to find an earfman," piped Marygold again, "one that could hide under Fay's thimble."

"Shut up that rot," said Andrew, crossly, "and I say, Di, keep out of that nettle-bed, will you? None of you are to disturb those nettles, do you hear, all of you, I'm the eldest, and I mean what I say."

"Do you?" retorted Di, "and please, your majesty, why can't I begin my explorations by jumping into the very middle of that nettle-bed if I see fit as I most probably shall."

"Because, probably, amongst those nettles there'll be some Hipparchia."

"Now, chain up with that jargon," broke in Jack, "we're not going to stand a butterfly-butcher bossing it over us."

"You horrid boy," cried Faith, "that sounds so ugly."

"There, Mrs. Faith, you show your ignorance of the best verse of the period," was the retort, "for I was quoting from a very fine piece of modern poetry, eh, Di?"

"Here's the original, I declare," said Phil, stretching out his hand from where he was sprawling on the grass, and snatching up the paper on which Di had been busily scribbling before she had arisen, on exploration bent. "Capital," went on Phil, glancing at the paper, "you've improved on it since the morning. Now, pay attention, Miss Annie, here is something worth listening to."

"Oh, never mind about reading it now," said Faith, whose previous acquaintance with Di's verses was not encouraging as to the results of their declamation, "don't read them now, Phil."

Phil turned a deaf ear. Scrambling up the nearest tree, he perched himself astride one of the branches best adapted for his purpose, and then proceeded to declaim:

"Will you buzz behind my coffin?"
Begged a butterfly, "dear bee;
For that insect-butcher, Andrew,
Will soon have slaughtered me.
No more upon my painted wings
My slender form will soar,
And, midst the flowers in sunny hours,
You'll never see me more."

"Oh! cruel is the havoc made
By Andrew's net and pin;
There's no one left to mourn me now,
Of all my kith and kin.
'Twas only yesterday I found
A widowed moth in tears,
'My husband's corpse lies stretched,' she sobbed,
'On one of his cork biers.'
Then will you buzz behind my coffin?"
Once more he asked the bee,
"Right gladly," quoth that insect,
"If you're sure he won't kill *me*."

"And now, gentlemen and ladies, you'll kindly join in the chorus," said Phil, "I'll lead it."

"Then down with Butcher Andrew!"
Hark, all the insects cry,
"Let him be caught, and pinned on cork,"
Moans every butterfly.

And the chorus was taken up with such goodwill, and so much noise, that every owl within a radius of at least a

mile must have been startled from his afternoon's nap, whilst old widow Pugsley, who was a proverb for deafness, paused in her hay-tossing to remark that "Mussa Busson had a rare lot of merry youngsters down yonder in the Cuckoo-copse."

CHAPTER VII.

COMING TO BLOWS.

UNFORTUNATELY, they were not *all* having a song together down in that shady copse.

Faith had, indeed, been coerced into joining the chorus; with Jack shouting it into one ear, and Di shrieking into the other, it would have been vain to resist, but Andrew was as dumb as a fish.

If he had had a grain of sense he would have *scored* off his tormentors by joining lustily in the song against himself, but instead of that, he swelled with silent rage, whilst he reflected on the best way of avenging this insult.

His first step in that direction was to round on Hubert, and fling him head foremost into a thicket of brambles. Hubert's hearty "Let him be caught," etc., turned abruptly into a dolorous howl, which served as the signal for opening hostilities.

Down from his branch clambered Phil, and by the time Faith had rescued battered Hubert from his thorny surroundings, Andrew was struggling in the strong clutches of his cousins.

"Leave Andrew alone, do boys," besought Fay and Phoena in one breath. By this time, the offender was stretched full length on the ground, but Di, whose sense of justice was always greater than that of mercy, declared that Andrew ought not to be let off.

Even little Marygold, strong in her unfailing loyalty to Hubert, piped out shrilly that "he ought to be made to say that he was *drefffully* sorry, before he was released."

"Of course, he must offer a humble apology," said Phil, digging each of his knees into Andrew's sides, and shaking his arms violently to and fro above his prostrate head, whilst Jack was adjusting what he called "hobbles" upon his victim's feet. "It was beastly mean of you," went on Phil, "to attack one of the infants, and if you won't apologise as you should, we'll help you to."

"Yes," chimed in Jack, "you can take your choice entirely. You can either stay where you are, and you must be jolly comfortable, I am sure,"—here Jack seated himself on Andrew's fettered feet,—"till we are all tired of sitting on you, by turns, or you may now and at once accept our terms and regain your liberty. Make your choice."

"He must have the terms read over to him," said Di. "Phil, dictate them!"

"Don't please hurt him really," put in the forgiving Hubert, "because the scratches have done hurting now."

"Recommendations to mercy are not in order now," ruled Jack, with a gesture of command. "Shut up, will you!"—this to Andrew, who was wriggling with all his might beneath the weight of his captors, "Di, come here!"

After exchanging a few whispers with Jack, Di returned to her former position under the oak, and, taking up her pen and paper, proceeded to note the articles of the treaty. They were soon ready.

"These terms," said Jack, taking the paper from Di, "are far too lenient, but let me state at once, that no interruption on the part of the public will be allowed to interfere with the course of justice." Then, clearing his throat, he began, "Prisoner on the ground, the chief end and aim in administering justice being the restoration of peace to the public, we do here invite you to return to your former position in our midst, as a free and law-abiding citizen, on the following conditions. That you shall, in the first place, repeat after me, in such words as I shall dictate, a full apology to Hubert, for the dastardly assault upon his person, whereby you sought to do him grievous bodily harm; and, in the second place, that you shall, in a clear voice, and with due emphasis, rehearse after Diana the said Diana's spirited verses, setting forth your evil deeds, the audience assisting you at the close of each separate verse with a repetition of the chorus. Prisoner on the ground, give tongue, do you accept our terms, yea or nay?"

"Get off, will you," cried Andrew, who was perilously near tears. "Faith, they're suffocating me."

"Oh! Jack," interposed Faith, "do leave him alone, you will hurt—"

"My dear Faith, his well-being is in no one's hands but his own," said Jack, emphasizing this statement with a rapid rise and fall of his person on the unfortunate Andrew's chest, "what's simpler? he has only to accept our terms, and then he rises a free man."

"Fa-a-ith, I'm suf-fo-cating," gasped the culprit.

"Oh! please, please," besought Marygold, with clasped hands, and terror in her face, "do let him go now."

"You say," began Jack, "that—"

"I'll say I'm sorry," gasped Andrew, "on condit—"

"No, no conditions," broke in Jack, "you must—"

"Look here, boys, it really isn't fair," said Faith, "you're two to one, and you know that Andrew isn't half as strong as either of you."

"Yes," added Phoena, "and if you go on bullying him much more, it's acting rather as he did to Hubert."

"Well, there's something in that," admitted Jack, "after all, Phil, it's only poor Annie, and it's just a girl's trick to knock over one of the infants to show her strength."

"Yes, just the sort of thing a little girl would do," echoed Phil, "here, get up, Miss Annie, we'll forgive you. Lend me a hand, Jack, we must help a lady to rise properly."

Therewith Jack seized one luckless arm, whilst Phil held fast the other, so between them the "lady" was certainly assisted to rise, with good will, if not exactly with courtesy!

"And now we'll conclude this entertainment," said Jack, "with a new kind of *rock-it*" and with a significant wink at Phil, they set to work to shake Andrew backwards and forwards between them, till every tooth in his head must have trembled in its socket.

And all the time they sang loudly in his ears, to a tune of their own, the offending chorus of Di's song.

Though Andrew was a year older, and much taller than Jack, and "twice as fat as both he and Phil put together," as his cousins always assured him, the treatment received at their hands so far cowed him, that once released, he slunk away without a word.

But, coward as he was, he could not resist the temptation of pinching Marygold's arm viciously as he passed behind her.

"Oh! oh! he did pinch me hard," she cried, with a very pink face and quivering lips. She would have spilt her blood to avenge any injury inflicted upon Hubert, but she struck no blow to avenge her own. "You are a werry mean boy," she said, "but p'raps you can't help it, for I heard Ruth say that you seemed a poor house-lamb sort of young gentleman."

Possibly this withering remark hit Andrew harder than her small fists could have done.

Phil and Jack greeted this statement with a roar of approving laughter, which Andrew, happily, did not see fit to resent.

Clearly his recent chastisement had made him, *temporarily*, a wiser, as well as a sadder boy.

CHAPTER VIII

OGRES.

FOR the next quarter of an hour, perhaps, certainly no longer, comparative calm reigned amongst the little party.

But the spirit of discord having once broken bounds in their midst, the happy peace of that glorious summer afternoon, which might have worn away so merrily, was gone, and sad to say, wrangling soon began again. First of all, Di, bent on being idle herself, took to teasing Phoena. The latter was trying to read, but Di confiscated her book. Then she ridiculed Fay, who was making a knock-about frock for Marygold's big doll to wear in the hayfields. Meanwhile Phil and Jack decided to give Hubert a lesson in tree-climbing, and though they began their instructions with the best intentions, they soon started teasing him when he showed himself somewhat unamenable to their orders.

"Look here," said Phil, indicating a very inaccessible limb of a birch tree, "you're a regular little molly, but you'll have to climb up to that branch and ride-a-cock-horse on it before we've done with you."

"But I'll tumble down, I know I will," said Hubert, with an amount of caution which his six years made very excusable.

"Well, and if you do tumble down, and if you do break your precious little neck—"

"But I'll be *deaded* then," shrieked Hubert.

"Well, and what are the odds?" asked Jack, with a coolness that curdled Marygold's blood, "much better that you should die like a man—"

"But I ain't a man yet and I don't want to die like one," yelled Hubert, who was being prodded up the tree now by both his brothers.

"You're wicked, bad boys," cried Marygold, "I'll deliver you, Hubert, I will deliver you."

Therewith she flew upon Phil and hanging all her weight upon his arm, strove to disable him from tormenting Hubert any further.

"I do wish a big ogre would come now and gobble you up," she gasped.

Then as the boys still persisted that Hubert *must* reach the perilous point first indicated, Marygold grew quite desperate.

"Please, please don't break his *pore* little neck," she pleaded. There was such real horror in her voice, she looked so pitiful with her brilliant blue eyes brimming over with tears, that the sight of her face helped Hubert quite as effectually as any ogre might have done. For it did gain Hubert's welcome "deliverance."

And Marygold gained something further still. For when she suggested that as it had got cooler now, they might all have a really nice game before tea time, Jack and Phil actually consented to "give the infants a turn," and graciously permitted them to choose the game they would play.

"Oh! ogres, ogres!" they cried, "for this wood will be just beautiful."

"There'll be such heaps of room, you know," added Marygold, "for the little innocents to play at *gaffering* strawberries and picking up sticks."

"And such splendid bushes," went on Hubert, "for the wicked ogre and his blood-thirsty wife to hide in."

"Come on," shouted Phil, "you must all come and play."

"I'll be the ogre's wife," volunteered Di, "and Andrew always likes to be the ogre because he's only got to sit still and receive the live prey as it's brought in."

"All right," said Phil, the master of the ceremonies, "Fay'll be the infants' mother, Phoena must be the ogre's cook, and Jack his caterer, and I'll be the old man of the wood who'll side with the infants."

"At that rate," objected Jack, "there'll only be the two kids to bag; there ought to be a better show of game than that."

"Where's that French froggy?" asked Andrew, suddenly, "we may as well make him come and play."

"Yes," assented Jack, "infants, where's his Froggy-ship to be found?"

"I think he's in the orchard," said Hubert, whilst Marygold added, "But you won't call him froggy, will you? for he's a good little boy and very frightened."

"Oh! is he?" cried Andrew, "then we'll have some fun with him."

"Oh! Fay, you won't let them tease him," pleaded Marygold, who felt in honour bound, if she betrayed Gaston's whereabouts, to provide for his safety, "you promise me you won't."

"No, no, we won't bully him," cried several voices.

Comforted by these assurances, the infants set off to fetch Gaston. They found him sitting disconsolately

amongst the long grass. Tired of boar-hunting all by himself, he was playing with an ugly, unsavoury looking toad.

So the children's invitation to join their game in the wood was acceptable, though his face betrayed some alarm when Gaston understood that he was to play with all the big boys and girls too.

"But we're all going to be ever, ever so kind to you," said Hubert.

Thus re-assured, he consented to come. Indeed the prospect of a real good romp soon raised his spirits and voice too, to such a pitch of volubility, that Phil declared that he could hear Monsieur Frog chattering "like a vanful of monkeys" before either he or the infants came in sight.

"Here he is, here's Gaston," announced the latter, with a note of pride in their voice, bred of a certain sense of proprietorship in the small foreigner.

"Bonjour, Monsieur Grenouille," began Andrew.

But Gaston did not heed him. His good manners might have put his new acquaintance to shame.

Pulling off his cap, he ran straight to Faith, attracted by her gentle face, and standing bare-headed before her, executed the most perfect bow.

("With his feet in the first position," Di sneered, "and his hands hanging straight at his sides.")

"Good day, Mees," Gaston stammered.

But when Faith threw her arms round him and kissed his small pale face, he swiftly abandoned all formality and nestled up to her side, as if he had found a long-lost and sorely-missed shelter.

"I told you he was a good little boy," said Marygold.

"A precious Molly, though," remarked Andrew.

"Molly yourself," retorted Jack, "come on now and let's begin sport."

"And you," said Phil, turning to Marygold, "tell Gaston the rules of the game."

These were of a delightfully simple nature.

"Fay's our mother," began Marygold, "and Hubert and you and I are her little children and we pretend that we've come into the wood to *gaffer* strawberries and pick up sticks. And we pretend that we don't know there's a wicked ogre's den behind the bushes. He's always wanting children to eat you know, so he sends out a bad man, that's Jack—to catch us. When we see him coming, Phil, (that's the old man of the wood who tries to protect us) comes to fight him off and we have to run away as fast as ever we can."

"And we yell as loud as we can," added Hubert, shrieking this item of information at the tip of his voice.

"There, now do you see, the wicked ogre has gone away to hide," said Marygold, "with his wife, that's Di, and his cook, that's Phoena. So we'd better go to Fay. She's dreadfully sorry when we get caught, but very often she gets caught herself."

Then from the leafy depths of an old oak, Phil gave the signal for the game to begin.

"My little dears," he cried, "come out to play."

"That means, come out to be eaten," said Hubert.

Therewith Gaston, who by this time was not so sure that this new form of amusement was likely to prove so very charming, was dragged off to play his part in the ogre game.

"It really is quite *strordinary* fun," Hubert assured him.

CHAPTER IX.

"QUITE 'STRORDINARY FUN."

CERTAINLY if ear-piercing shrieks constituted "strordinary fun" Hubert's statement was fully justified.

From the very onset the game was wildly exciting, even to the bigger boys. Even Phil, as he jeered the ogre from the tall oak, forgot to call it a baby game, and as Jack executed his "flying squirrel trick," which meant taking flying leaps from branch to branch, in order to view the land, he began to think that, after all, this sport with the infants was rather fine.

Faith, meanwhile, played her part as an anxious parent perfectly. Hither and thither she fluttered between the different points of danger, with out-stretched arms and skirts, like a good old hen protecting her precious bantlings.

In and out of the hazel bushes and the briar tangles—ay, even into nettle-beds—the infants dashed, caring nothing for pricks and stings and scratches, so long as they could evade the long arm of Jack, the ogre's caterer, and escape the fierce eyes of the ogre and his wife. These latter would now and again show themselves, glaring ferociously through the bushes, and clamouring loudly for fresh food to be brought to their larder.

After a time, Faith allowed herself to be taken prisoner, and for a moment quite a solemn awe fell upon her companions whilst they watched the proceeding which followed in the ogre's camp.

First, the captive was securely bound to the slim stem of a birch, then the ogre called on his wife and cook to come and judge if she were fit for immediate dressing.

With rounded eyes and parted lips the three little ones waited almost breathlessly, whilst Di, supported by Phoena,



"She shall be fed up on snail soup," said the Ogre.
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who carried a long iris leaf to represent a knife, advanced to make the inspection.

Di thrust her fingers into Faith's cheeks, examined her tongue to see if it would "pay for salting," pinched her arms, and finally agreed with the cook that she must be cooped up and fattened.

"She shall be fed up on snail soup and luscious slimy slugs," said the ogre—Andrew was always good at acting,—whilst Di added:

"Tadpole tea is even more nourishing than Bovril, and I've seen many skeletons grow stout on caterpillars in oil."

"See that she has them then," said the ogre, in a voice that sounded like thunder, "but for our immediate food, my dear wife, we must catch some smaller fry."

"Yes," replied the 'dear wife,' "one of those little dears yonder, if nicely stuffed and roasted, would make a tasty morsel for supper. Suppose we order that little girl with the cloud of golden hair, which, by the way, would make quite a pretty table garnish."

Diana's tone was so business-like that Marygold almost shook in her shoes.

"Or that tender youth crouching beside that ash," said the ogre, pointing to Gaston, "he'd make a toothsome savoury. Ah!" catching sight of Hubert, who peeped out from the edge of a nettle-bed, "there's a pair of those small boys, I see. Jack, my caterer, catch them at once, and have them served for supper as grilled green goslings."

"Certainly, sir," said Jack, "they'll make delicious mouthfuls for your greedy-ship and lady. Now, if you will withdraw, and pretend to sleep, I will proceed to secure these desirable young dishfuls."

Thus pressed, the ogre household retired into semi-privacy, and immediately afterwards the air was rent with the sound of loud snoring.

"They're only pretending to sleep," Marygold explained to Gaston, dragging him behind some hazel bushes, whence he could see the sham sleepers. "They think that we haven't heard them making their wicked plans, you know. But, oh! look at Phil."

Armed with a long thistle, Phil was advancing stealthily upon the ogre, who was leaning against the trunk of a tree, snoring lustily, with fast-closed eyes. In another minute Phil would have tickled the ogre's nose with the spikey weapon he carried.

But Gaston, untrained in the tactics of ogre warfare, instead of observing the breathless silence maintained by the others, gave vent to a loud giggle. This instantly roused the ogre to a knowledge of his danger, and caused Phil to be ignominiously routed.

In the general confusion which ensued Marygold was captured and bound to a tree, with the delightful prospect of being turned into a white soup before sunset.

"You little duffer," cried Phil, savagely, turning upon the trembling Gaston, "you spoilt all the sport with that idiotic giggle of yours. Now you shall be punished for that by being delivered up to the ogre in exchange for Faith."

"Yes, master Froggy," put in Jack, seeing that Gaston really looked alarmed, "you'll have to pay for that giggle with your blood, so come on."

Planting his heels firmly together, Gaston resisted resolutely.

It might be all play, still, the big English boy's voice sounded very angry, and his face looked very fierce.

"Come on," said Phil, giving Gaston a desperate tug.

"Oh! but, but, I pray you, have pity," began the boy.

But his entreaty for pity came too late. Negotiations with the ogre, initiated by Jack, were already begun.

And now Phil was addressing the ogre himself.

"Look here, you old wretch," he was saying, "respect our flag of truce,"—here he waved his handkerchief—"and we'll parley with you." And as the ogre graciously signified his consent, Phil went on:

"Here's a handsome offer, a jolly little roasting pig, a real Paris *nouverty*, all ready for dressing, which we'll give

in exchange for the victim that you caught first."

"And if you don't say 'Yes,' " put in Hubert, who was well versed in the customs of the game, "we'll sell him cheap at the nearest cannibal market, so you'd better make up your mind quick."

Very pompously the ogre advanced.

"Let the article for exchange be exposed," he said, "and on the faith of an ogre no unfair advantage shall be taken."

By this time poor Gaston was on the brink of tears. The sudden change in the complexion of affairs from all the previous screaming, shouting, and running, to the dignified air of solemnity which now invested the proceedings, filled him with alarm. Consequently, when, at a sign from Phil, Hubert advanced, and, seizing Gaston by one arm, helped to drag "the article" forward for closer inspection, all notion of it being only a game disappeared from Gaston's mind, and he really thought that he was facing certain death.

He was rather a baby for his age, but then he had never had elder brothers, and this was his first experience of big English boys and of ogres.

"He—he won't really eat me," he faltered.

"Eat you! of course he will. Skin, bones, and grizzle," said Phil, thoroughly enjoying Gaston's dismay; "someone always has to be eaten up at the end of the game to make it real."

"But—but the last time that you did play, who was eaten up then?" enquired Gaston, with not unnatural curiosity still holding back.

"Oh, an awfully jolly little chap," said Phil, cheerfully, "very like you. I don't think he would have minded it much if they hadn't eaten so much mustard with him."

"They won't have of mustard to eat with me," cried Gaston, "for Mrs. Busson was this morning not able to find any."

"Pepper'll do as well, or better," said Phil, coolly, "hurry up, we're not going to wait any longer. Don't you hear the ogre sharpening his front teeth on the backbone of the giant that he ate for breakfast this morning? Come on, I say."

"But no, no, I won't come, I won't," yelled Gaston, trying to throw himself on the ground. "I won't be eaten, I won't be eaten!"

Vainly he looked round for succour. His last friend, Marygold, was herself a captive, and of course, Jack, the caterer, was not on his side.

"Be good enough to come on, gentlemen," said the ogre, "having begun proceedings, you're bound to go on with them. Shall my official, Jack, come to your assistance?"

Thereupon Jack came forward, and now, to his exceeding terror, Gaston found himself lifted bodily between the two bigger boys and carried forcibly into the clutches of the ogre.

The latter began to examine him at once. By this time, Gaston was a quaking jelly.

"Hm," pronounced the ogre, "he'll do fairly well, provided he's eaten at once. Cook, come here and take my orders."

Then, as Gaston fought and struggled with all his might, the ogre remarked, "Now, no struggling, if you please. Don't you know that over-exertion on your part will spoil your flavour, and make you horribly tough? Jack, my caterer, I fear we shall have to chastise this small object before cooking him, as an example to others, you know."

"Yes, indeed," said Jack, "a nice chance of dinner we should have, if all the legs of mutton took to kicking us, and all the calves' heads began to butt at us."

"Well, make up your mind, Mr. Ogre," said Phil, "are you prepared to take over this little porker, or not?"

"I am," was the reply, "and as he persists in showing fight, we'll see what a little beating will do for him. It answers admirably in the case of beefsteaks, you know. Take charge of him, Jack."

"All right," said that official; then, with a wink at Phil, "just hold him down a minute, while I tie his pettitoes together. Mr. Ogre, kindly assist us."

"Don't be afraid," whispered Hubert in Gaston's ear, as he lay on the ground, "they won't really hurt you, Phil won't let them."

But *playing* at bullying is a dangerous game with the best intentioned of schoolboys, and Andrew was the prince of bullies when he was secure from any risk to his own precious person. With such a tiny victim as poor Gaston, he felt perfectly safe. But he had reckoned without his host, or at any rate, without his host's teeth.

For as soon as he came within biting range of Gaston, the latter, who, as we said, had long ago forgotten that he was supposed to be playing, caught Andrew's hand between his teeth, and hung on to his fingers for dear life.

Andrew danced and yelled with pain.

"You nasty, abominable little wretch," he shrieked, "won't I pay you out for this."

"What are you about, boys?" cried Faith, who, tied up with her back to this exciting scene, was terrified at these alarming sounds. "Di, do go and see what they are doing."

But Di was busy now giving chase to Hubert, whom she had been stealthily trying to capture, so she had no ears for Fay.

As to Phoena, no one heeded her gentle remonstrances.

"It's only fun, Gaston," she assured him.

"Of course it is, we're only rotting you," said Phil.

"Oh, are we," cried Andrew, savagely, breaking off a stout hazel switch as he spoke, "we'll see about that; ogre or no ogre, I'll teach him to bite me again. Hold him down, Jack, and I'll give him the jolliest licking he's ever yet had."

And before anyone could stop him, Andrew had delivered a cruel cut on Gaston's small prostrate person.

A piercing yell from the victim rang and echoed again through the wood.

"You shall have plenty more," said Andrew, lifting the switch to strike afresh, but the elder boys fell upon him.

"Shut up, will you," they cried, "it's beastly mean to hit such a little chap. Trying to kick him now, are you? You'd better." And without more ado the cousins, aided by Hubert, who had returned, panting, but free, brought Andrew to the ground for the second time that afternoon.

"Now we'll see if a little beating won't make *him* tender," said Jack, wrenching the stick from Andrew.

So it fell out that the rod which he had prepared for another's back, fell upon Andrew's own in no very gentle strokes.

"There, I'll be bound that's the best licking you've ever had in your life," cried Jack, with genuine satisfaction. "Shouldn't be surprised if it made a man of you, old chap," he added, breaking the stick in two pieces and flinging the fragments high up into a tree.

Too mortified to howl, and too cowardly to retaliate, Andrew skulked off in sullen silence.

Gaston was nowhere to be seen. Once freed from his tormentors' clutches he had flown out of sight and sound of the copse.

"He went so fast, I believe he flew," said Hubert, who, if the truth must be told, had been so absorbed in watching Andrew's chastisement, that he had had no attention to spare for anything else.

CHAPTER X.

"YOU'VE NEVER BEEN QUARRELLING."

"DEAR, dear Miss Faith, whatever has been happening?" enquired Ruth, anxiously. She had come to meet the little party as they returned in answer to the tea-bell's summons.

Once within sight of shelter, Gaston had lifted up his voice in piteous weeping. Shaking and sobbing, he displayed the marks of ill-treatment that he had received at the hands of his so-called play-fellows that afternoon.

The sight of Andrew's swollen nose and bleeding fingers, and the disturbed air pervading the whole company put the finishing stroke to Ruth's alarm.

"You've never been quarrelling, I do hope," she added, as fervently as if the bare possibility were not to be contemplated for a single instant by any sane person.

"Oh! haven't we!" responded Jack, cheerfully; "and it's done us all a jolly lot of good."

"And made us awfully hungry," added Phil.

And, to judge from the promptness with which they fell upon the good things provided for them, that afternoon's misdoings had certainly not blunted the mis-doers' appetites.

The girls, however, did not follow suit. Marygold was tired, and really very sad for Gaston, who was nowhere to be seen. Even Di was unusually subdued, whilst Fay and Phoena were thoroughly ashamed of the results of the first afternoon of taking care of themselves. Indeed, the latter's sorrowful face, and yet more, her untasted tea, attracted Phil's attention from his own plate.

"Hullo, Phoena," he laughed, "whose funeral are you arranging for now? Why, your face is as long as all King Cole's fiddlers put together."

Phoena started. She had been very far away in thought-land just then.

"I was thinking," she began.

"A good thing then," said Di, "that you didn't upset your tea this time."

But Phoena went on: "I was thinking what a pity it seems that this time yesterday we all had such a lot of good intentions, and this afternoon we all managed to forget them so quickly."

"Yes, indeed," said Faith, with a sigh.

"A pity we couldn't bottle them," said Di, flippantly, "and label them to be used when wanted."

"Or pickle them," sneered Andrew.

"No, but do listen," besought Phoena. Somehow when her eager face was all aglow with enthusiasm and her large eyes shining like lamps no one could resist listening to Phoena. "I've been thinking how in the old days, when they must have been just as fond of fighting as you boys are now, they had a very good plan for helping people not to forget their good intentions."

"Really," jeered Andrew, "pray how did they manage that, Mrs. Solomon?"

"Did they advertise them like Sunlight Soap?" broke in Di.

"Well, yes; they did something like that," said Phoena; "that is, they made their good intentions so public that for very shame sake they had to fulfil them."

"Oh! now I see what you mean," said Di, who had plenty of wits when she chose to use them; "you're thinking of those old creatures who were called—oh! what was their name? Cru—cru—something?"

"Cruets!" yelled Hubert, whose last spelling lesson had ended with that word.

"Crusaders, you little donkey," said Andrew, with withering scorn.

"Yes," said Phoena; "of course the Crusaders were amongst the people I meant, for you see when they once decided to deliver the Holy City, they did wear a red cross on their arm as an outward badge of their intentions; but I wasn't thinking of them so much as of Arthur's knights of the Round Table; that glorious company, you know, the flower of men."

"I see," said Di; "of course, by accepting knighthood they did advertise their good intentions."

"Yes, but before they could be knights they had to bind themselves by vows to keep those good intentions," said Phoena; "and those vows bound them fast like chains, from which they never could be set free without shame and dishonour until they had fulfilled them."

"Then pray are we all to wear chains?" enquired Andrew.

"Chain up yourself," said Phil, "and let Phoena speak, will you? Go on, Phoena."

"Well, if you don't mind listening," she continued, "this is what I thought. Though we haven't got a King Arthur, and—"

"But we've got Mrs. Busson's round table in the window," put in the irrepressible Di.

"And though we can't get the Archbishop of Canterbury to come and bless our sieges—yes, don't laugh, that is the proper name for our seats—and though we can't have our names put in letters of gold over each of our places, yet I don't see why we shouldn't have a sort of Round Table here, and agree to promise to do as far as we can all that Arthur made his knights promise to do."

"But where are the heathen to come from whom we ought to smash up?" asked Phil.

"I expect we might find something like them still," remarked Fay.

"You see this is what my book says," said Phoena, producing a volume from under the table, where she had evidently been studying it out of sight on her knees: "The knight was to take an oath to fulfil the duties of his profession, namely: to speak the truth, to maintain the right, to protect women, the poor and the distressed, to practise chivalry, to pursue infidels, to despise all temptations to ease and gluttony, and to uphold their honour in every perilous adventure."

"H'm!" remarked Jack, "rather a large order, but as Andrew always likes to be cock-of-the-walk let's make him the first knight, and see how he manages to keep his vows."

"I've no objection to being the Grand Master of the Order," said Andrew, who was secretly rather pleased at being noticed again after his recent disgrace, "but before taking vows and that sort of thing there is a deal to be considered. In the first place," he continued, in the tone of superiority that he loved to assume, "what kind of armour, I wonder, would be suitable."

"Oh! the right kind for you would be *plate* armour," said Di, quickly, glancing at the amount of jam and cream with which Andrew had heaped his plate, "nothing else would suit you."

"Happy hit, Di," laughed Phil. "If you go on at this rate, Miss Annie, we shall have to label you the 'hold-all' when we take our luggage home again."

"You dare!" began Andrew; but happily Ruth, who was perhaps doing duty as constable in plain clothes this evening, happened to appear at that moment to enquire if she could clear the table—all the others had finished their tea—whereupon Andrew, being far more anxious to clear his plate than his character, devoted all his attention to the former pursuit.

And so, when Mrs. Busson and Ruth finished dismantling the table, they were able to record with fervent thankfulness that at any rate the tea had been partaken of in peace and quietness.

CHAPTER XI.

"TARRY THE BAKING."

It was rather wonderful how eagerly all the children took to Phoena's idea of founding a Knighthood of the Order of Good Intentions.

The fact was that in one form or another it possessed distinct attractions for each member of that rather mixed company.

Notably to the schoolboys, to whom the prospect of being bound by a vow to pitch into all evil-doers was highly acceptable.

"Those young beggars who are always riling the farmer by making short cuts across his meadows will come under that head," said Phil, "we'll teach them the way they should go and no mistake."

"That we will," echoed Jack.

"Yes, but remember that you ought to meet your foes in fair fight," remarked Faith. "Knights weren't supposed to bully, you know."

They were all indoors now, for the sultry heat of that oppressive summer day had ended in a tremendous thunder-storm, which had driven everyone, even the most ardent haymaker, under shelter. True, Phil and Jack were disappointed of their row on the river, and so was Andrew of his expedition into the lanes, where he had intended to besmear the tree trunks with the beer and treacle mixture he had been preparing, nevertheless all the boys resigned themselves very happily to their enforced imprisonment, so keen were they on discussing the details of Phoena's scheme.

"Of course," said Andrew, "as I've consented to be your Head it will be for me to draw up the laws by which our Order is to be governed."

There was instantly a roar of dissentient voices, above which Phoena at length made herself heard.

"Perhaps if your name were Arthur instead of Andrew," she said slowly, "it might seem a pity not to make you the King, but as it is, wouldn't it be better for us all to agree that our King is absent—"

"Fighting the Paynims," broke in Di.

"Exactly," said Phoena, "and we should all be left on oath to defend the honour of the Round Table."

"Yes, and couldn't we make it this way?" suggested Fay; "that the King was to bestow golden spurs on the knight who could show the noblest record on his return?"

"The knights always had golden spurs, I think," said Phoena, "I don't think they were regular knights without them. But we might fix a certain trial time during which every knight must do his best to distinguish himself, and when the time is up we'll appoint a special day and invest him with a grand Order of Merit and—"

"And have a big banquet," put in Phil.

"Yes, a real stuff-and-sit-down jollification," added Jack, "infants and all."

"Yes, yes, infants and all," chimed in those young parties.

"But please, how soon will that grand day be?" enquired Marygold.

"Ah! that will have to be settled," said Faith.

"I was coming to that," said Phoena; "you see we must allow the knights fair opportunity to win their laurels, so as we are here for at least a month, shall we say that the investiture—"

"Please is that the name of what we shall eat," asked Hubert.



Andrew flung Mrs. Busson's best patchwork cushion at Jack's head.

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"Little boys shouldn't interrupt," said Phoena, severely. "I was going to say, shall we fix the grand day for this day fortnight? That will give a clear twelve week-days for all to achieve their noble exploits."

Unanimous cries of "Yes."

"But," said Faith, "how are we to settle who has done the noblest deed?"

"That will be my business," said Andrew.

"Cock-a-doodle-do," broke in Phil, "hark to the Biddie Tom."

"Of course it will be," asserted Andrew, "I'm the eldest of you all, except Fay, and she's only a girl, of course it's my right."

"Bosh," said Jack, "if only one person is to decide, then it ought to be Phoena, she knows the most about the Round Table laws, and besides *she's* sure not to be sneaky."

"Be what?" cried Andrew, springing up, "say that again and I'll—"

"Get another jolly good licking, eh?" retorted Phil.

"If you don't shut up, Miss Annie, we'll turn you out of this," said Jack.

"I shall decline to have any share in the business," said Andrew, "if I'm not properly treated."

"Which would be, of course," remarked Jack, "to give you another licking, but it's too much fag."

"You wretched boys," cried Di, "can't you manage to be ten minutes together without fighting? Oh! take care, that nearly hit me," as Andrew flung Mrs. Busson's best crazy patchwork cushion at Jack's head, via Diana's.

"I'm very much afraid that there will have to be another free fight," said Phil, drawing a long face, and straightway making himself ready to battle.

"There need be no fight at all," Andrew struggled to say from under a woollen anti-macassar, which Phil had thrown over his head off the back of his chair. "It's my right to be the head of everything, and you ought to support me, Faith." He was wriggling now in Phil's clutches.

"Well, did I ever!" exclaimed Mrs. Busson, appearing in the doorway, "talk of a Welsh Fair, all this noise would beat it to pancakes. Well, you are young gentlemen to talk, and no mistake."

"To fight, you mean, you dear old Busson, only you're too civil to say so," laughed Phil.

"*Fight!* I should hope not indeed," exclaimed Mrs. Busson, "whatever could you find to fight about, the idea!"

"We are not exactly fighting," began Andrew, grandly.

"What a cracker!" cried Jack.

"We were only differing," protested Andrew, "I was trying to—"

"Oh, please Mrs. Busson, do hear what a beautiful plan we are making," said Phoena, "if you can stay to listen that is, for I daresay we may have to get you to help us in carrying it out."

"And very glad I'll be to help you any way I can," said Mrs. Busson, "so just you tell me what it's all about."

To anyone less enthusiastic in her cause than Phoena it would have seemed rather a formidable undertaking to initiate worthy Mrs. Busson into the mysteries of the Round Table lore, but not so to Phoena.

True, she wisely confined herself to giving the merest outline of the scheme, and laid the chief stress upon the two leading features in the programme, namely, the promised distinction to be awarded to the noblest deed and the

grand ceremony which should celebrate that function.

And, wonderful to relate, instead of being fast asleep by the time that Phoena had finished her story, Mrs. Busson was keenly awake and alive to the situation, as her first remark satisfactorily proved.

"Well now, I call that quite the prettiest bit of play-acting I've ever heard of," she declared, "and nothing to quarrel over, I'm sure."

"Oh, it was only Andrew trying to be disagreeable," said Di, "he always wants to be first, you know, in everything."

"Now isn't it strange?" said the old farmer's wife, "how, ever since the Bible days, when the good Lord chid His disciples for just such disputing amongst themselves, there's never been a little company but what one of them has wanted to be first. There," went on Mrs. Busson, smoothing down the folds of her black silk apron, which was the badge of her "evening dress," "you children put me in mind of something that happened in my young days, when I wasn't much older than Miss Fay."

"Oh! tell us about it," said Di.

"Well, we were all over at grandfather's farm, a number of girl cousins, for it was the day before Harvest Home, and we always went to help prepare the supper for next day, Dear me! what a sight of roasting, and stewing, and boiling, and baking there was to be done, for grandfather never would allow of any stint, everyone on the place was feasted. But to come to what I was going to tell you.

"There were about a dozen of us girls in the kitchen, and for want of knowing better, we all fell to squabbling as to who could make the best puff-pastry, and we grew that spiteful against each other that from saying ugly things about each other's pastry, we finished by saying them about each other.

"There, we got to such high words that I can't tell where it would have ended if grandmother had not come into the kitchen and stopped us, short and sharp.

"'Now, listen,'" she said, "'this very evening, when the rest of the cooking is all done, I'll have each one of you make a bit of pastry after your own fashion, and the piece that *I* say turns out the best shall be called the best in this house for ever after. So now not another sound from any of you chattermags till your pastry has been into the oven and out of it again.'

"And though we all in turn tried to make the old lady say that our own particular recipe was bound to turn out the best, she had only one answer for us all:

"'Tarry the baking, and then the best will be *called* the best.' "

"And was yours the best?" asked Fay.

"No, my dear, my cousin Rachel it was who won the day. But grandmother's saying of 'tarry the baking' came to be our favourite proverb ever after whenever we were tempted to be over hasty in settling how any matter was going to turn out. And so," wound up Mrs. Busson, "that is what I say to you, my dears, don't spoil everything by being in too great a hurry to make a king amongst you. Just wait patiently, and all give each other a fair chance, and then, when you've really settled it amongst yourselves, we'll have a grand day. Trust me to make you a regular feast, with junkets, and syllabubs, and all manner of good things. And I wouldn't be surprised that when the day comes you'll all have done so well that you'll have to be crowned kings and queens together. And now," added Mrs. Busson, moving to the door, "I'll go and see if Rob has brought in the half sieve of cherries that I thought wouldn't come amiss to you staying indoors this wet evening." And though as Mrs. Busson disappeared, the elders of the party agreed that "all being crowned kings and queens together" was not exactly the object that they had in view, they all, Andrew only excepted, fully concurred in the wisdom of her recommendation to "tarry the baking."

CHAPTER XII.

"LIVE PURE, SPEAK TRUTH, RIGHT WRONG."

THE next day, directly breakfast was over, there was a solemn meeting in the Cuckoo copse, to consider the further details in the development of Phoena's scheme.

"There's only one thing that I want to say," said Di.

"When isn't there?" asked Jack.

"Well, but," persisted the eager speaker, "what Phoena read out of the book last night was all very well, but as far as we are concerned there's no sense in it in these days. I mean as regards keeping the vows, we can only do the dull part, such as speaking the truth and being kind to each other, and all that sort of thing."

"Hear, hear," broke in the boys.

"But as to the other part," went on Di, encouraged by their applause, "which really was the only nice part, what chance have we of pursuing infidels, and riding abroad to maintain the right and of breaking lances over wicked people's heads?"

"Oh! but Di," cried Phoena, "you mustn't talk like that. Proper knights didn't break their lances over people's heads as if they were only old women's broomsticks."

"Oh! all right then, stuck them into people's hearts," retorted Di, with a delightful independence as to the accuracy of her language, "so any way, I'm going to propose something much simpler. Let's all agree that the boys are to do one brave thing every day and we girls one kind thing. And whoever fails to fulfil this, must be summoned before the whole lot of us and—"

"Be sat upon as we shall judge fit," concluded Jack.

"Capital, capital!" resounded from all sides.

Only Faith dissented. Did she not know the fearful squabbling which under the proposed conditions would most surely mar the close of each day. "I don't want to preach—" she began.

"Then *don't*," said Di, promptly.

"No, but," continued Faith, growing scarlet, "if we bind ourselves at all, wouldn't it be better to try and *be* kind

instead of binding ourselves to *do* something kind and brave and all that? Because, though, I can't exactly explain what I mean, *doing* things isn't always *being* them. One may do a kind thing without being really kind."

"What on earth do you mean?" asked Diana.

"This sort of thing," said Faith. "Last evening when poor little Gaston looked through the door at us all eating cherries—"

"Well, we gave him some," said Andrew.

"Yes, and giving him a handful of cherries was a kind act, but you were not kind in giving them to him. You called him a flabby French frog and in such a nasty tone too, I'm quite sure that he would have been much happier if he hadn't had the cherries at all."

"Yes," said Jack, "I see what you mean, you dear pious old Fay, but look here, we're going to turn over a new leaf altogether, you know, and we mean both to *be* good and to *do* good."

"Still," said Phoena, "Fay's right, Di's scheme won't do. To start with, we shouldn't probably have all an equal chance of doing great things, and then besides," Phoena rather faltered over this bit of plain speaking, "besides we are none of us so extra kind and good, you know, that we are likely to—"

"Have some goodness to spare for every day in the week, that's what you mean to say," wound up Di.

"Something like it," admitted Phoena, "so that we had better be contented with all trying to do our best, and then at the end of our time we must all solemnly consider whose best is *bestest*."

Then followed a tremendous argument as to what kind of deed should be considered best. On this point, there were of course so many different opinions that the discussion bid fair to last to midnight, had not Hubert's shrill tones asserted themselves.

"The most unselfish thing that we can do, and the thing that hurts ourselves the most, that ought to be called the bestest deed," proclaimed this small self-constituted oracle.

Vague and distinctly ungrammatical as this proposition was, it was nevertheless hailed as a welcome end to the long discussion, and was duly carried in these terms.

"That that deed which shall be the most unselfish, and shall cost the doer the heaviest price shall be adjudged the best."

And as Phoena entered this important resolution into her code of rules and regulations Faith wondered a little anxiously as to how and when that resolution would be enforced.

If she had only guessed what was coming!

But though Hubert's suggestion was adopted, his sudden leap into public life, as well as to the top of the fence, whence he had delivered himself, nearly cost him the chance of being enrolled himself into the order at all, for the elder boys agreed that it was quite impossible to admit such an infant on the same footing as themselves.

"He's such an awful youngster," said Phil, sighing heavily at the thought of Hubert's four years juniorship to himself.

"Of course," said Andrew, decidedly, "we can't have such a baby amongst us."

But the pitiful look on the "awful youngster's" face softened Jack's heart.

"Phoena, can't we take him in as something that isn't a knight?" he asked; "As a squire or a page?"

"He might go in as a valet," said Phoena. "No, you needn't look offended, Hubert. A valet in those days didn't mean a man who brushed clothes, but simply a vassalet or little page. He began his training for the knighthood just about your age, and valet was only the short for vassalet."

"Vaseline you mean," said Di, wickedly.

But Phoena went on:

"His chief duties were to attend his lord in the chase, to learn from him how to shoot and use the lance, to be taught courteous ways towards ladies, and to be ever of a modest and obedient behaviour."

"Then, as I'm eldest, you'll have to be my valet," broke in Andrew.

"Only so long as you treat him properly, though," said both boys; while Hubert, content through sad necessity, accepted these terms.

"But what shall we girls have to do?" asked Di. "I suppose we shall have to fulfil our good intentions in some way or other."

"Of course," said Phoena, "we shall have to be much more careful than the knights to fulfil our vows and to set them a good example. In olden times it was always the ladies, you know, who used to inspire the flower of chivalry to do noble deeds and teach high thoughts and—"

"High jinks will be what Di'll teach us, and nothing else," laughed Jack; "but I say, what about taking that little French beggar into the Order?"

"Oh! please do," begged both the infants.

"It would be rather unkind to leave him out," said Fay.

"He'd better look out if he comes under my notice," said Andrew; "I'll show him that I can pay off old scores."

"Take care," warned Phoena, "or you may get turned out of the Order and dubbed a false knight, for to revenge yourself on the weak would be breaking your vows, you know."

"Oh! let's have the poor little beggar in," said Phil, good-naturedly. Marygold had been whispering so pleadingly in his ear.

"He is rather a Molly, you know," objected Jack.

"And scarcely likely to be an ornament to the Order," remarked Di.

"And very likely to be a bone of contention," sighed Faith, who began to realise that there might be many objections to admitting Gaston to closer companionship with the older boys.

And so the motion for admitting Gaston into the noble company was not carried; but when, on the next afternoon, they held high festival in the Cuckoo Copse to inaugurate their Order, and Gaston, under Ruth's protection, ran to and fro, a willing helper in carrying the good things which Mrs. Busson had provided for the feast,

they all felt, as Phil expressed it, that it would be awfully mean to keep the wretched little chap out of their fun.

With infinite trouble Phoena had traced out a huge circle on the mossy ground, which was to represent the Round Table, and within this magic ring, all the viands were arranged also in a circle.

There were pyramids of strawberries and cherries, jugs of cream, currants in a snowstorm—a confection peculiar to Mrs. Busson, composed of whites of eggs beaten to a stiff snow and inlaid with clusters of crystallised red currants—there were fairy foolscaps, made of most transparent pastry, stuffed with cream and jam, there was thunder and lightning—clotted cream, intersected with flashes of apricot preserve—big bowls of curds and whey, with a magnificent dish of trifle to crown the centre of the table.

Mrs. Busson had indeed spared no pains to make the banquet worthy of the occasion.

But when, after Gaston had finished helping Ruth to arrange the table with such deftness that Ruth declared he was a regular little French cook, he meekly followed her back to the house without attempting to stay beside the tempting board, there was a violent reaction in Gaston's favour amongst all the intending merry-makers.

To the infants' exceeding joy they were bidden to pursue the outcast and to bring him back to the feast.

And so, with no very clear comprehension of his obligations, Gaston joined in the banquet, and was duly enrolled as the youngest knight in the Order of Good Intentions.

"We *must* make him a knight," Di had wisely whispered to Jack, "for if he were only a valet like Hubert, Andrew would bully him so."



They were bidden to bring him back to the feast.

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CHAPTER XIII.

"NO, NO, IT IS NOT JUST."

"I WONDER what sort of grand things *he* will do," said Andrew with a sneer at Gaston, who, at the close of the banquet ran off to tell of his new honours to Ruth. "Not much fear of his carrying off the prize from any of us."

"Not much," laughed the schoolboys.

"It doesn't seem to me," remarked Phil after a pause, "that it'll be an easy matter for any of us to get a chance of doing anything really swagger."

"Just what I was thinking," said Jack; "if only one had the chance of slashing off a few Turk's heads it would be easy enough to get famous," and as he lay on his back amongst the high grass, Jack made a ferocious onslaught with his stick at the tall blades waving above his head. "But you see where it is, however much those youngsters may break down the fences and rob the cherry orchards, we can't go and slice off *their* heads."

"I should think not, indeed," cried Faith; "why you know that you must not even strike them."

"We shall see about that," said Jack, very ominously, "when the time for action comes; but depend upon it, my fellow knights," he added, with a knowing wink at Phil, "it was not customary to hold councils of war in the presence of gentle ladies."

"Of course not," said Andrew; "knights brought their trophies to their fair ladies to win their praises, but they didn't tell them beforehand how they were going to get them."

"They'd have been bigger duffers than I take them for if they did," remarked Jack.

"Perhaps in those days," remarked Andrew, "the ladies had more go in them than the meek and mild Fay has."

"Now, I say, don't *you* jeer at Faith," cried Phil, quickly.

"You'd better not," cried Phoena, "or you'll be disgraced and degraded, Andrew, as recreant to your vows."

"Come on," said Jack, springing to his feet, and thrusting his cap in true schoolboy fashion at the back of his head with the peak well over his left ear, "come on, fellow conspira— knights I mean, I've an idea."

"May I come, too?" asked Hubert, timidly.

"And I, too?" enquired Gaston, returning at that moment.

There was a whispered conference between the elders, then Andrew said audibly:

"As my valet, you know, he will be under my control, and we might find him useful."

"Oh! yes, I'd be werry useful," shouted Hubert, fervently. He was trembling with fear lest on the very threshold of his new career he should meet with a rebuff.

"Well, you understand," said Jack, turning rather a grim countenance on the small suppliant, "that you'll have to knock under to us; if you don't you'll get toko, mind that."

"What's toko?" asked Gaston, under his breath.

"Only a whacking," said Hubert, as gaily as if it had been a plum bun. "I don't mind that."

"Then you're the right sort of man, old chap," cried Phil.

At this bit of praise Hubert swelled almost visibly with pride.

"And may Gaston come?" he asked.

"He'll have to come as knight, you know," said Jack to Phil.

"Yes, and Andrew would be sure to fight him and spoil sport that way," whispered the latter in return.

"May Gaston come too?" asked Hubert again.

"No! Gaston mayn't come too," answered Andrew, mimicking Hubert's tone; "we don't want the company of a French frog on this occasion; do we, you fellows?" he added, addressing the other boys.

"No, he had better not come," they agreed.

"So hop off, Master Frog, till further orders," jeered Andrew.

"Never mind, Gaston, you'll go with them next time," comforted Faith. But Gaston, seeing all the boys disappear without him, and thus realising that, in spite of their promise, he was to be excluded from their games, was deaf to consolation.

He stood motionless, like a small monument of stony grief, his sorrowful eyes fixed on the opening in the thick bushes through which the others had vanished.

"Never mind, dear little Gaston," said Phoena, kindly, running up to him and putting her hand on his arm, "you shall be my own knight, and we will do something grand between us."

"You are good," he said, slowly, but so mournfully that even Di's heart was touched, "but it is not just; no, no, it is not just."

Then he turned, and, with almost a majestic step, he walked out of the wood. A minute later he might have been seen executing a kind of war-dance on the top of the steep bank which separated the wood from the fields, and muttering in his mother tongue words to this effect:

"Ha! I am a French frog indeed! Yes, yes, a frog! Ah! it is well; they shall see, they shall see."

Fay, meanwhile, and the other girls were speculating rather anxiously as to what might be the outcome of the boys' conclave.

"I do hope they're not going to do anything very dreadful," said Fay, "but the boys are so foolhardy."

"Yes," said Phoena; "though I'm sorry for Gaston's disappointment, I'm glad he didn't go with them."

"I wish they hadn't taken Hubert," said Faith.

"I don't," said Marygold, like a cunning little woman, "'cause I expect Hubert will tell us all about it when they come back, and the others wouldn't."

But Marygold was somewhat disappointed.

Hubert had been bound over to secrecy, and consequently his reticence as to the affairs of the meeting—at this early stage of the proceedings at any rate—was not to be shaken.

"Nuffin very important was to happen till to-morrow evening," was all he could be coaxed into divulging.

"I'm going to start a kind of diary," announced Phoena at breakfast next morning, "where I shall enter everything grand that anyone does in the day. It'll make it easier to settle up at the end, you know."

"Capital notion," said several voices.

"I expect you'll have a not half bad entry for to-night," said Jack, mysteriously, upon which all the boys chuckled meaningly; and, to judge from their long absences during the day, and their very pre-occupied airs during meals and on all other public occasions, it was clear that something was brewing.

"I guess," said Di, "that at last they've found a wasps' nest, and are going to blow it up; that's why they are in such a hurry for tea."

For Hubert had just come to say that they had asked Mrs. Busson to have tea half an hour earlier than usual.

"For *particular* reasons," Hubert had explained.

Diana's guess was wrong, however.

What was actually planned was never let out by the conspirators, nor indeed what actually took place, for Phoena was called upon to make no entry in her book that evening. Only mere fragments of information leaked out from Hubert. They were told in strict confidence to Marygold, and, being pieced together by her elders, furnished the following story, which was practically the true one.

By way of beginning their new career, the boys had determined to turn their attention to the trespassers, who vexed Busson's soul so sorely and so persistently by straying from the footpaths through his grass fields, and making short cuts instead.

"We'll give them such a lesson in trespassing," the boys agreed, "that old Busson will bless us for ever after."

With this laudable result in view, it would appear that they had arranged to lie in wait, "armed to the teef" as Hubert expressed it, *i.e.*, provided with stout sticks, and concealed behind hay-stacks and hedges, in order to fall upon the first evil-doer who should stray from the right path. Their dream was to capture as many of these

malefactors as possible, and to drag them to the farm bound in chains.

The chains were to be represented by some strong whipcord, upon the purchase of which the knights expended a considerable amount of their week's pocket money. They made their plans with much care. They had learnt the "lay of the land" by heart, they had reconnoitred their positions again and again, and had rehearsed their manœuvres at least a dozen times during the day. Hubert had been well drilled in his part, with a good allowance of "toko," which he had taken in excellent part as belonging of right to the fortunes of war; yet, despite all these preparations, when the moment for action came the result was a failure, and rather an ignominious one too.

They were to wait till well after dusk before beginning operations, twilight being the time when the trespassers were always abroad. Each of the boys was to occupy a separate position, and to be ready to spring upon the foe or foes the instant that there was a deviation from the lawful path, and by judicious out-flanking no culprit was to be suffered to escape. Hubert was concealed in a deep ditch which ran so close to the foot-path that he could not fail to note the passers-by, but he was specially charged not to blow his whistle unless the individual did actually transgress and forsake the beaten way.

"They must be caught red-handed," the boys had decreed.

Loyally did Hubert fulfill his duty, though he literally hungered to see each passing pair of feet stray into forbidden paths. But none of the tired labourers who passed along the field showed any inclination to wander. Hubert had to let all go by with a heavy sigh and an increased longing for "really bad ones" to come soon.

At length, when it was growing very dusk, a short figure was seen to vault over the stile at the further end of the field, and without attempting to approach the foot-path, run boldly across the meadow.

Here, at last, was the longed-for malefactor.

Before even Hubert could whistle, Andrew, who was nearest to the stile, had darted out of his hiding-place and was attacking the foe.

But instead of meeting him face to face, as had been agreed should be done, according to the accepted canons of fair fighting, Andrew had allowed his victim to pass him, and had then followed him and struck him with his stick.

"I am just glad to be the very first of them all to be in the field," he was saying to himself, but he didn't say it twice.

In another second the figure, who was one of the odd men on his way to see to some yearling colts in the upper meadow, had rounded upon Andrew and seized him by the collar. Then he shook him so roughly that feeble cries for "he-elp" were nearly choked in his throat.

And if Phil and Jack had not come to the rescue and recognised Ned, with whom they had already chummed over the boat, that individual, so he solemnly assured them, would have well-nigh broken every bone in Andrew's personal possession.

"And sarve him jolly well right, too, for hittin' a chap over the head in the dark, and from behind, too," Ned said.

"Well, you *have* gone and made a fool of yourself, and of us too," cried his cousins, in deep disgust, as Ned departed. "Why on earth couldn't you observe our laws and behave like a man? Now, at any rate, hold your tongue and don't blab a word of what has happened. We wouldn't let the girls know for anything."

"And so you mustn't never say one word of it to anyone," Hubert gravely told Marygold, who had forthwith taken the earliest opportunity to repeat "only a little bit of it" to Phoena, and a little more to Di, and pretty nearly the whole to Faith.

Happily for Hubert, *they* kept their own counsel.

CHAPTER XIV.

"A PUNITIVE EXPEDITION."

IN spite of the boys' efforts to conceal the failure of their first essay in knightly deeds, there was no doubt that it had a very depressing effect on their ardour.

Indeed, the grand project might quite possibly have languished and died out, if it had not been for a fresh impetus given to it from outside. This came in the form of a letter from Mrs. Durand.

Faith had sent an account of their scheme to her mother, who entered so cordially into their project, that she wrote, promising to award as her own prize one golden sovereign to the best deserving of the knights. She only stipulated that the record of the noblest deed of each should be submitted to her for consideration.

Fay and Phoena were to be responsible for the accuracy of the list, which was to be endorsed by all the other members' signatures.

"I'm glad," ended Mrs. Durand, "that you've taken little Gaston into your number. A Gaston should do doughty deeds to keep up the reputation of such a bright name in the rolls of chivalry; besides, it would have been unkind, and therefore unknightly, to have left him out."

Fay was careful to read this last remark out, and though it was received with evident dissatisfaction, it nevertheless bore fruit.

Fired now by the prospect of winning a "golden opinion" the boys set to work to consider what enterprise they could next take in hand.

Phoena furnished them with an object on which to expend their zeal.

In a certain village, Playden by name, through which they had driven, coming from the station, she had noticed a thrush hung up in a cage outside a cobbler's door. The poor bird was beating itself so wildly against the bars that Phoena felt certain that it could not have been bred in its wicker prison, and must, therefore, have been only recently captured.

"Now that really is a poor distressed creature that ought to be succoured," she declared; "I've thought of it ever since I saw it."

"It shall regain its liberty before sunset," said Jack, solemnly.

"And vengeance shall overtake its persecutors," added Phil.

"If necessary the whole cottage shall be burnt to the ground, as a warning to all the surroundings," added Andrew.

"I've got a whole big match box in my pocket," whispered Hubert to Phil.

"Bring it with you," replied the latter, to Hubert's excessive joy.

"How far off is the village?" asked Fay, not daring to show the immense alarm with which the prospect of this punitive expedition filled her.

"Oh!" said Phoena, who had evidently given much thought to the subject, "it's only about a mile off; if the boys go now they will have plenty of time to free the captive and return for dinner."

"It rather depends," said Andrew, "upon the amount of resistance we may encounter."

"It's to be hoped there'll be a jolly lot," said Jack.

"But please remember," Fay ventured to say, "that you must not behave like a horde of savages. After all, the bird is not your property, and if you want to set it free, you must start by offering to buy it."

"I think," said Andrew, grandly, "you may leave us to conduct the matter so as to preserve our own honour. And now," turning to Hubert, "you valet, wind your horn and assemble our lieges."

The horn was a tin pipe, from whose slender interior, at the expense of much puffing, Hubert managed to extract a thin shrill note.

Phil and Jack being already on the field, that summons would have been the merest formality, had Gaston not been allowed to respond to it.

But to Marygold's delight, when poor little Delzant came flying across the paddock in answer to the horn, he was graciously permitted to set forth in company with his brothers-in-arms.

"There's a short cut across the fields," began Phoena, but a frown from Faith stopped her.

"No short cuts for us," replied Andrew, who privately hated fields which might hold cattle of uncertain temper, "we march to glory on a straight and open road."

"Hear, hear," from the rest of the company.

Therewith those gallant redressers of wrong sallied forth to execute justice on the unsuspecting, and, to all appearances, law-abiding population of the small village of Playden.

"There they go," said Di; she had clambered up to the top of a high gate, and was standing on the bar. "Hubert's heading them with his pipe, thank goodness that he's not blowing it very loud, and Gaston is following him. The others are marching abreast, because I suppose they are all of equal rank, just behind Gaston. It's such a lonely road that they're not likely to meet anybody. I wonder how they'll get on."

"I'll never forgive them, if they come back without the bird," said Phoena, quite fiercely.

"I'm sorry for the poor bird," said Fay, "still, I wish Phoena, that you'd never told them about it. You don't know what it may lead to."

"Oh! you coward, Fay," cried Phoena, "how would wrongs ever get righted if people stayed to think what it might lead to? When would they do anything grand if they always stopped to count the cost?"

"Well, I'm going to see what this'll lead to," retorted Fay, flushing angrily. "I'm going to take the short cut across the fields, and get to Playden before the boys arrive, and offer to buy the thrush. I'm quite sure it's the only way to prevent a row."

"Oh, you traitor," cried Di; whilst Phoena added, "If you do that, you'll encourage all the village to imprison other birds."

"I don't care," said Faith, "that's what I'm going to do," and with Marygold for a companion, she set off at a brisk rate through the fields.

"We won't come with you," said Di and Phoena together.

But Faith had not gone far before Marygold, looking behind her, announced with great excitement, that the two girls were following them. "But they bobbed and hid behind the haystack when they saw me looking," said Marygold.

"I thought they'd come," laughed Fay, "but I expect we should have done as well if they'd kept their word and stayed at home."

CHAPTER XV.

"FIRST CATCH YOUR BIRD."

THUS it came to pass on that pleasant July morning that as old Jonas Tubbs, cobbler by trade and a rare practical joker by taste, was following the stitching duties of his calling, he was surprised by the arrival of a troop of boys and girls at his door.

By this time Phoena and Di had joined the others.

"Bother my best button boots!" said Jonas, "I'd like to know what's the meaning of all this! 'Tisn't as if I sported lollipops and sweetstuff in my winder to tempt anyone, and they ain't the sort of youngsters to want any of my goods," he added, casting a professional eye on the nine pair of feet which belonged by right to the assembled party. "Well, I do wonder what they're all after."

Although at first starting, the boys would have resented the idea of being joined by the girls, yet just then they were really very glad to see them. The truth was, that though they had found the cobbler's cottage easily enough, they had failed to discover the cage hanging by the door containing the hapless victim they had come to champion.

"I believe you dreamt it all, Phoena," said Andrew, peevishly.

"Any way," laughed Jack, "it looks much more as if we had come on a wild goose chase than a caged thrush one."

"But it was here," cried Phoena, earnestly, "I know I was not mistaken. I'll go inside and ask that old man."

"No, don't," said the boys, quickly, "you'll spoil sport if you do; he'll smell a rat then and be bound to gammon you."

"Then I'll go into that shop opposite," said Phoena, "and ask if they can tell me whether Tubbs—yes, that is the right name," she added, going backwards on the narrow pavement in order to read the description of himself and his performances over Jonas's door—"whether Tubbs does not keep a caged thrush."

Therewith Phoena darted into a small shop, which was evidently the "Harrod's Stores" of Playden, offering a miscellaneous assortment of wares for sale, varying from bootlaces to bacon, and from mouse-traps to smart bonnets.

"Please can you tell me," asked Phoena of the woman at the counter, "if there isn't generally a bird-cage hanging outside Tubbs's door?"

"To be sure, can't you see it for yourself, Miss?" was the reply, and Mrs. Bowles ducked her head under a string of brilliant handkerchiefs to secure a better view of her opposite neighbour's door.

"But it's not there to-day," said Phoena.

"No, more it is," cried Mrs. Bowles. "Well, I never! 'Twasn't more than an hour ago that I saw it there with my own eyes, with a cabbage leaf laid on the top, same as they always put over in the heat. Maybe they've just taken it inside, whilst the day's at its hottest."

"Thank you," said Phoena, and without noticing the woman's disappointment at her abrupt departure, she flew back to the others.

"That wicked old man must have guessed that we were coming," she said, "for the woman in the shop says that the cage was put out to-day."

"I wish we had come earlier," said Faith, "for it makes it much more difficult to do anything now."

"Nonsense," cried Jack, "it'll be all the more exciting. Now we must go in and make the old beggar hand up the bird or show us where it is."

"I shouldn't be surprised if we have to use a little force," said Phil, "for if he tries to rot us about the thrush we'll make him sit up."

"The best way," suggested Andrew, "would be for you two boys to tackle the fellow, and leave me to free the bird. You deal with Jonas, and I will open the cage and let out the bird. I'm not a bit afraid of taking that responsibility," he added loftily.

"Trust you," began Phil, "to take the eas—"

But Faith broke in, "You really mustn't set about it in that way, boys," she said, "you've no right to touch what doesn't belong to you. Let us go in first and offer to pay for the thrush, then when it belongs to us we can do what we like with it."

"But of course, he won't sell it, he—"

"Well, let's ask him, at all events."

"And suppose he flatly refuses?" asked Phil.

"Then," shouted Jack, "we'll wreck the whole show, shop and all."

"You can't," said Fay, in the severe tone that she always assumed when she was most terrified, "you won't forget that you are gentlemen, I'm quite sure that you won't."

"And that it is the duty of real knights to redress wrongs, but not to inflict them," put in Phoena, who was feeling a little frightened.

Fay meanwhile had quickly stepped into the cobbler's half-opened door.

"Good-morning," she said, very hurriedly, "you have a caged thrush, have you not?"

"Well, who said I hadn't," said Jonas, not looking up from his work.

"Oh, nobody," said Faith, very politely, "but we saw it by your door, and we want to know if you would sell it to us."

Jonas Tubbs looked up from his boot-mending. There was an expression of exceeding surliness on his face, but there was likewise a malicious twinkle in his eye which would probably not have escaped the notice of an older person. To Fay, however, he only appeared an abominably cross-looking old man.

"How much would you take for the thrush?" she asked.

"All depends how much you'd like to give," snarled Jonas.

"We'd give you—" began Faith, but the others cut her short.

"Don't be so green as to make an offer," whispered Di, at her elbow, whilst the boys, who were dying to put in their tongues, repeated Faith's first enquiry in deafening tones. "Come, out with it, how much will you take for that thrush that we saw in the cage?"

"Aaron," called Jonas, by way of answer—Biblical names were evidently in favour in the house of Tubbs—"Aaron, just come here."

There was the sound of shuffling footsteps, accompanied by that of a hollow cough, then a miserable-looking, undersized youth with a crutch under one arm became visible.

"You come here, Aaron, just as a witness to this here bit of business," said the cobbler. "Now then, young ladies and gentlemen," he continued, turning to the party, which was fast filling up his small shop, "you want to know, I understand, what I'll charge for the thrush what you saw in the cage outside my door."

A look of startled surprise leapt into the cripple's face, and his lips jerked as if he were about to protest, but his eye met his father's, and what he would have said remained unspoken.

"How much I'll take for the thrush, that's what you want to know, eh?"

"Yes, you old stick-in-the-mud," cried the boys, "haven't we said so a dozen times? Hurry up and give us an answer."

"All in good time," said Jonas, quietly. "You've heard that, Aaron?"

"Yes, father," said the boy. There was a look on his face now of mingled expectation and amusement, which

puzzled the girls and irritated the boys not a little.

"Repeat it after me, my lad," said Jonas, "when parties are entering into a contract, 'specially where they're all strangers, one can't be too *partiklar* as to the terms of a bargain."

Aaron obeyed dutifully, whilst Phil whispered to Jack that if the old "demon" went on much longer at this sort of game they would have recourse to different measures.

"Now tell us the price," said Andrew, "or it'll be the worse for you."

"And the better for us," laughed Jack, who was pining for an excuse to come to stronger measures.

But at this point Tubbs saw fit to make an offer.

"Suppose I said ten shillings?" he enquired.

Blank dismay, accompanied by a great silence, fell upon the group, but barely for a minute. Then Jack came forward.

"You're trying to swindle us, you know you are," he said, "we won't give you anything like that."

"Well, we'll say nine shillings and elevenpence."

"We'll give you the elevenpence without the shillings," said Phil.

"And if you don't take care you won't get that," added Andrew.

Phoena, whose desire to aid anything in the form of distressed animal life made her bold beyond her wont, added, "You ought really to be ashamed of yourself to want to be paid at all."

"Shut up, Phoena," said Jack, "when girls put their oar in they spoil everything. Now listen, Mr. Jonas Tubbs," he continued, "we'll give you half-a-crown, neither more nor less, for that thrush, and if you don't accept our offer you'll repent it."

"That you will," echoed several voices in ominous tones.

"*Wull*," said the cobbler, with an odd chuckle, "I expect I might, for it's not every day that I get an offer of that sort. All right, then I close, on condition that the very instant that you get the bird you clear out of my place, every stick and staver of you."

"Oh, you needn't be anxious about that," said Andrew, "this abominable smell of leather isn't so particularly nice if you don't happen to have a cobbler's nose."

"Isn't that *raver* rude?" asked Marygold, under her breath.

Fay set to work at once to collect the various contributions towards the poor thrush's ransom. In due time, after the rifling of many pockets, the half-crown was collected and handed to the cobbler. Phoena was allowed the proud delight of actually paying down the sum.

With an ill-concealed chuckle, Jonas slipped the sundry coins into some safe hiding-place behind the folds of his black apron.

"Now Aaron, my lad, fetch the thrush for the young gentlefolk," he said, turning with a grim smile to his son.

"Yes, and look alive," added Andrew, sharply, "don't be all night about it, do you hear?"

"Don't rag the poor beggar," said Jack, "he's not so well off as we are in the leg line."

"We won't let the poor bird fly here," said Phoena, "for there may be cats about for all we know."

"I shall take over the thrush," said Andrew, decidedly. "I'm the eldest, and besides, I was the only one amongst you who paid sixpence towards his ransom."

"Yes," said Faith, "I think it would be fair for Andrew to have it."

"We'll settle that when the bird comes," said Jack, with the voice of an oracle.

CHAPTER XVI.

"A COWARD'S TRICK."

"WAIT a minute, Aaron," shouted Tubbs, a minute after his son had disappeared. "I'll come and help you with that bird."

Throwing aside his tools and scrooping back his wooden stool, the old cobbler vanished in his turn into the back regions of the establishment.

"I wish between them they'd be a little quicker," sighed Fay, who regretted the delay in the winding up of this transaction.

She was terribly afraid that the boys, finding no outlet for the warlike intentions they had been nursing so zealously, would relieve their disappointment by indulging in a little civil war amongst themselves of a singularly uncivil type. "I do wish they wouldn't be so slow," she repeated.

"I suppose they *will* bring it," said Phoena.

"I say, are you hatching the thrush?" shouted Jack.

"All in good time, young gentlemen," came the cool answer.

"Look here," called Phil, going to the inner door, "we're not going to stand this any more; if you're going to humbug us about that bird it will be the worse for you."

"If you don't bring up that bird by the time I've counted fifty," said Andrew, "we'll make hay of your shop."

"Come on, Aaron," Tubbs was next heard to say—he spoke in aggressively loud tones—"don't do to keep little squeakers too long without their pap and their playthings, so best see to them now."

"Little squeakers, indeed," cried Phil, "he ought to be knocked into the middle of next week for daring to speak like that;" whilst Andrew remarked, with a withering sneer at Gaston and Hubert, "That's the sort of remark we must expect if we go about with babies."

"I'm not a baby," cried Hubert, flaring up with indignation, "a baby's a horrid little thing that always seems crying out of its mouth, instead of its eyes."

At that moment Jonas appeared with the cage, cabbage-leaf and all tucked under his arm. Aaron, with a broad grin on his face, followed close on his parent's heels.

"Now give me the bird," said Andrew, stepping forward, "let me have it, just as it is in its cage, do you hear?"

"Certainly, my young sir, by all manner of means," said the cobbler. "You mind, Aaron, he says he'll have it '*just as it is in its cage!*' "

And as Aaron nodded assent, Jonas, with much show of deference, placed the wicker cage in Andrew's outstretched hands.

The children clustered round Andrew at once, eagerly peering into the cage.

"Let Phoena have the first peep," said Di, and all agreed thereto.

"Oh! thank you," she said, "but we won't open the cage here, he shall be set free out of doors, poor darling; you see——"

Her voice changed suddenly into an angry scream. "Oh! you wicked, wicked man, the poor darling's dead, quite dead!"

Yes, there was no doubt of it! With its head hanging limply on one side, so that his beak just ruffled the pretty speckled plumage of his breast—such a still motionless breast it was—and with his little claws, looking like tiny stiffened



"Oh! you wicked man. The poor darling's dead!"

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hooks, the poor thrush lay on its back on the floor of the cage, just a small heap of feathers.

"Do yer still think he was worth the money?" enquired Jonas.

Aaron burst into a loud laugh, moved to the display of this unseemly merriment by the blank disappointment depicted on all the children's faces. But he didn't laugh long.

For Andrew, who was standing nearest to him, struck him such a blow across his shoulders, that Aaron, unsteady on his legs at the best of times, stumbled, tried to save himself, and finally fell with a crash to the floor.

At the same moment, a handful of leather bootlaces whistled round Andrew's ears, their brass tags making themselves felt unmercifully on his neck and face, for the cobbler was wielding this original scourge with a will. But, instead of attacking the cobbler, as most other boys would have done, Andrew continued his assault upon Aaron, kicking at him with all his might as he lay prone on the floor.

"Shut up, Andrew," cried Phil and Jack, in one breath.

Furious as they were at the way in which they had been tricked, they would have scorned to strike such a poor creature as Aaron.

"How can you be such a cad as to touch such a poor chap?" they said.

"Hope you like yer dead bird," came in a muffled, jeering voice from Aaron, who had evidently more spirit than strength, "hurry 'ome, I would, and make a pie of him."

Then, as he felt himself released from his oppressor, he went on, "Ah! that's better now, hold him off, young gentlemen." For Jack and Phil had pinioned Andrew from behind, and were dragging him back. In his rage, Andrew was kicking out right and left, so that had his fellow knights been wearing any visible armour, he would certainly have inflicted many dints upon it.

His cousins, however, were well used to schoolboys' mills and stuck to their guns. Even Gaston and Hubert, at a wink from them, had risen to the occasion. Each had seized one of Andrew's feet and was hanging on to it, like little terriers to a rat.

But the girls were pale and tearful. Phoena was absorbed by her grief for the thrush's death, but Fay and Di were ashamed of the whole business.

"You had no right to deceive us about the bird," said Fay to the cobbler, who was now calmly resuming his cobbling, leaving the "young uns" to square up accounts by themselves; "you ought to have told us it was dead, when we first asked you about it."

"You ought to have asked if it was alive, if you were particular on that point," retorted Jonas, catching the end of his long thread between his teeth, and suiting it to the length he desired.

"Of course, we supposed it was."

"Never should suppose anything without knowing it for sartin."

"But we'd seen it alive so lately," began Phoena.

"Well, and if you had happened to have come an hour earlier, you'd have seen it alive then. 'Twasn't my fault, it died."

"No, but it was your fault not to tell us that it was dead," said Di.

"Now, blow me, if I think it was," cried Jonas, "a civil question gets a civil answer, that's what I've always learnt. And if you'd spoken civil to me, first go off—them boys, I mean—I'd have spoken civil too, and acted straight with you. But, as it is, I've given you all a lesson in manners, and not charged over highly for it either. And now I'll ask you to clear out of my place; quick march, I say."

"You're a werry rude old man," cried Hubert, waxing bold; but Andrew broke in, his tongue being the only member left free, he meant to use it for a final onslaught.

"Now, my good man," he began, intending to be dignified and opening his mouth extraordinarily wide, after a manner peculiar to himself, "now my goo—"

His mouth shut with a snap, amidst the hearty laughter of all around him. For with an aim so direct that it could not err, and with such promptness that no interference would have been possible, Jonas had thrown a big lump of cobbler's wax straight into Andrew's pompously parted jaws.

And so this episode, which the boys had fondly hoped might end perhaps in a little bloodshed, was concluded by this comical finale, which provoked all the spectators from sober Faith down to little Gaston to ungovernable merriment.

Only Andrew looked as black as the offending missile itself.

"And as that last attention wasn't reckoned for in the bargain, you can have your money back again," laughed the old cobbler, producing the half-crown, "and my best wishes along with it; that when you next try to set the world to rights, you'll make a better job of it. And, as for you," nodding at Andrew, "don't you pick out a lame dog again to show your strength on. Coward's trick, I call that."

"Ay, ay," echoed Aaron's voice from the background, where he had disappeared, "a coward's trick, and no mistake."

So coward was the last sound that pursued the young knights as they retreated in doubtful good order from the field of this, their maiden essay in redressing wrong.

CHAPTER XVII.

EXECUTING A SENTENCE.

"WE must convene a Chapter and degrade him."

They had scarcely reached the outskirts of Playden, when Jack made this thrilling announcement. He was perched on the upper bar of a style in the middle of the field leading to Gaybrook, and his tone was as decided and as impressive as the occasion demanded.

"Of course we must," agreed Phil, tweaking Hubert, significantly.

"Of course we must," said Andrew's valet, in response to the tweak.

Andrew, meanwhile, the person to be degraded, was walking ahead in solitary sulkiness.

"He ought never to have been made a knight, he's not got anything knightly in him," said Phil, "if he's kept in the Order at all, he ought to be made to rank below Gaston."

"But the fact is," said Jack, "he oughtn't to be kept in at all. It's the second time that he's behaved like a sneak, and made fools of us."

"But, boys," began Faith, "you must remember that Andrew has never been to school."

"No fear of our forgetting that, Grannie Faith," retorted Phil; whilst Di added: "But you know if you turn him out the Order will be a very small one."

"Yes," said Phoena, "but we want quality, not quantity."

But though the boys applauded this remark, they nevertheless felt that there was something, too, to be said for Di's argument.

"Go on, you girls," said Jack, "we must discuss this by ourselves."

"I do wonder how they'll settle it," said Fay, who was sorely divided in her mind as to which course would prove best to produce peace and concord. She would have been far more troubled had she guessed the resolution regarding the punishment to be inflicted on Andrew which had been decided upon.

"The execution of the sentence must take place after dinner," Jack had ruled, "and in the meanwhile none of us must cast so much as a single glance at the renegade knight, commonly known as Andrew Durand."

And so rigorously did they all obey this command, that when after dinner all the boys disappeared, leaving Andrew alone, he was so tired of being sent to Coventry, that he quite hailed Hubert's return as the bearer of a formal citation. This was to summon him to appear before his co-knights to answer certain charges against him.

"What do you mean, you little donkey?" cried Andrew, impatiently, as Hubert was conscientiously but laboriously delivering himself of his errand, "I was just going out butterfly hunting, and I can't stop here for ever listening to your rotten message."

"You've got to come down to the river-meadow," said Hubert, punctuating each word with a nod of his head, "and if you don't come *dreckly* they'll come and fetch you."

"I shall come when it suits me," was Andrew's reply.

"He's trying to be cock-lofty," was Hubert's report to those who sent him, "but I believe he is coming all the same."

"He'd better," said his judges, "now young uns, remember your duty."

"Yes," said those "young uns," cheerfully. But in truth, Hubert was secretly quaking with fear; whilst as to Gaston, nothing but the terror of being jeered at as a "French froggy" kept him from running away.

Accustomed to the intense stillness of his grandmother's house, these continual fights and rumours of fights not only bewildered him, they were utterly distasteful to him. But, now he felt that his honour as a Frenchman was at stake, and stay he must.

"Behold the recreant knight," cried Jack, as Andrew approached.

"What a pity," said Phil, "that we couldn't kodak the scene, it's bound to be thrilling."

The spot selected for this rather original court of justice was certainly a very pretty one. Jack, the president, had taken up his position against the trunk of a huge willow tree, whose silver-coated branches swept the surface of the river, which gave its name to the low-lying meadows. An old meal tub, reversed, supplied Jack's seat, whilst a conveniently forked branch on either side of him furnished admirable perches for his two aides-de-camp, Hubert and Gaston. Gaston had selected the safest branch, whilst Hubert, with great glee, had clambered into the fork of the bough which hung so immediately over the water, that his dangling toes just swept the rippling wavelets. Phil apparently combined the offices of prosecutor, witness, and jury in the oncoming trial.

Feeling secretly much alarmed, Andrew presented himself before the court.

"Look sharp and say what you want," he said, "I'm going after butterflies."

"We must ask the butterflies to excuse your attendance to-day," said Jack.

"And I shall want you, Hubert, to carry my net," went on Andrew, ignoring Jack's last speech.

"Wish you may get him," said Phil, whilst Jack added:

"Now look here, Andrew, we've been discussing what happened this morning and what happened the day before yesterday, and we've decided that on each occasion you behaved like a horrid sneak and a coward. If you were one of our fellows at school you'd get a jolly good licking. As it is, we're going to kick you out of our number."

"Yes, we're not going to let you join in anything again," said Phil.

"I don't mean to have anything more to do with any of you," said Andrew, "I was on my way to tell you so."

"Oh! you thought that you were going to sneak out of your rightful punishment that way, did you?" cried Phil, "pretty joke that."

"Hm! you won't find that so easy," said Jack; "when soldiers and sailors are dismissed from Her Majesty's service they don't exactly take up their hats and say 'Good-day' to their superior officers, and stroll off as if they were going to a picnic. The law takes a little personal notice of them first, you know, just as we are going to pay a little special attention to you now. Hm!" and Jack cleared his throat significantly.

At this signal, which had been settled before, Hubert and Gaston descended from their perches and stood at attention on either side of the accused, and facing Jack.

"Keep your distance, you two grinning apes," cried Andrew; "look out, you frog, or it will be the worse for you," he added, giving a poke in the ribs to Hubert, and a pinch to Gaston's arm.

But the proud position in which they found themselves rendered both small boys impervious to their injuries.

"Therefore we have decided," pursued Jack, "to allow you your choice of two alternatives; by accepting either, you will have a chance of paying the penalty for your cowardly behaviour, and thus redeeming your reputation."

"I'm not a coward, and I've not behaved as one," said Andrew.

"O-oh!" came in a prolonged whoop from the assembled audience, "don't you call it cowardly to knock down a wretched cripple, and then kick at him when he's down? Don't you call it cowardly to spring out on a chap in the dark, and hit him in the back, eh?"

"It was all done by mistake, I didn't mean to do it," said Andrew.

"Oh! all right then, you're prepared to come along with us now, are you, this very moment, to Playden, and apologise like a man and a gentleman to the miserable Aaron? Look here, we'll come with you, so that you shan't run a chance of being paid out by them."

"But with people of that sort," said Phil, "an apology is only half the battle; you'll have to stump up that half-crown you've got stowed away somewhere."

"A likely story," cried Andrew; "I'm not going near that cobbler's den again, I can tell you."

"If you're not the very biggest cad that ever breathed, you *will*," said Phil; "why, when we had a row with some street cads at school, and one poor chap got his tooth knocked out, we all clubbed and gave him five shillings, just because we were gentlemen and he was a cad."

"I don't care a mouldy rat," replied Andrew, "whether you knock out a gutter-scraper's teeth or your own, but you won't find me fagging over to Playden, it's not good enough."

"He's werry cheeky," exclaimed Hubert, who was genuinely amazed at such open defiance on Andrew's part.

A sudden blow from Andrew sent him sprawling his full length on the ground, and thus the formal character of the proceedings was entirely dissipated. Before Hubert could find his feet again, Phil and Jack had fallen upon Andrew, and a tremendous struggle ensued.

"Now, I say," cried Jack, who was the first to get breath to express his views on the aspect of affairs, "Andrew deserves a ducking."

"And the sooner he gets it the better," said Phil.

"Shut up, will you," shouted Andrew, who, feeling himself powerless in the hands of the schoolboys, with Hubert and Gaston as their helpers, was really alarmed; "Shut up, will you? I'm not a bit afraid for myself, but you'll find it rather poor fun, I can tell you, to drown a chap."

"Poor fun, do you think so? Wait and see," said Phil; "besides, if you behave yourself, we *may* just stop short of drowning you; give you a chance, at any rate, of seeing what a really good ducking will do for you."

"And it shall be a ducking and a half, you bet," said Jack, cheerfully. "Come on, you fellows," he added, and having finished tying Andrew's hands and feet together, Jack gave him the first decisive shove towards the stream.

It was a very shallow one, you know, measuring about twelve feet across from bank to bank, and hardly deep enough at the point where the willow grew to reach Gaston's elbow standing upright, but Andrew's terror of water in any shape was only equal to his fear of cows, so that the prospect of being thrust head foremost into the river made him wild.

"Better behave pretty," jeered Phil. "Why, you're wriggling like one of your miserable butterflies when you stick a pin through them. You are always so sure they're enjoying it, try and enjoy this too."

"I'm fa—ain—ting," whined Andrew; "the doctor would—"

"Order cold water like a shot for you," rejoined Jack. "Now then, boys!"

"Look your last, Andrew, at the pretty green fields," began Phil, helping in the gentle propelling of Andrew into the stream, "and the bright blue sky, for here you are going, going, *going, gone!*"

"Now mind," Jack had said at the beginning of the business; "we must not really let go of this precious specimen, for it would never do to let Miss Annie really get a wetting. We'll only duck his head a couple of times under the water, to give him a bit of a fright."

But when boys are bent on tormenting each other it is not always easy to stop short at the precise point at which they had intended to limit their operations, and so, thanks to Andrew's struggles partly, and partly to the temptation that the other boys felt to keep up the idea that their luckless victim was in real bodily danger, the exploit ended in the whole party rolling into the river together. The water was so shallow, and their plight was so ludicrous, and apparently so little harm was done to anyone, that even the little boys laughed heartily.

"We've got a bit of a ducking," said Jack, whose first thought had been for Hubert and Gaston, "but we'll soon dry in this broiling sun."

"On the whole, it has been quite refreshing," laughed Phil.

"Werry much so," chimed in the little boys. But Gaston's teeth were chattering from the shock of his sudden immersion into the Gay.

Andrew, standing dripping from head to foot, said nothing.

"And will he go back to his kind sister Faith, and show her his little wet jacket?" jeered Phil, as Andrew presently moved off.

"Look here, old chap," cried Jack, good-naturedly, "do like us. Put your jacket here to dry in the sun. This bit of grass is as good as a hot plate any day," and he pointed to a sun-baked patch where the younger boys' garments were already spread out, "and we none of us got wet to the skin."

"Yes, give us your jacket," said Phil.

But Andrew, turning a deaf ear, marched off across the fields, but not to the farm.



"The whole party rolling into the river together."

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CHAPTER XVIII.

"WE'RE AWFULLY SORRY NOW."

"Oh, Fay, wake up, do wake up, there's burglars at our door!"

It was just midnight, and for the last two hours an unbroken silence had reigned within Gaybrook Farm.

But now Marygold, with her long hair tumbling over her little nightgown, was standing beside Faith's bed tugging at her sheets with all her might. "There, there it is again," as a loud but dull thud came against the lower panels of the door.

Poor Faith, who had till this moment been sound asleep, started up in bewildered alarm.

"It is burglars," repeated Marygold, "and I can't find the matches."

By this time, however, Faith had collected both the matches and her wits, and was lighting the candle.

"Who, who's there?" she asked, in rather unsteady tones.

Then a very frightened little voice made itself heard.

"Oh, please Fay, I can't find the handle, and I'm so frightened out here in this ghostly passage, and Andrew's dying."

In a twinkling, Faith was out of bed, and with her dressing-gown flying loosely behind her, was hurrying down the long passage and up the little flight of steep stairs, which separated the girls' rooms from those that the boys occupied.

Poor, half-awake Hubert was meanwhile telling his sleepy story to Marygold.

"I *b'lieve* Andrew's dying. Phil and Jack are awfully frightened 'cause he is making such a funny noise and doesn't seem able to *breaf* a bit. I was to run as fast as I could for Fay, they said, but it was all dark, and I hit my head three times and knocked my elbow *dreffully*."

"Suppose we go and tell Di and Phoena," suggested Marygold; "they'll be ever so frightened," she added, in a tone of distinct cheerfulness.

"Oh, yes, let's," assented Hubert; it was joy to create a sensation.

But before they had succeeded in awakening Di satisfactorily, or in even making Phoena open her eyes, Ruth had swept down on these young "pilgrims of the night," and arrested their further exploits.

"There, Miss Di, take Miss Marion into bed with you and keep her quiet," said Ruth, tucking Marygold into a corner of the huge bed in which Di lost herself every night. "And you come along with me, Master Hubert, we don't want you running over the house in the middle of the night and catching your death of cold." And with less gentleness than her wont, Ruth caught Hubert up in her arms and disappeared with him, just when Phoena was beginning anxiously to enquire what had happened.

"Hubert says that Andrew's dying," said Marygold.

"Who told Hubert so?" asked Phoena, very wide awake now and sitting up in her bed. "Did Fay say so?"

"No, it was Phil and Jack b'lieved it," said Marygold.

"Oh! that all, I suppose his breathing was bad and they were frightened," said Phoena.

"I expect if we listen, we may hear if there is much disturbance," said Diana.

"Yes," said Phoena, "let's listen."

And so she did, but the only thing she heard distinctly was presently the sound of her cousins' snoring; their anxiety was not keeping them awake! Phoena's fears, however, were not so easily allayed.

Nor did she feel reassured when after much opening and shutting of distant doors, she finally heard the sound of hasty footsteps on the flags of the stable-yard below, then that of horse's hoofs. Blackberry, the farmers' stout cob, which did all the errands, was being led out of the stable, Phoena made that out plainly, and then, a minute later, she heard someone trot off at a round pace.

Phoena began to tremble in her little bed. Andrew must be very ill, she felt sure of that now, and they were fetching the doctor.

"Oh dear! oh dear! I do hope Andrew isn't very, very bad," she said half-aloud, "it's dreadful to lie here and wonder all through the long night. How I do wish the hours would strike faster."

The clock struck some twenty minutes later, but Phoena did not hear it. She had fallen asleep again and only awoke to hear Ruth bidding Di and herself to get up as quietly as they could and go down the stairs softly to breakfast.

"Poor Master Andrew has been very ill in the night," she explained, adding, that though he was better before the doctor left, it was of great importance that his sleep should not be disturbed.

"Did the doctor say that he was dangerously ill?" asked Di.

"Dear me! no, I should hope not," cried Ruth, "we should have to be sending for your Mamma, in that case, Miss Di, but he has had a very nasty attack of asthma, and Dr. Forbes says he needs all the sleep he can get to help him over the exhaustion. There, it's a good thing it's Sunday and you'll all be going to church this morning—all, that is, except Miss Faith."

"What's *she* doing?" asked Di.

"Sleeping, I hope, poor little soul," said Ruth, "she's fairly worn out."

"Oh! Fay likes fussing with steam-kettles and mustard leaves," said Diana, rather contemptuously.

"I don't know if she likes it," retorted Ruth, "but she's a very clever little nurse, and as to Master Andrew, he's the best patient I ever saw. Poor boy, how he did suffer and struggle for breath last night, and never a word of complaint."

"Oh! he's never half so horrid when he's ill," began Di; but by this time Ruth had gone, taking Marygold with her, to ensure that Faith's belated night's rest was not interrupted by any inroads from her usual small room-fellow.

"Poor Andrew," said Phoena, beginning her toilet. "I *am* sorry he's ill."

"Oh! it's his nature to be seedy," said Di, speaking rather crossly, because she was in sharp conflict with a tangle in her long wavy hair, "you know that we always hear that he's such a wonderful saint when he's ill and he is such a toad when he isn't."

"I should think that it must be harder to be nice when you are ill than when you're well," remarked Phoena, rather dreamily.

"I'm sure it can't be," broke in Di, "because it's always the way with the horriddest people. They enrage you so when they are well, that they make you say and do horrid things yourself, and then they have a trick of getting ill and going to bed and turning into such saints, that somehow you can't help feeling ashamed of yourself for having hated them when they are well. I call saints of that sort 'pillow case saints,' for their goodness slips off their pillow, just as easily as it slips on. And then if they go and die—oh! bother, there's no tucker in my frock, how I wish Andrew wouldn't be ill and make Fay stay in bed instead of being here to help me. Andrew always is a bother!"

"It's very shocking to speak so hard-hearted, Miss Di," said Ruth, re-appearing at this moment, "maybe you'll be sorry for it, some fine day."

"Wouldn't a wet day do just as well?" retorted Di, pertly, "why are all the nasty things to happen on fine days?"

"That sharp little tongue of yours will bring you into trouble, Miss Di, if you're not careful," said long-suffering Ruth, taking pity all the same on Di's unsuccessful attempts to complete her dressing. "There's an old saying, you know, that 'a sharp tongue cuts its owner's throat.'"

"Oh! you good old Ruth, don't begin preaching so early in the day," said Di; "of course, I'm dreadfully sorry for Andrew and I mean to be ever so careful not to disturb him."

And certainly she kept her word, declaring, as she went down stairs, that she should beg the boys to be very kind to Andrew.

But there was no need for her to exhort them on that point.

Jack and Phil were full of compassion for their cousin, a compassion which as Di guessed, was greatly leavened with compunction.

For though no one, not even Hubert, had divulged a word of the ducking, the schoolboys' own conscience accused them pretty clearly as to the cause of Andrew's sharp attack of illness.

And though they might have been heard muttering more than once, "Well, it only served him right!" their tone signified unmistakably, "I wish to goodness that we'd never done it."

Moreover Andrew's patience and real pluck in bearing his suffering had appealed to them strongly.

"Poor old beggar," said Jack, "to see him panting like a steam engine and as white as a turnip, and trying all the time to grin over it, made one feel jolly bad all over."

"Yes, it's awful hard luck on the wretched chap," said Phil, "I wish one could do something for the poor specimen."

"I expect," began Hubert, with some practical shrewdness, "if we never called him 'Miss Annie' again, it—"

But Jack broke in, "'pon my word, if it wasn't Sunday, I declare I'd go out and try and catch some of his precious beasties for him."

"Well, I'll go and feed his gold fish now," said Di, getting up from the table, whilst Phoena, without announcing her intentions, went to attend the canary and guinea-pig.

"We've all got to start by half-past ten for church, remember," said Di, looking back from the door.

"All right," said the boys—they were delightfully docile to-day.

"And you'll remember to keep quiet, because of Andrew," added Di.

And so, though Fay was not there to marshal her flock into good order, it was a very well-behaved party that set out from Gaybrook Farm for the parish church, on that summer Sunday morning.

"And they all behaved like models all through the service," reported Ruth, who had watched them rather anxiously from her exalted seat in the gallery, "I was rather afraid how the young gentlemen might behave, if anything went wrong with the singing, as does sometimes happen, or if the sermon was extra long," she confided to Mrs. Busson.

"Then more shame for you," her Aunt had replied severely, "haven't they always behaved like little gentlemen in my house, so would they be likely to forget manners in the House of God."

"All the same," said Ruth, "little Miss Marion did look straight at the sight of the high pews, as if she didn't know whether to laugh or cry. I believe she was a bit frightened."

Gaybrook Church, with its mossy leaning grave-stones on the outside, and its old-world galleries and pews inside, along with its service which had been unaltered for the last fifty years, were all of the most ancient description. So that both Hubert and Marygold, who had never in their short lives been in a high pew before, were almost alarmed when they were shut into one of these formidable-looking boxes, which, as Marygold remarked afterwards, "didn't smell at all nice."

Still it never occurred to them to behave less well than they would have done in their own church at home, although their attention, and their eyes too, would keep wandering to their new surroundings.

They were half fascinated, half awed, by the imposing mural tablets which frowned down on them from over their own and their neighbours' pews, displaying such a variety of designs and devices. One tablet attracted Hubert greatly, from which a helmet stood out in such bold relief that he wondered if it would take off, whilst Marygold was deeply interested in the white marble effigy of a little girl, almost as big as herself, kneeling in a flowing robe with clasped hands on a level with her chin.

Why was that little girl there, she wondered, and had she been kneeling there for a great, great many years?

"Please tell me what's written there," she whispered to Phoena after the service was over; "it must tell about her death, I think."

"It's all in Latin," returned Phoena, scanning the inscription under the little girl's monument; "perhaps Jack could tell us what it is." But another monument by the west door of the church was fascinating Jack and Phil, and they had no attention to pay to Marygold.

This was the life-size effigy of a recumbent knight, painted black, and looking ancient and grim beyond description. The shape of his shield and his crossed legs delighted Phoena, as showing that that old knight had been a Crusader, whilst Hubert fell in love with the hound which had crouched for so many years in stony stillness at his master's feet.

"Now, doesn't it seem curious?" cried Phoena, eagerly, as they came out of church, "that there should be a real old knight lying there? It seems as if it was to remind us that they really *did* live once, and did all the grand, brave

things one can only read about now."

"But then they only got buried and painted black," said Phil, dismally.

"But they'll never be forgotten," said Di, quickly.

"I should like to know what great things that grand old chap had done," remarked Jack, thoughtfully.

They were going through a barley field just then, where the foot-track was so narrow that they were obliged to walk singly between the sea of ripening, drooping ears on either side.

"I wonder," repeated Jack, "what sort of grand things that old fellow did so many years ago."

The summer breeze was whispering amongst the gently swaying barley, and Phoena was following closely upon Jack's heels, so that she might well have heard his musings, and answered them, but nevertheless the words which presently rang in Jack's ears in reply to his own questioning came neither from Phoena's lips, nor were they borne on the pleasant breeze, and yet no words ever sounded more distinctly, at least so far as Jack's hearing was concerned.

"Whatever grand things that old knight might have done," the voice said, "I'll tell you what he never would have done. He would never have bullied a poor weakly fellow as you bullied Andrew yesterday, or held his peace and not owned up when his victim was suffering from the consequences."

"Bother," said Jack, audibly, "I don't believe he would have, either."

As they came through the porch into the house-place the children ran up against Dr. Forbes and Mrs. Busson in grave consultation.

"No, indeed! indeed!" the latter was saying, her usually bright face clouded with distress, "I can't think, Dr. Forbes, how the poor child could have come by such a chill, for as to letting him sleep in an unaired bed, why, sir, you know me better than to believe——"

But Jack broke in.

"It was my fault, doctor," he said; "we thought we'd give him a lesson, so we ducked him in the stream yesterday. Is he awfully bad?"

Jack's voice grew shaky with the last words, and he was red to the tips of his ears.

"Not awfully bad, I hope, my boy," replied the doctor, "but bad enough to teach you a lesson, young man, not to play such pranks again on a weakly fellow. You've caused him a lot of suffering, and a deal of anxiety to others besides."

"I'm awfully sorry," said Jack, simply.

"It was just as much our faults," chimed in Phil and Hubert; "we all helped."

"Well, you're all a nice set of young scamps," said the doctor. "You are a brave woman, Mrs. Busson, to undertake the care of them."

"Oh! not so brave as you think, doctor," said the old lady, with returning cheerfulness. "I expect they've done their worst now, for they are not the sort of young gentlemen to say they're sorry and then go and do it again."

That afternoon a letter directed in Jack's best writing, and posted only with his and Phil's knowledge, carried the following lines to Mrs. Durand:

"DEAR AUNT AGATHA,

It wasn't Mrs. Busson's fault, or anybody else's but our's. We ducked Andrew in the stream, and we're awfully sorry now.

Your affectionate nephews,

JACK AND PHIL KENYON."

CHAPTER XIX.

"THEY HAVE NOT GONE YET."

"THERE, I must say, Libbie," remarked Mrs. Busson, as she busied herself with her Saturday's tidying of store-room and linen-press, "we do seem to have had a nice, quiet week since last Sunday. One may say of those dear children that if they came in like lions, they'll go out like lambs."

"They haven't gone yet, ma'am," said Libbie, in a decided, though deferential tone, and she sighed somewhat significantly.

Libbie felt that she had paid rather heavily towards maintaining that week of peace.

Diana had taken to making cheese instead of mischief, and to stirring up jams instead of strife, and Libbie's patience had not been a little taxed by the mis-placed zeal Di had displayed in both these pursuits; indeed, more than once Libbie had come near to losing her temper altogether, Di having achieved the loss already of much of her toil and time. Still it was certainly a fact beyond dispute, as Fay and Phoena agreed, that when Di was happily occupied and Andrew was invalided, matters went much more smoothly.

Andrew took a full week to recover from his sharp attack of asthma. On the whole he enjoyed that week very much, for not only were the girls his willing slaves, but the boys did their share as well in helping to amuse him. Although they generally hated the sight of dominoes, and voted a game of chess worse than vulgar fractions, yet whenever they came indoors they rushed up to Andrew's room to offer to have a game with him, and they never once called him "Miss Annie."

Even Gaston—though he never felt safe near the once savage ogre—actually brought his best-loved French picture books, and, depositing them on the chair nearest to Andrew's door, fled back down the passage as though wolves were pursuing him.

"It's a pity that he's such a frightened little frog," said Hubert.

To Marygold's grief Hubert had taken to copying his elder brother's contempt for Gaston.

"I wouldn't like to be such a silly," he added.

"It's a great pity that you don't try in a kind way to make him braver," said Fay, severely. "Yesterday, for instance, when he was so afraid of being struck by the cricket ball, instead of telling him that it would be sure to break his legs, it would have been much kind——"

"Preachey, preachey," broke in Hubert, so rudely that Phil, who joined the party at that moment, promptly fell on him.

"Look here, you're getting too cheeky," he declared, with a warning shake: "we shall have to court-martial you. How dare you speak like that to Fay? How dare you, you young monkey?"

"I dare what I choose," retorted the young culprit, defiantly.

Hubert's fearlessness in the face of chastisement always appealed powerfully to his big brothers' admiration, so that however much they might threaten him with a "jolly good licking," neither Jack nor Phil would ever have carried out their threat on the small boy, whose pluck was their favourite boast at school.

"You may beat me to death if you like," Hubert proceeded to observe.

"What's up now?" enquired Jack, who came to see what was going on.

Faith rehearsed what had taken place.

"Well, I must say Gaston *is* an awful little muff," said Jack; "still I suppose we've got to be kind to him, so look here, Hubert. First of all, go and tell Faith that you're sorry for having been rude to her."

"I'm sorry I was rude to you, Faith," said Hubert, with the grandly condescending air of a royal penitent, "but I was quite right all——"

"Chain up," broke in Phil, "you weren't asked to furnish any additional remarks about yourself. Now go on, Jack, with what you were saying."

"And then you must finish your penance," continued Jack, "by fetching Gaston, and we'll give him a lesson in cricket."

"And you'd better not try to frighten him over it, do you hear?" said Phil.

"I'd much raver be licked than have to play," began Hubert.

"But small boys can't always get what they want, even when it is a licking," said Jack. "Now, off you go, or you shall have the frog and a whacking too."

"It really would be kind," said Fay, "to try to teach Gaston in a gentle way to be a little more like an English boy."

"We can try, but I don't think that we shall ever succeed," said Phil.

"So you've brought him," cried Jack, as, a few minutes later, Hubert came back with Gaston, whose eyes looked red with crying. "Now, look here, Gaston, do you or don't you want to belong to us?"

"But I do, I do," said the boy, eagerly.

"All right; but then you'll have to do as we do, and not be a silly little French doll," said Jack.

Gaston flushed as lively a crimson as his olive skin would permit. But though he opened his lips as though to speak, no sound was audible. His eye had met Phoena's, and he suddenly remembered the talk they had had on the previous day. Phoena had tried, and apparently not vainly, to teach him how self-restraint was one of the chief duties imposed on a young knight.

"So now," went on Jack, "if we teach you to play cricket, you mustn't funk a few whacks from the ball."

"Nor drop it like a hot potato, when you should field it," said Phil.

"No, no, certainly not," said Gaston, with quivering lips.

"And you'll have to learn to climb trees like an Englishman, not like a monkey," said Phil; "we'll show you the difference."

"And, besides that, you'll have to learn heaps of other things," interrupted Hubert, just a little disappointed that Gaston did not seem more alarmed by the programme sketched out for him; "you'll have to——" But his eloquence was arrested by Jack, who promptly toppled him over to teach him to hold his tongue when his elders were talking.

"Very well then, come along, old chap, and we'll make a man of you," said Jack, and therewith the first lesson in cricket began.

On the whole, that morning's instruction proved very successful. True, Gaston could not help hopping and dancing a little, when a specially swift ball came very close to his ears, yet he survived the ordeal without uttering a scream or shedding a tear, which was a pitch of heroism beyond anything that his companions could imagine. Indeed, Phoena was, perhaps, the only one who understood something of the little French boy's nature, and guessed at what lay beneath his rather uninteresting exterior. But then, like Gaston, Phoena dreamt dreams she would never mention to mortal ear, and built lofty castles in the air, to which none were admitted, or suffered to guess at their existence.

CHAPTER XX.

THE KING OF MUFFS.

"I'M dreadfully afraid that those boys have been bullying Gaston again," Phoena remarked to Faith, some days later.

"Why, I saw them all starting out together to play cricket on the common," said Faith, "less than an hour ago."

"I know, but when I came through the orchard just now, Gaston dashed past me, with his head down, and flew through a gap in the hedge. I did not run after him, for I saw he did not want me to notice him."

"Really," cried Fay, a little impatiently, "I think it must be his own fault. Our boys are not really bullies; see how good they are to the infants, and I'm sure if Gaston would only play with them like a sensible boy they would be glad enough to have him."

"Of course they would," put in Di; "the truth is, he can't get on with them, because he's such a wretched little French specimen. He's only fit to sit by Phoena and tell silly stories about French fairies. Ugh! I'm glad I wasn't born

a French girl."

"It's no credit to you that you weren't," said Phoena, quickly, "and I think it's very unkind of you to be always reminding Gaston of what he can't help. He never jeers our boys for being English, and I daresay they seem quite as silly to him as—"

"Oh, no, I'm sure they can't," broke in Di, whilst Faith added, "I'm certain that Gaston would do anything to be like our boys."

"Of course, anyone can see that," said Phoena, "that's why I'm so sorry for him. I know he'd love to be treated as an equal by Jack and Phil, for he has a deal more spirit in him than he shows."

But even Phoena did not gauge how much Gaston pined to be admitted to an equality with the English boys, for whom he felt an unbounded admiration; nor did she guess how, at the same time, he resented their jeers at his nationality. So long as his parents lived, their little Gaston had been their *bijou*, their *petit coeur*—their jewel, their little heart,—and he had been taught to consider France as the grandest country in all the world, and to be proud, very proud, of having been born a Frenchman.

So, when he first came to England to make his home with his grandmother, it was absolutely bewildering to his seven-year-old intelligence to grasp the reason of Madame Delzant's Martha's contemptuous pity for his Frenchified ways and clothes, a pity which changed entirely into open scorn when the old lady became too ill to leave her room again, and Gaston was left wholly at the mercy of this well-meaning, but terribly narrow-minded servant.

"You dare tell me, you little French whipper-snapper, that France is as good as England, and that my cooking isn't as much to your liking as your old *Murrie's*, or whatever you call her," Martha exclaimed; "Not eat my potatoes, indeed!"

This was when Gaston, sighing for his *pommes de terre sautées*, had pushed aside a plate of plain boiled potatoes with a sigh.

"You'll learn to starve a little, young gentleman, or have some English sense shaken into you."

Martha did not mean to be unkind to the forlorn little foreigner, but still, she had struck at his very heart's roots, and before he had been many months in England, Gaston found himself wondering why the fact of being a French boy was reckoned to him as a disgrace, which entitled him to all manner of scornful epithets and contemptuous insinuations.

"I wonder," Gaston said to himself one morning, as he sat on the wall of his grandmother's garden, "I wonder if the people in England do not like being called what they really are. I do notice that boy who has red hair does not like being called red-haired, and the only time that Martha ever slapped me was when I said that she looked old. Perhaps *they* don't like being called English, so that is why, when they want to be unpleasing to me, they call me a French boy. I'll try, and see." And, anxious to test the worth of his new theory, Gaston slipped off the wall and accosted an ancient man, who was trimming the laurels.

"*Jardinor*," he began, standing well beyond the range of that functionary's shears, "Jardinor, you're an Englishman."

"Thank the Lord, I am. I'd have been ashamed to have been born anything else," returned old Wakeford, with a heartiness that demolished poor Gaston's theory.

"Well, it is droll, I do not understand," he thought, retreating disconcerted, and more bewildered than ever.

Yet, although in his new surroundings, his nationality was so clearly accounted a shameful thing, Gaston was too good a patriot to be persecuted into accounting it so himself. "On the contrary," he said to himself, "they shall see for themselves, that a French boy can be as good as an English one," and with a resolution that did credit to his tiny frame and tender age, Gaston, in spite of many involuntary tears and frequent failures, held fast to his determination.

All the same, his present training under the young Kenyons, though it might in the end "make a man" of him, was actually making him very miserable.

He worshipped Fay for her gentle ways; he loved nothing better than to be with Phoena, and listen to her quaint old stories, and he thoroughly enjoyed a game with Marygold; but he was so afraid of being called unmanly by the boys, that he scarcely dared have anything to do with the girls, though he was constantly on the look-out to render them a service.

Both for Jack and Phil, Gaston's admiration was unbounded; he would accept all their knocking about as a distinct honour coming from their hands; nor did he, as a rule, resent what Hubert did, or said. But as for Andrew, he hated him.

But this was not due to the old ogre episode—that was long ago forgiven. Gaston's detestation of Andrew, and the resentment he nourished against him, had a deeper root.

Towards the others he had the cordial feelings that a generous boy has for those whom he knows to be manlier than himself, and was learning to take their chaff, as it was meant; but for Andrew, with his selfishness, his sneaking tricks, and his bragging, which was such a poor disguise for his natural timidity, Gaston had the greatest contempt. To be made an object of ridicule by, or before Andrew, was real torture to Gaston, so true is it, that to be humiliated before those who we despise is about the sharpest form of suffering of which we are capable. To be jeered by Phil or Jack for want of pluck in tree-climbing, or for his "butter-fingers" in letting a ball slip at cricket, was sometimes a little trying to Gaston's naturally quick temper, but when Andrew ventured to taunt him in like manner, or called him "Mamselle Gaston" when he ran away from a cow (which they all knew that Andrew would never have faced himself), then Gaston's spirit was sore, with a bitterness beyond all description.

At last, Andrew's mere presence grew to be antagonistic to Gaston, so that no expedition or undertaking of any sort was likely to be a success, so far as he was concerned, if Andrew was of the party.

It was because Andrew was standing by, so ready to jeer, that Gaston had lost his temper, on the morning on which our chapter opens, when he brought his own share in that day's proceedings to a tragical conclusion.

Though Hubert was generally sweet temper itself, he it was who began the disturbance. Andrew had ordered him to carry his bat and stumps to the common, just when Hubert wanted to stay in the orchard, and play at board-hunting with Gaston and Marygold. So the order to accompany the elder boys to the cricket ground was very unwelcome.

"You can carry Andrew's things to-day," Hubert said to Gaston.

"No," said the latter, who had no mind to serve Andrew, "you are the valet of Andrew, I not."

"You'd *have* to carry them if Andrew chose to make you," said Hubert, incensed at Gaston's refusal, "yes, you would, Mamselle Gaston."

It was the first time that Hubert had ever dared call Gaston so, and, though he felt himself under Andrew's protection, he was half afraid.

And small wonder. The angry flame that leapt into Gaston's eyes at his words was ill to see.

"Don't say that again," he said, speaking in a slow, threatening voice.

"Hullo, you small boys, what are you about?" cried Jack, looking back, "what's up, eh, Andrew?"

"It strikes me someone will soon be *down*," laughed Andrew, "these small boys can't settle their difficulties, eh, Mamselle Gaston?"

"Eh, Mamselle Gaston?" echoed Hubert, but before he could say another word, before anyone could interfere, Gaston, losing all self-control, fell upon Hubert, and dealt him such a blow, that he was sent rolling head over heels down the grassy bank, at the top of which the fray had begun. But Gaston had not finished with him then.

Down the bank he followed, collaring Hubert, before the latter could find his feet, and shaking him with a fury that almost frightened Jack and Phil. Hubert's nose was streaming with blood, and he looked a pitiable object when Jack extricated him from Gaston's clutches, but that was not directly. Jack had a schoolboy's sense of justice, and though Hubert was very dear to him, he knew that he must have drawn this chastisement on himself by his incorrigible cheekiness.

"Now, you've both had a jolly good mill," he said, using his own handkerchief on his little brother's face with rough tenderness, "and you'll be both a deal the better for it. Shut up, Andrew, will you?" as the latter tried to egg the combatants on afresh. "My word, old chap, you'll have a glorious black eye, and no mistake, but I'll be bound you've deserved it. It's been our fault, though, for not licking you more. Now, Gaston, old man, come and shake hands with your vanquished foe."

"Yes, and hold up your pecker," said Phil, patting Gaston on the back, "for you're a jolly good fellow, who has learnt at last how to use his fists."

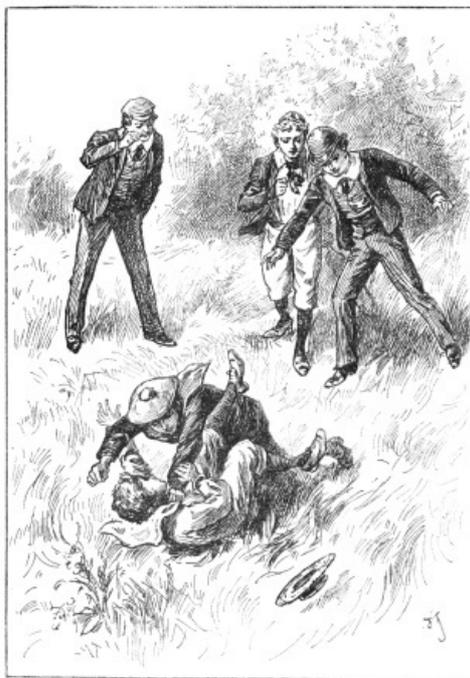
"Yes, yes," chimed in Jack, "he's a jolly good fellow."

Surely no single moment in Gaston's short life had ever been a prouder one.

For once, he was an acknowledged victor on English soil, and no one remembered to call him "French froggy."

But alack! alack! they did not forget for long.

Flushed though he was by his victory, Gaston was genuinely grieved at Hubert's pitiable plight, for he was crying bitterly now, not from his hurts—he was not so babyish—it was the mortification of having been beaten by



"Shaking him with fury."

p. 124.

Gaston that brought the tears down his swollen cheeks. So that Gaston, moved to pity, and forgetting that he was not amongst his own French comrades, instead of shaking hands with Hubert in due form, ran forward, impulsively, like a thorough French boy, and, throwing his arms round the vanquished's neck, kissed him warmly on each cheek.

This action, so natural to Gaston, was greeted with a general howl of disgust from the on-lookers.

"Oh, I say, shut up, Mamselle Gaston!"

"Oh, you awful French froggy!"

"Oh, drop your beastly slobbering, do!"

These, and various other exclamations, couched in more direct, and less poetical terms, were hissed and hurled at poor Gaston for full three minutes, before he realised the nature of his offence.

"Now, I say, you fellows," sneered Andrew, "I think he'll be 'Mamselle Gaston' for the rest of his natural life; fancy any decent fellow behaving in such a way."

"Yes, really you French boys must be awful muffs," said Phil.

"Of course they are," said Andrew, spitefully, "and Gaston is the king of muffs, eh, mamselle?"

For a moment Gaston stood quite still, looking down without uttering a word. He was abased, but not ashamed, and, strange as it may seem, the feeling that he was abased in Andrew's sight acted as a stimulus to his self-love.

As some horses, at the touch of the spur, make straight for the winning-post, so Gaston, in that moment of humiliation—a humiliation which was all the more bitter, because it had trodden so quickly on the heels of his short-lived triumph—Gaston vowed within himself, that come what might, he would show Andrew yet that the "king of muffs" was less of a "mamselle" than himself.

"Well, are we all going to stand here till midnight?" asked Phil, presently. "Here, Hubert, shut up bellowing, and thank Gaston for making a man of you, by giving you your first black eye. My goodness, how the girls will stare when they see it."

"Yes, let's come on to the Common now," said Jack; "you can come too, Gaston, if you'll promise not to slobber me," and Jack made a very comical grimace.

Without answering, Gaston turned away, disappearing into the orchard, where Phoena ran up against him, some twenty minutes later. Believing that he would be safe there, Gaston had had a hearty cry, but at sight of Phoena, he had fled through the orchard hedge to the copse beyond. Flinging himself down there, amongst the tall, thick bracken, Gaston had sobbed and muttered, muttered and sobbed, in a fashion quite peculiar to himself.

Poor little lonely creature. He was very like a fledgeling, pushed suddenly over the edge of his nest, with no parent bird to teach him that he had wings, much less how to use them.

"Oh, maman, maman, ma mère, ma mère!" he cried, and even as the echo of his bitter cry came back to him, borne on the still summer afternoon breeze, there came with it another sound, a sound of words spoken long, long ago. "Pray, pray, my child, never forget to pray, and your good angel will carry your prayers to Him Who cares for the little children." And, kneeling upright, amidst the high bracken, Gaston, who never forgot to say the prayers that his mother had taught him, crossed himself reverently, as was his wont, and poured out the sorrows of his heavy heart, praying to be made brave.

But why, oh! why, he wondered, rising from his knees, had the good God seen fit to make him that strange and terrible thing, a French boy?

CHAPTER XXI.

"A VERY SAD LITTLE BOY."

OF course, Hubert's black eye created an immense sensation, not only amongst his immediate circle, but throughout the whole establishment, from old Mr. Busson down to the smallest boy-labourer on the farm.

If the whole constitution of France had been represented in Gaston's small person, and if the quarrel with Hubert had assumed properties of international warfare, racial feeling could not have run higher in the worthy rustic's breast.

"A pretty joke indeed!" they declared, "to have that young Frenchy knocking one of *our* little gentlemen about."

And what a fuss Mrs. Busson made over the injured hero; whilst Ruth was careful to remark within Gaston's hearing, that it was a great mercy that Master Hubert's eye had been not hurt, for folks got sent to prison and kept there for less than that very often.

Hubert himself made no fuss at all. He was so delighted to possess anything so entirely un-nurserylike as a black eye, that he obstinately refused all Mrs. Busson's offers of raw beef applications for the purpose of abating the swelling; and when he discovered that the "pomade divine" with which Fay had promptly anointed his temple, was supposed to reduce the discolouration of the bruises, he scrubbed it off with more energy than he had ever bestowed on his face before.

"But Hubert, didn't it hurt you dreffully?" asked Marygold.

"Nothing to matter," he said, "but of course you girls don't under—"

"Oh! no," began Andrew, teasingly, "it wasn't the black eye that he minded, was it, Hubert. It was—"

"You're not to say it," shouted Hubert, crimson with rage. Andrew had jeered him so unmercifully all the morning, for having been slobbered like a nice little baby-girl, that he was in absolute terror lest Di should hear of it, for Diana's teasing was quite as merciless as the boys'.

"If you say one word," cried Hubert, swelling with rage, "I'll ki—"

"Yes, shut up, Andrew," interposed Jack. "It's a shame to rag the poor chap, any more."

And so, though at intervals during the day, Andrew dropped mysterious hints anent some still deeper disgrace that had befallen Hubert at Gaston's hands, just for the sake of "getting a rise" out of Hubert, the girls never discovered the nature of poor Gaston's further delinquency.

"Well, I don't care," said Di, standing in the doorway between her own room and Faith's, "I always did think Gaston was a horrid little wretch, and now I'm sure of it. He must have done something horribly bad, for Jack said he'd never have forgiven him, if he'd been Hubert."

"I'm afraid he did," said Phoena, reluctantly, "but I'm quite sure, it could not have been all Gaston's fault."

"Well, it's quite clear," said Fay, with the uncompromising finality of early youth, "Gaston isn't fit to play with our boys, we've tried to make the best of him, because he was an orphan and all that, but he has behaved like a little savage, and the less we have to do with him the better."

But Marygold, who had been put to bed full an hour ago, and was supposed by her elders to be sound asleep,

hid her face against the pillow and cried softly. "Oh! dear Father in Heaven," she prayed, "be kind to poor Gaston, he is such a *werry* sad little boy."

The same thought came to soften Mrs. Busson's heart,—very little was needed to do that,—as according to custom, she took a last look at Gaston, lying in his bed in the little room next her own.

"Poor little dear," she said, looking down at the small thin face as it lay with closed eyes on the pillow, and carefully shading her light with her hand, that its reflection might not disturb him, "It's a good little face, that it is, and it isn't his fault that he was not born a nice English boy like the rest. It is a pity, to be sure, that he's got to grow up into one of those Frenchmen. Well, I'm glad at any rate, that he's sleeping so quiet."

And Mrs. Busson crept away noiselessly to her own room.

Good soul! She little guessed that her softly spoken words had added the last drop of bitterness to Gaston's already over-full cup. The lids that she had fancied were fast shut over Gaston's eyes were quivering with wakefulness, and on the ears which she believed to be securely closed in sleep, every word of her mutterings fell clear and distinct.

From that day forward, there was a marked change in the relations between Gaston and the other boys. Whenever they invited him to join in their games and expeditions, he went with them, but more often than not they forgot all about him, and the girls never reminded them.

"I'm quite sure for all concerned that it's much better for Gaston to be left to himself," Fay ruled; "he adds neither to his own nor to others' happiness by playing with them."

"No, Hubert's face testifies to that," said Di.

And so even before the injured eye had gone through the various stages of discolouration, Gaston had drifted so far away from his fellow knights that, as Andrew said loftily, "there was no need to degrade him formally as he had had the good sense to retire practically."

"Nonsense," cried Phoena, who was in no such hurry to consign Gaston to the rank of a hopeless miscreant, "so long as none of you can show cause why he should be turned out, and I suppose none of you can?"

"Oh! rather not!" cried Jack, "poor beggar, why should he be turned out?"

"Very well, then, so long as we don't turn him out, he remains a knight of course, and perhaps some day he will do something grand, that will surprise us all."

"It's very certain to be a *surprise*, whenever it does come," said Di. Marygold however stole away to the orchard, making for the deep, dry ditch, whence Gaston had emerged on the first occasion of their meeting. It had become once more his favourite refuge, only Marygold always found him now, with his old lesson books open on his knee, trying hard to learn those tasks which, at the eleventh hour, he remembered that "Maman" had told him must be learnt, if he meant to grow up a wise man.

"Gaston," said Marygold, creeping down to sit beside him in the ditch, "they've all been talking about you in the wood, and they say that you are a knight still, just the same as ever you were. And Phoena says, she believes that you will do something ever so grand and brave some day, that will astonish us all."

But Gaston shook his head.

"Ah! no, that will never be," he said, "because, because, there is, I know not what—but no one here can understand," he added, helplessly.

"Oh! but they will understand, we shall all understand," rejoined Marygold, eagerly, "and you mustn't look so sad, poor dear Gaston, because it makes me feel so sad for you too."

"Ah! you are good for me, Marygold," he said, and a gleam set all his face alight, "you are very good."

"But I pity you so, poor Gaston, because it's not your fault that you are a little French boy," said Marygold. "Oh! Gaston, where are you going so fast? Don't run away."

Gaston had started up as if he had been suddenly stung, and scrambled over the hedge. Nor did he return for all Marygold's beseeching.

"No, it is done; I have finished with them," he muttered. His eyes were dry, but his spirit had never been so sore, "even she says it now, even Marygold!"

CHAPTER XXII.

"NOW THESE BE SECRET THINGS."

"LIBBIE, what is that funny noise that we hear up here? It always seems to go on and on, as if a big crowd of people were talking, only such a long way off that it is more like a muffled, rumbling roar."

Diana was up in the big cheese room, helping or hindering Libbie in the making of a splendid "double duttons" for which, Mrs. Busson had quite a reputation in the country side.

"What does that noise come from, Libbie?" Di repeated.

"Take care, Miss Di, do, you'll be upsetting that crock there, by your elbow," was Libbie's answer. "There! I do believe by the look of that cloud that we're going to have a thunderstorm, and if we do, all the pans in the dairy will be spoilt before I can scald them. I wonder—"

"But Libbie, do listen," broke in Diana. "*What* is that funny noise? Sometimes it sounds like a lot of voices and then again like a barrel organ a long way off."

"I expect that will be about it," said Libbie. "I wouldn't be surprised if there's one, playing over at Mr. Tossle's Farm, on the other side of Primrose Hollow."

"But you said yesterday, that barrel organs never came into these parts," persisted Di; and then noting poor Libbie's confusion, she went on mercilessly, "Why you said yourself, that you hadn't seen one for twenty years, so it can't be an organ; you know very well that it is not."

By this time, Di's curiosity as to the origin of the mysterious noise, which up to this point had not been so very

great, was thoroughly roused. "Libbie," she said, coming round to where Libbie was at work, and planting her elbows on the table, "Libbie, I'm quite sure now, that you do know what that noise means, and that for some reason, you won't tell me.

"Whatever next!" exclaimed Libbie, with an air of such ill-used innocence, that it only served to strengthen Di's suspicions. "Why, what could I know about it?"

"Oh" said Di, coolly, "you do know all about it quite well, you are only pretending not to. Oh! yes, Libbie, you wouldn't get so fearfully red, if you weren't."

"I expect you'd get just as red, Miss Di, if you had all these heavy cheeses to handle on such a piping hot day," said poor hard-pressed Libbie. "Good me! I declare that was a clap of thunder. Run downstairs quick, do, Miss Di, and ask Mrs. Busson if she didn't hear it."

Di burst out laughing. "Oh! I can tell you she didn't, for as you know there was none to hear. No, Libbie, it's no good, I'm determined—"

"Coming, coming Ma'am," shouted Libbie, in answer to a call, which was as imaginary as the thunder, and without giving Di time to say another word, the faithful Libbie fled downstairs.

For a few minutes Di awaited her return; then deciding that she was not coming back, Di thought she would go and help Nellie, in the boiling down of some giant rhubarb stalks, which were to make wine.

"I'll go and see what Nellie looks like, when I ask *her* about that noise," thought inquisitive Di.

Before, however, she was half way down the steep staircase, the sounds of Libbie's voice conversing in agitated tones with her mistress, reached Diana. Though she had never been guilty in her life of eaves-dropping, she paused involuntarily now, to listen to what was being said. Mrs. Busson was evidently engaged inside the long, low wine-cellar, that ran under the staircase on which Di was standing, for her voice could only be heard now and again, speaking in answer to Libbie, who was talking to her in the doorway of the cellar.

"But good me! Ma'am," Libbie was saying, "I tried my Sunday best to put her off, I promise you that."

Mrs. Busson's reply was inaudible.

"Turn a deaf ear! goodness me, if I'd turned half a hundred, it wouldn't have been no good."

Another inaudible reply from the cellar, then Libbie said, "Begging pardon, Ma'am, I can't see how very great harm could be done by telling the truth; I can't see if as how they were told exactly—"

This suggestion brought Mrs. Busson from the depths of the cellar.

"Tell them, did you say?" she cried very distinctly, "why bless the woman, she must be clean daft! Why, Libbie Kibblethwaite, don't you understand boys and girls better than that? Why just the temptation to lay hands on the tons and tons of sweet stuff that must be in that room would be enough to tempt even Master Andrew to do something daring, and he isn't so specially brave either.

"No, no, that room has been closed for over fifty years to my knowledge, and it shall never be opened whilst I've a voice in the matter. Tell them indeed! Go back to your cheese-making, Libbie and just remember to-day isn't April Fool's day."

What Libbie may have replied was lost upon Di. For awakening to the risk that she was running of being discovered eaves-dropping, she flew back to the cheese-room and appeared to be wholly intent on counting the rows of "double duttons" on the well filled shelves, when the unsuspecting Libbie returned.



"Oh, I say, I have something to tell you!"

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"It would be a mistake to ask her any more question," Di decided; but after a few minutes, she invented an excuse for slipping off and leaving Libbie alone.

But it was not to the rhubarb-stewing that Di next turned her attention. Bursting with her newly-acquired

knowledge, she dashed in amongst her companions, who happened to be all assembled in their favourite Cuckoo-copse.

Jack and Phil had come in from a long ride on some delightfully rough ponies which the farmer had put at their disposal. Andrew was amusing himself,—if not Hubert—by teaching his valet to shoot with a bow and arrow, but they were all awaiting the bell which always rang then to give them notice to get ready for dinner.

“Oh! I say,” began Di, “I’ve something to tell you. Infants,”—this to Hubert and Marygold,—“run away.”

“Please mayn’t we stop?” they implored.

“Why shouldn’t they, poor little beggars?” said Jack.

“Oh! then I shan’t tell you, that’s all,” said Di.

Jack felt in his pockets. “Here’s a halfpenny for each infant that runs as far as that fir tree,” he said, tossing the coins in the air.

“Now, Di,” cried Phil, as the “infants” ran off.

“I’ve found out this morning,” cried Di, excitedly, “that there’s a mysterious room in the house, which has been shut up for hundreds of years, and Mrs. Busson doesn’t want us to find it out.”

“Then,” said Jack, promptly, “it would be beastly mean of us to try to find it out.”

“Of course it would be,” echoed Phil.

“Oh! but you haven’t half heard,” said Di, greatly crestfallen; “it’s most exciting, I’m not supposed to know anything about it, but just by accident, I happened to hear—”

“Oh! isn’t that like a girl?” broke in Phil, “just to listen by acci—”

“Not like all girls,” put in Phoena, indignantly, “I’ve never listened by accident, and I’m sure Fay never has, have you, Fay?”

“Well, if it were an accident, Di couldn’t help it,” said Faith; “but it is horridly mean to repeat what you weren’t meant to hear. And I think considering how good and kind dear old Mrs. Busson is to all of us, it would be very ungrateful and horrid of us to go and pry into anything that she doesn’t want us to know.”

“Rather!” cried Phoena and her brothers in one breath. Andrew said nothing.

“I see you don’t understand,” faltered Di, on the verge of tears, “if you’d chosen to hear me out you would have seen that I hadn’t done anything mean or underhand either. However, I shan’t tell you any more,” she added, “though I *could* tell you the most extraordinary things, things that would sound more like fairy tales than—”

“Well, chain up now, for here are the infants coming back,” said Jack, “and the next time you do any eaves-dropping, don’t come and tell us about it, Madam Di, do you see?” and Jack tickled the end of his cousin’s nose with a long bracken frond, but very gently, for Jack was never rude to girls.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you, Faith,” said Di, ignoring Jack’s last remark. “Libbie tells me that horrid old Nannie is going to pay us a visit. I am sure I don’t want to see her, do you, Andrew?”

“Oh! of course she’s only coming to see you girls,” said Andrew.

“Who’s Nanny?” asked Jack.

“Oh! she’s our old nurse; the first, we ever had,” explained Faith.

“She’s Libbie’s sister, and lived with us till she married. I thought she would come to see us as she lives near here. Of course, we must be nice to her, if she comes.”

“She was never nice to me,” said Andrew.

“Nor to me either,” said Di, “but Fay never got punished by anyone, she was born a saint.”

“Nonsense,” laughed Fay, “Nanny was very strict with us all, but I daresay, we were troublesome enough; any way, we must behave properly to her, when we see her.”

CHAPTER XXIII.

“TOUCH YOU!”

“OH, I say, I say, I’ve got such a piece of news!” shouted Hubert, running indoors to join the others at breakfast, a few mornings later. “There’s a real big fair, with real gipsies, and merry-go-rounds, and caravans, and lots of things of that sort at Bramblehurst, and Mr. Busson says that he’ll put Ploughboy and Gleaner in the van and drive us all over there this afternoon, and he says too, that—”

Mrs. Busson, appearing at that moment, took up the thread of Hubert’s tale. “Yes, it really is quite a pretty sight,” she said, “for there’s a lovely open green at Bramblehurst, and the different coloured vans, and the horses, and everything dotted about make a regular picture. Most of the gentry round about drive in just the first day of the Fair to take a kind of bird’s-eye view of it, for the old village street is a sight in itself as well as the green. Indeed, they do say that artists hold that Bramblehurst Fair is as picturesque a sight as can be found anywhere, now-a-days.”

“Oh, let’s go, let’s go,” was the unanimous chorus.

“Well, I said to Busson, last night, I said, ‘it would be a real pity if the little gentry didn’t go to the Fair.’ ”

“That it would,” said many voices; whilst Fay, with her usual tact, added, “but, of course, you’ll come with us, Mrs. Busson.”

Did she not guess how the dear old lady was dying to join the party.

“Well, if it wouldn’t be crowding you too much,” she said, modestly, “I would be ever so pleased to come with you. But what do the young gentlemen think about it? They could have the ponies, and ride alongside of us, for I expect they’d weary of being inside the van for so long.”

“Oh, that would be stunning,” cried Phil and Jack. “We’ll be your outriders.”

“May I sit in front, with Mr. Busson, and drive?” asked Hubert.

“To be sure you shall, my dear.”

"You promise that he won't let Andrew have the reins," began Hubert.

"Don't alarm, yourself," said Andrew, "I shan't come with you."

"Not come with us, Andrew," exclaimed Phoena.

"No, I've got a headache, and don't fancy a ten miles jolt in a van," was his singularly ungracious remark on the treat Mrs. Busson had planned for their benefit.

"Poor Andrew," said Fay. "I shall stay at home with you."

"No," said Phil, "that's not fair. Fay's always giving up for Andrew."

"I don't want anyone," said Andrew, "I want to stay at home alone. I shall look over my butterflies, and find plenty to do."

"I'll stay at home with you, Andrew," volunteered Di, to the surprise of all.

"You, Di," cried the boys, "why, only as we came along in the train, you were saying that you'd give anything to see a real fair."

"Was I?" said Di, "then I've grown wiser since then. Besides, though I haven't actually got a headache, I feel as if one is coming."

"What does that feel like," asked Marygold, genuinely curious.

"Like wanting to be left to oneself and not worried by silly little girls," was the very tart rejoinder.

"She's werry cross, so perhaps the headache is getting ready," said Marygold.

Faith, meanwhile, was asking if Ruth would not like to come. Without Di and Andrew, there would be lots of room in the van.

"If you don't object, it might be as well," said Mrs. Busson, "for she might give an eye to the little ones, in case they got a bit excited and flustered over the Show and all the set out, you know."

"Will Gaston come?" enquired Phoena.

Mrs. Busson was doubtful. "He was an odd little gentleman," she remarked, and no one seemed anxious to press the point.

"I hope, my dears, that you won't mind having your dinner at twelve o'clock," said their hostess, "for if we're to have a good time at the Fair, we shall have to get away from here at one, and then we shan't be home before sunset."

"We'll eat our dinner at ten, Mrs. Busson," was the obliging rejoinder, in which even the invalid of the present, and the sufferer from the headache of the future, joined quite fervently.

Neither Hubert nor Marygold could eat any breakfast, so great was their excitement at the prospect of the Fair. To both, there was a fearful joy in coming within close range of the mysterious and deeply interesting gypsies. Although they would have been terrified to encounter one alone, under the strong escort they would have this afternoon, they would feel brave enough to face an army of thickly-populated caravans.

"Will they have their faces stained with walnut juice?" Marygold asked.

"And, Phoena, do you think that we shall see the queen of the gypsies?" enquired Hubert.

"I'll tell you what would be really, awfully fine, infants," said Phil. "If we could find some stolen children in the vans, and carry them off." The infants screamed for joy at the bare suggestion.

"Oh, yes, sorts of baby earls and earlesses, or dukes, or p'raps a live prince," cried Marygold, whose thirst for the sensational was abnormally large that morning.

"I expect," said Hubert, gravely, "that I'd get made a knight straight off, if I found a princess, and carried her home."

"I'll tell you what, my good friends," remarked Phoena, solemnly, "the days of trial are passing very fast, and I've not yet made a single entry in my ledger of 'golden deeds.'"

"Well, you see, Phoena, our exploits turned out rather badly, and then there was Andrew's illness, and—"

"On the whole, Andrew's illness was a good thing for you," broke in Phoena, "for you know that as he was invalided for ten days, we didn't count them at all, so that time was given in, and you ought to have used it to make all sorts of plans in. Now, think, we've only got three whole days left to us. If someone doesn't do something grand in that time we shall have to write to Aunt Agatha, and tell her that she needn't send us any prize, because no one has earned it."

"We'll be disgraced and degraded for ever," laughed Jack.

"Oh, but you are idle, false knights," cried Phoena, really distressed by their luke-warmness. "First you are untrue to your vows, and then, what is worse still, you try to make light of them."

"Wait a bit, Phoena," remarked Di, "the three days of grace are not up yet, and a good deal can happen in one single day," and Di gave a very queer little laugh.

And, oddly enough, that laugh was echoed by Andrew, although, as he lay on the grass, with his hands clasped under his head, he seemed utterly absorbed in watching the light, fleecy clouds which were sailing through the summer blue overhead.

Phoena noted the laugh, and its echo, and darted a keen glance at Fay. As the eyes of the two cousins met, they said as plainly as eyes can speak: "Didn't I tell you yesterday that those two are in league about something?"

Strange to say, during the last two days, Di and Andrew had seemed to have a deal of private business to transact together. As a rule, the brother and sister were by no means allies; yet, only yesterday, when, for the first time during their stay at Gaybrook, Andrew had come near to defying Mrs. Busson's authority, Di had been ready to champion him.

"Oh, Mrs. Busson," Andrew had begun, "I'm very much interested in spider's webs, so I want to examine those which are over that sort of door, near the linen-press."

"Oh, you can't go fussing there," had been the unusually sharp reply; "besides, it's too dark."

"Oh, of course, I shall take a candle," said Andrew, coolly.

"Then, of course, you won't," said Mrs. Busson, very decidedly.

"But I mean to," persisted Andrew.

"And I mean you shan't," was the retort. "I'm not going to have the place set on fire, I can tell you."

"But I shall go with Andrew, and hold the candle," Di had volunteered. Only she and Andrew were present, for they had taken care to wait for this interview till the others were out of hearing.

"You'll do nothing of the sort," said Mrs. Busson, firmly. "If you want spiders' webs, you can find plenty of them down in the cider cellar."

"I don't choose to go down there," said Andrew; whilst Di added, with a thoughtfulness that was very foreign to her general behaviour: "It is much too damp for Andrew to go underground."

"Then stay above ground, and don't worry," said Mrs. Busson.

There was something so uncompromising, both in her tone, and the gesture which she made, as though to sweep them from her presence, that both the children felt that further remonstrance would be vain. So, with a very ill grace, they retreated.

"Hullo, Gaston!" shouted Jack, catching sight of Gaston, running across the top of the field, "come here, old chap."

Gaston came immediately; the schoolboys always commanded his attention.

"Look here, are you coming with us to see the Fair to-day?"

"I—I don't know," said Gaston, falteringly.

"Oh, yes, come along," said Phoena, encouragingly, "it'll be great fun."

"Is Andrew going?" asked Gaston, very gravely.

"No, Andrew's not going," said the latter, mimicking Gaston's tone.

"Then I come, then I come," cried Gaston, capering into the air, and beating both heels together, a gymnastic peculiar to himself.

"Flattering for you, Andrew," remarked Di.

"What do I care," retorted Andrew. "As long as he speaks *to* me with proper respect, I'm glad enough to leave him to himself. Of course, if he ever attempted"—this with an aggravating look at Gaston—"if he ever attempted to touch me—"

"Touch you," echoed Gaston, with a whole world of loathing in his tone, "ugh! I would as soon touch a creeping, crawling serpent. Ah, no, I do mean rather a maggot; you are not grand enough to be a serpent, make no doubt about that."

"That small boy hates you, and no mistake, Andrew," said Jack, as Gaston was turning away.

"Yes," said Gaston, looking back, "that is true, I *hate* him."

"He's very welcome to hate me, if he likes," said Andrew. "I don't worship him, so there's no love lost between us."

"Still, I shouldn't like to be spoken of in that way," said Phoena, " 'specially by someone to whom I'd not been particularly kind."

"Perhaps not," said Andrew. "For myself, I can't imagine that the affection of a French frog could be of any great value."

"It isn't exactly that," said Phoena, "but I should hate to be despised as Gaston despises you."

"Well, I call that a good notion," cried Andrew, flushing scarlet with indignation. "The idea of a miserable little under-done 'parley-vous' despising me, *me!* You are a green goose, Phoena."

"All the same, there's a deal in what Phoena says," said Jack; "anyway, I'm glad Gaston doesn't speak like that of me."

CHAPTER XXIV.

"HURRAH! HURRAH!"

"Oh! hurrah! Andrew, hurrah! They're off at last! Did you think that they would ever start? Well, if this isn't the rarest bit of good luck that ever was!"

And, standing out in the broad noon-day sunshine on the grass plait in front of the farm-house, Diana pirouetted like an accomplished dervish. The headache that was on the road to her at breakfast must surely have lost its way.

"What a blessing that Gaston has gone too," said Andrew. "I was in a blue fright that he wouldn't, after all, just because we wanted him to go so much."

"Yes, but I'll tell you what's even better," rejoined Di. "Nellie's going over to Spelmonden."

"What for?"

"There's an obliging old woman there who's broken her arm or her neck, I forget which," said Di, "and I heard Mrs. Busson tell Libbie that Nellie was not to hurry home. If she was back by supper-time it would do quite well."

"Splendid! She'll be out of the way at any rate."

"Yes," went on Di, "and so you see there will only be Libbie indoors, and Polly, who——"

"Who doesn't count," put in Andrew, "for she's always running after the pigs or the poultry, or gathering things in the garden."

"Exactly; and Libbie is going to be busy all the afternoon in the brew-house tapping the last barrel of crowslip wine."

"Are you quite sure?"

"Yes. I heard her arranging with Mrs. Busson how she would bottle it to-day. When she is once in there she'll be safely out of hearing of anything that we may do."

"Hadn't we better soon begin?" suggested Andrew. "You see we don't know how long it may take."

"We must watch Nellie off the premises first," said Di. "We'll go and sit under the walnut-tree near the stack-yard. We shall be able to see the back-door splendidly from there without seeming to be watching."

"All right," assented Andrew.

"You're quite sure that you have got all your tools ready, Andrew?" enquired Di, presently, as the two young conspirators stretched themselves on the short grass in the shade of the venerable walnut.

"No fear," laughed Andrew; "I think these instruments ought to suffice, even for our undertaking," and he put his hand into his jacket pocket and rattled the chisel, hammer and gimlet which lay concealed there. "That sounds like business, eh?"

"And I've got two big knives," announced Di, triumphantly.

"Knives? But what for?" cried Andrew.

"They may be very useful, very useful indeed," repeated Di, with great emphasis.

"What do you mean?" asked Andrew, nervously.

"Well, you see," said Di, slowly, "we're not quite sure what or *who* we may find inside this mysterious chamber; anyway I think that we may as well be armed, both of us."

"But Di," said Andrew, very distinctly alarmed now, "you don't really suppose that there's anyone really alive in there?"

"I'm not so sure. I heard Libbie telling that man—a man who came about some cheeses, I think—that there were very odd customers inside there. Yes, really that was what she said."

"What did she say, tell me exactly," insisted Andrew.

"Oh, well, it was when Libbie and the man were coming downstairs from the cheese-room," said Di. "The man asked—he was joking, you know—if she dealt in cobwebs as well as cheese, for he had never seen such a sight as over that door."

"Yes, and what did Libbie say?" asked Andrew, breathlessly.

"Oh, she said the spiders had had a good time there, for the door hadn't been opened for fifty years or more."

"And didn't the man ask why?"

"Yes, but I couldn't hear Libbie's answer; only when the man said, 'Well, if that's so I'd have a try and see what I could make out of it.' Then I heard Libbie say: 'Ah! that's all very pretty, but I expect we'd find some rare awkward customers to deal with on the other side of the door.'"

"What could she mean?" speculated Andrew. "It is odd that no one will open that door."

"Libbie told the man that the missus wouldn't have it tried, not for any sake," said Di.

"What can it be?" repeated Andrew, with a very long face.

"I did ask the little farm boy," proceeded Di, "what all that odd rumbling noise in the cheese-room meant, and he looked dreadfully scared. He said that was what he'd never been able to find out, but people did say it was haunted by the ghosts of some wicked smugglers who lived long ago at the farm; in fact," went on Di, drawing largely on her own imagination now, "from what Henry said I believe that the room is crammed full of all sorts of beautiful stolen goods, so that no one has ever been able to get the door open. Oh! Andrew, won't it be grand if we're the very first people who have ever been brave enough to force our way in?"

"Yes," said Andrew, but his assent was pitched in a less jubilant key.

"I believe you're getting into a fright already," sneered Di.

"No I'm not; only I can't help wishing that there was a real window, so that we might get a peep at what is inside, before actually going in," said Andrew.

For though this mysterious room was furnished with a door and a chimney, it had no window. There was only a sham painted semblance of one set in the house wall, to match, as best it might, the other real ones.

"You see," continued Andrew, "one hasn't the least idea what one may see when the door bursts open."

"Or what may see us," laughed Diana.

"Oh, don't," cried Andrew; "that's too horrid."

"Nonsense," said Di. "There wouldn't be much real courage wanted in the world, if people could always see exactly what sort of danger they were going to face. Why, you silly Andrew, anyone could win a page in the book of golden deeds at that rate."

"But you don't think, Di, that Mrs. Busson will be very angry?"

"Angry! why, she'll go on her knees with gratitude," cried Di.

"Will she really, do you think?"

"Go on her knees, I say, and so will Mr. Busson, and Libbie, and everyone in the whole place, I expect," asserted Di, trying hard to make herself believe in the probability of this crowd of grateful genuflectors, who were to flock round Andrew and herself, with the opened room as their background. "They'll be awfully grateful."

"It'll be a great score over the others," said Andrew.

"Yes, won't it," said Di.

"It will be such a sell for Jack and Phil," remarked Andrew further.

"But time's precious," said Di, "I think we ought to be stirring."

"But suppose Libbie hears us going upstairs," began Andrew.

"Oh, you Master Much-afraid," cried Di, impatiently, "suppose you run and hide yourself with Mr. Despondency, in the pages of 'Pilgrim's Progress'; won't you give me your tools, and you go and play with Marygold's doll in the Cuckoo-copse?"

"It isn't that I'm the least afraid for myself," began Andrew, "but—"

But Di cut him short. "Now, look here, don't be such a coward, and listen to me. I can get upstairs quietly enough, but you're such an idiot that I can't depend on you for doing anything decently."

"That's cheek," pouted Andrew.

"So listen," continued Di, "Libbie has just gone into the brew-house, to bottle the cowslip wine, so I'll go in there

and tease and worry her so much that she won't have any ears to spare for what you may be doing. Meanwhile, take off your boots, and creep upstairs till you reach *the* door. When you're once there you can't do much harm, because you see the room isn't over the brew-house, and the walls are so fearfully thick, I don't believe that even a dancing elephant could make itself heard downstairs."

"But you will promise to come up soon," said Andrew, terribly afraid of being left too long within reach of this dread, undiscovered territory, "I can't stop up there too long, all by myself."

"I'll come as soon as I've worried Libbie into wanting to be rid of me," said wicked Di. "I'll make her feel thankful to leave me to my own devices. But don't you begin to do anything till I come."

"Oh, no, that I won't," said Andrew so fervently that Di felt sure that on this occasion, at any rate, Andrew might be trusted to keep his word.

"Very well, then, I'm off to begin operations," said Di, springing to her feet. Tilting her hat over her eyes, and walking with a very leisurely step, Di took her way to the back regions of the farmhouse.

Poor Libbie, with her head and hands engaged in her bottling process, fell an easy prey to her wiles. If the truth were known, Libbie had been bitterly disappointed, and so had Mrs. Busson, by Andrew's and Diana's refusal to join the fair-going party. They had reckoned so confidently on securing a quiet, undisturbed afternoon for the "flasking and cellaring" of the cowslip wine, as Libbie termed it.

"Headaches, indeed! Stuff and nonsense," she had said, "it's just their *contrariness*, and that's all. I'd like to give them a good dose of senna tea each, and lock them up in a dark room."

So, when Di appeared in the doorway of the brew-house, she found exactly the kind of reception she would have chosen.

"Now I can't have you worrying in here, Miss Di," said Libbie, "for as you can see for yourself, there isn't standing room for a well grown rat," and she pointed to the regiment of dusty bottles with which the door was crowded. "Why dear me! I thought you had a bad headache. What ever has become of it so soon?"

"It never was a very bad one, besides I don't make a fuss about things when I'm ill. I never do," said Di, forgetting that *never* is a long word.

"Well, I can't have either you or Master Andrew bothering in here, this afternoon," said Libbie, "it'll be your own faults, if you find it dull, but you must amuse yourselves as best you can. Only don't go getting into mischief. I've got my work cut out for me, here."

"And so have I," thought naughty Di, only she took care not to say so.

"Very well," she answered aloud, "then if you won't let me help you Libbie, I'll go now."

And very slowly, Diana turned away and recrossed the threshold.

CHAPTER XXV.

A TRAGICAL AFTERNOON.

ONCE out of sight of Libbie, Di bounded upstairs, three steps at a time, flinging herself down outside the door, breathless with speed and suppressed laughter.

"Oh! I'm glad you've come," said Andrew, "it's been quite horrid waiting up here alone, with all that horrible noise going on all round."

"It sounds rather eerie, doesn't it?" said Di.

"Yes, really I do think it is rather dangerous," began Andrew, "I—"

"Then run away," said Di, "only leave me your tools."

"No, I didn't mean to say that," said Andrew, "only—"

"Now, look here, be sensible," broke in Di, "just hold this chair steady, whilst I stand up on it. I want to have a good look at this door. Here's the candle and matches, just light it, and hand it up to me, when I'm safe on the chair."

From her exalted position and aided by the light of the tallow dip, which Di had abstracted from Polly's box in the scullery, she proceeded to make a careful inspection of the door and doorway.

The labours of many generations of undisturbed spiders had resulted in layers upon layers of cobwebs, which hung in grey misty folds all about the panels and locks, and cracks, and hinges, of the long dis-used door.

These were easily swept away, but when removed, an unwelcome fact became apparent.

"Oh! I say," cried Di, in dismay, "they've walled up the door!"

Not only the keyhole but every hairbreadth of space all round the door had been filled in with solid cement. Yes, even between the floor and the lowest panel of the door, there was a thick seam of plaster.

"Oh, the old fiends!" cried Di, jumping off her chair and stamping with rage, "Old wretches, whoever they were! I wonder if Mrs. Busson ever saw this."

As a matter of fact, she had not. Otherwise, she would not have been so anxious to keep the knowledge of that room's existence from her little guests.

"We are done, hopelessly done," cried Di, "one might as well try to open a sealed up vault as that door."

"Are you quite sure of it?" asked Andrew, with a look of relief on his face which was not apparent in that dim light.

His prolonged nearness to that uncomfortable rumbling noise had entirely quenched Andrew's ardour for forcing an entrance into the forbidden room, and he was quite ready to abandon the undertaking without further ceremony.

Not so Di, however.

"Of course, we *won't* be done," she said.

"But if we can't help it," began Andrew.

"But we will help it, we won't be beaten," she said. "I've thought of something," she went on, with sudden inspiration. "Hand up your tools, Andrew, I've got an idea."

Snatching the gimlet from Andrew, Di went on her knees. With a will, she set to work to bore a hole in one of the lower panels of the door.

"Do you see what I'm doing?" she asked, without raising her head from her work. "I'm going to drill a hole."

"Oh! Just big enough to peep through, I suppose," said Andrew, thinking this was a splendid idea.

"Big enough, you booby, to put our hands through first of all, and then our bodies afterwards," retorted Di.

"O-oh!" was all Andrew found to say. He was quite determined that it should be Di's hand that went in first.

For some time, Di worked away laboriously with the gimlet.

Then she paused. "I can't get on with this," she said, "I must try something else. Go half-way down the stairs, Andrew, and stand there and listen if you can hear me at work. It won't do to attract Libbie's attention. Go quietly."

"It's all right," reported Andrew, returning from executing Di's orders. "I couldn't hear a sound, not from you, at least, but there's no end of a row going on downstairs. Libbie must have some friends to help her, for they are jawing no end in the brew-house."

"So much the better," said Di; "now I'm going to do something desperate."

Therewith, seizing the hammer, Diana wrapt her handkerchief carefully round the head.

"That'll deaden the sound," she said. Then taking one of the knives, she stuck the point into the panel, upon which she had already been operating, and then dealt a blow with the hammer on the handle of the knife with all her might.

"Hurrah! Andrew, the wood is beginning to give," she said, "with another blow or two, we'll do it."

"Oh! dear," gasped Andrew. "I wonder what we shall find."

"We shall know very soon now," returned Di, "I hope this will settle the business!"

Therewith she dealt another furious blow with the hammer.

There came a noise of splintering wood,—Di remembered that afterwards, clearly enough, but what followed besides, she could never recall.

Her first impulse on feeling the panel yield to her blows, was to thrust her hand and arm through the gaping slit, with a view to laying hands on the gold or precious stones or stores of sweet-stuff, which must surely be within her reach; her next was to draw her arm back again with all speed and to rend, not the door but the air with piercing, frantic shrieks.

And these shrieks were echoed by Andrew.

Anxious to secure his share in the booty, he had also thrust his hand—and his face, too—through the broken panel, and was now dancing and yelling like a maniac.

"Shut your eyes; shut your eyes, Andrew," shrieked Di. "Libbie, Libbie, Libbie! Come, come, come!"

Crash went at least a dozen bottles in the brew-house, then helter-skelter up the stairs, came Libbie, followed by her visitor.

By this time, the narrow bit of passage, which turned abruptly away from the head of the staircase was alive with clouds of angry bees, and a stouter heart than Libbie's would have quailed at the prospect of encountering such a host. It was well for her, that her visitor, who was none other than the severe Nanny of other days, kept her wits about her.

Nanny's first step was to seize Andrew, who, with his hair full of humming bees and his hands held tightly over his eyes, was running aimlessly to and fro.

In a moment, Nanny had dragged off his jacket, which was all alive with the infuriated creatures, and rolling it up tightly, she flung it back into the enemy's country.

"And now run as fast as ever you can," she ordered Andrew, "and jump into the rain-water tank, close by the back door."

Andrew who was even more frightened than stung, promptly obeyed, howling and yelling so loudly all the way, that in a few minutes all the farm hands were running to know what had happened.

"There, however any of us came out of it alive, is what I never shall understand," was how Libbie always wound up



"In a moment Nanny had dragged off his jacket."

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the narration of that tragical afternoon's doings. "When I come to think over it now, I don't seem able to remember nothing but pails of water on all sides, water dashed here and there, for all the world as if there had been a fire. And then oh! good me, the shovel-fulls of brimstone, which well-nigh suffocated the life out of one. There, I do say, that with all the humming and the buzzing about one, and all the *furios* creatures as well, one felt for all the world as if one had been turned into a bee-hive oneself, with just a pair of boots on.

"But oh! dear, dear! What a sight poor Miss Di was! Well, there, if all the meddlesome-matties got their reward that way, the world would be very soon rid of them, I'll be bound."

CHAPTER XXVI.

"WHATEVER WILL THE MASTER SAY?"

"Oh! isn't this fun, isn't this fun?" cried Hubert and Marygold in one breath, as by way of winding up the afternoon at the Fair, the whole party gathered round a plentifully spread tea-table in the old fashioned parlour of the "Cygnet" Inn.

On the whole, the entertainment had been a glorious success.

The younger children had been given into Ruth's special keeping, whilst the two elder boys went off with Mr. Busson, ostensibly to knock over cocoa-nuts and shoot at stuffed pigeons and share in various similar sports, which they considered suitable to their advanced age.

But though they returned with a cocoa-nut apiece, they each owned to having had a turn of the "galloping horses," and more than one go in at the swings. To neither of these latter forms of entertainment were Ruth's charges admitted. And though Hubert cast longing looks at the "merry-go rounds," he soon forgot them for the other diversions which came in his way.

There was a wonderful performing dog, which could tell the days of the week; there was a big brown bear, that climbed a pole and danced a jig; and a gold fish, the size of a herring.

This prodigy, wonderful to relate, was reported to sing like a skylark—that is, if he had not "Happened to have caught a cold in his head on the way to Bramblehurst and lost his singing voice for the first time for over ten years."

These last details of the gold-fish's personal history were however only furnished after the penny (paid in advance for the privilege of hearing his song) had been safely pocketed by his mendacious owner.

A marvellous peep-show, exhibiting all the principal cities of the world, with their "male and female celebrities, taking an airing in the handsomest streets," proved a huge attraction to the children.

And after the peep-show, there was the lucky-bag, with its penny dips and marvellous possibilities.

Marygold drew a diamond brooch, and a box with the portrait of the Prince of Wales on it. Hubert got a knife and a pincushion the latter he intended to give to Diana; whilst Gaston drew a whistle and a shawl-pin, with a blue bead for its head, which he at once offered to Mrs. Busson.

Then there was the gingerbread-stall, with its strutting cocks and hens, its gilded elephants and almond-hearted knights and ladies, all very funny to look at, the children agreed, but nicer to look at than to eat.

Faith and Phoena invested in some baskets of doubtful durability, while Hubert made friends with a lame gipsy boy, from whom he bought a dozen washing pegs. These he thought, would make a suitable gift for Nellie, whom he had observed using these homely implements.

Whilst bargaining over the baskets, Phoena had kept a persistent look out for the traces of any waif or stray, who might be stowed away in one of the gaily painted vans, and was woefully disappointed to see none.

"You're glad now, Gaston, that you came with us, aren't you?" enquired Hubert as they sat down to tea.

"But yes, I am very glad," was the cordial reply.

"Won't Andrew and Di be sorry that they didn't come," said Phil, "when they hear all about it."

"Rather," said Jack, "I call it a stunning spree."

"Yes, it is a very funny sort of place," said Phoena, thoughtfully.

"I wish," said Jack, "that their wretched horses were fatter."

"Do you think that they're werry hungry?" asked Hubert, pausing in the act of attacking a plum bun.

"That poor thing out there looks like it," answered Phil, pointing to a miserable white skeleton of a pony, tethered by the roadside.

Hubert put down his cake and looked at Mrs. Busson.

"Anything wrong with the bun, my dear?" she asked.

"No," answered Hubert, "but may I give it to the poor horse?"

Hubert was very fond of cake, but the thought of anything within his reach that was hungrier than himself, always quenched his appetite.

"Bless your dear heart!" cried Mrs. Busson, "that mouthful of bun wouldn't do the poor thing any good." Then noting Hubert's look of disappointment, she added, "But look here, when you've finished your tea, you go out to Busson in the yard and tell him from me to ask the ostler for sixpennyworth of oats, and then Master Jack'll go across the Green with you, and Master Phil too, I daresay, and help you to give them to the poor pony."

Charmed with this delightful prospect, Hubert finished his tea, with equal enjoyment and alacrity, and then all the party arose from the table to assist in the feeding of the poor white starveling.

And perhaps this closing scene was the brightest moment in all that long bright summer afternoon.

"My word! won't he enjoy himself!" cried Jack, who under Busson's directions had presented the feast of oats in a pail of water. "I bet it's the first time in your life, you've ever had such a blow out, you wretched specimen."

"He's a poor, poor thing, but very ugly," said Hubert, with more truth than tenderness for his protégé. "Oh! Gaston, Gaston, how can you?"

For Gaston had laid his cheek against the neglected creature's dirty matted mane, and was stroking his untempting coat with hands as gentle and caressing as if he were fondling some faultlessly groomed, satin-coated pony.

"Oh! Gaston," cried Fay, dragging him away, "he's not fit to touch."

"He's so sad," said Gaston, simply. There were tears in the boy's big brown eyes.

"Oh! he won't be sad now," said Hubert, "Mr. Busson says that he will stop being hungry by the time he has eaten all those oats."

"Ah! one is often sad, when one is not hungry," said Gaston, slowly.

But no one heeded his last remark.

Ruth was running across the Green, to call them back to the Inn, at the door of which the Gaybrook van was standing already, with old Mr. Busson frantically waving his whip at the scattered party.

What a scramble there was to pack not only everyone, but everyone's newly-acquired property, into the tilted waggon.

For though Jack and Phil went off in search of their ponies, they committed divers articles, such as cocoa-nuts, walking sticks, in great variety, a top or two, some brilliant green performing frogs of vast size, a rat-trap, a marvellous kite, a stuffed pigeon for target practice, to Fay and Phoena, for the safety of which they were to hold themselves responsible.

The homeward drive, through the long winding lanes, in the soft golden light of the westering sun, was very delightful, if less noisy than the morning drive had been.

After the first few miles, Hubert and Marygold fell fast asleep, the latter on Fay's lap. Hubert, who had yielded his place on the front seat to Gaston—Phoena having represented to him that it was rather selfish to monopolise it both ways—was dreaming a confusion of sights and sounds, with his head resting on Ruth's shoulder, whilst Fay and Phoena were carrying on a low-voiced discussion.

"Oh! of course, you must put him down in the ledger of golden deeds," Fay was saying, "for he wanted to help the poor and distressed by giving up his cake but I can't see why Gaston should go in too."

"Because," said Phoena, slowly, "I think he was quite as kind."

"Because he went and stroked that horribly dirty creature? Oh! I say that was very dirty of him."

"I think it was rather grand," said Phoena, "we only thought of comforting the poor pony's body, but Gaston wanted to comfort his sad heart too. For instance, I should think it was much more noble to kiss a dirty old beggar-woman than to give her my dinner. I know at any rate, which I'd rather *not* do."

"That's true," admitted Fay, "still I can't understand Gaston, I don't think he really is a bit kind-hearted; he couldn't hate Andrew as he does, if he had a really good heart."

"Of course it's wrong to hate people," said Phoena; "still, I'm sure many kind people can't help it sometimes. But just because they are kind-hearted, they'd never be cruel to those they hate. I'm quite sure if Gaston had the chance, he would be quite as kind to Andrew as Jack or Phil would be, only he wouldn't be kind so gladly."

Fay shook her head. "When you're as old as I am, Phoena," she said, with her superior wisdom, "you'll understand more the wickedness of ha—" But she broke off suddenly.



"John made a clumsy attempt to rein in his flying steed."

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The sharp clatter of quick-trotting horse's hoofs coming towards them, smote on their ears, and Mrs. Busson started forward with a cry.

"That's Blackberry," she said. "I know his trot. That means there's mischief at home."

In another minute, the stout black cob, ridden by one of the farm men, came in sight.

"John! John Honeybun, what has happened?" shouted Mrs. Busson. "Where are you off to?"

"Doctor," was the brief reply, whilst John made a clumsy but ineffectual attempt to rein in his flying steed.

A great consternation fell into the midst of that hitherto happy vanful. For full thirty seconds no one spoke at all, not indeed until Blackberry became lost to view round the corner of the long lane they were just leaving. Then poor Mrs. Busson wailed out—

"Please God it's not the children."

But Phoena, with lips grown white, leant over to whisper into Fay's ear, "Don't you remember we guessed that they were going to do something?"

The remainder of that drive was a very sorry affair.

Though Mr. Busson whipped his horses into a pace, which greatly astonished those sleek, slow-going animals, it seemed to all concerned as if the chimneys of the Farm would never come in sight. At length, however, the old van jolted up to the door, whence they had set out so merrily that morning.

"Please God it's not the children," repeated Mrs. Busson, as Libbie came flying to meet them at the open door.

Poor Libbie, usually so trim and dainty! She looked now as if she had been through a campaign! She was capless, her drenched hair hung loosely over her shoulders, her face was flushed, swollen and blotched, her gown was be-draggled and torn, her apron burnt into holes, and one hand was tied up in rags.

"Oh! ma'am, oh! ma'am," she cried, in piteous distress, "they've been and broken through into the bee-room!"

"But speak, woman, are the children hurt?" cried Mrs. Busson.

"That's it, that's it, ma'am! Miss Di's been stung that venomous, that we've had to send off for the doctor. Manny's got her into bed, and is doing her best for her, but she's been most *cruelly* punished. As for her poor eyes, it's my belief that she'll never see out of them again. There, you can hear her screaming, she hasn't left off, not for five seconds together."

"And Andrew?" asked Faith, whilst Mrs. Busson and Ruth flew indoors.

"Oh! he's nothing hurt to speak of," said Libbie, "got about twenty stings perhaps, but Nanny's sent him to bed and locked him into his room, too. So he can't take any harm after jumping into the water-tank. But there, oh! there, what ever will the master say when he sees the muddling mess that has been made of his house, what with all the sulphur and brimstone that we had to burn before we could get the beasties under, and all the buckets of water that we had to throw down, as well! Never, no never have I seen such a set-out!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

"WHAT THE MASTER DID SAY."

WHAT the master did say, was far more terrible than even Libbie had imagined possible.

"You treat Busson properly," his wife was wont to assert, "and give him his dues, and he's as mild as buttermilk; but take liberties with him and his, and you'll see what's in him, then. Good me! he'd crumple up a stone wall as if it were brown paper, and snap a six-inch iron bar, like a cobweb!"

"No, I do say, Busson hasn't got his match in all the country round, either for good temper or bad, according as the fit is on him, for one way or the other."

Unfortunately, on his return from the Fair, Mr. Busson did consider—small blame to him—that a very great liberty had been taken with his house. Consequently, he was promptly overtaken with the fit for “crumbling stone walls, and snapping iron bars.”

In plain English, Mr. Busson flew into a furious rage.

“Thank goodness,” sighed poor Mrs. Busson, “that Ruth has packed the girls off to their rooms for the night, whilst Busson was still out.” For he had remained in the yard to discharge his duties to the horses, and thus his return to the house, and his further initiation into the full extent of that afternoon’s doings had been delayed some time.

But as Fay and Phoena, cowered together in their bedroom, which was directly over the parlour, where the farmer was giving free vent to his anger, the drift, if not all the words, of his fierce displeasure, reached the two girls very distinctly.

Their teeth chattered, and their limbs shook, but they were too petrified with terror to shed a tear.

Jack and Phil, following the farmer indoors, a few minutes later, after putting away their ponies, as they loved to do, beat a hasty retreat, though their untasted supper stood ready within their reach. They were in blissful ignorance as to the cause of the farmer’s rage, but a look from Mrs. Busson warned them that they were not wanted, and with the ready tact of good breeding, they had quickly vanished to their own quarters.

“Oh, I wish,” cried Phoena, “that Ruth, or Libbie, or someone would come and see us. It is getting so late, and it will be too dreadful if we have to wait till to-morrow morning without knowing any more.”

“Well, we can make out something for ourselves,” said matter-of-fact Faith. “For you can hear that Mr. Busson is evidently determined to turn us out to-morrow morning. Just listen, now.”

“Can’t turn ‘em out, you say,” Busson was roaring. “Can’t turn who I choose out of my own house! Well, I call that a pretty pair of walking boots. Don’t you make any mistake about it, Missus, out they’ll go, bag and baggage, neck and crop, leggins or no leggins, soon as ever the sun’s up to-morrow.”

Then came the sound of pleading in a low tone from Mrs. Busson.

This was speedily cut short by the farmer’s loud voice.

“Respect for Miss Agatha, indeed! Let her teach her young ‘uns to show respect for my goods and chattels. Let her, I say, before they ever set foot under my roof again.”

Then, after a moment’s lull, the farmer raged on anew.

“And as for that boy, this very night, I’ll give him such a thrashing as he’ll never forget for the rest of his born days. My word! if I don’t break a stick or two over him, my name’s not Benjamin Busson. Polly, I say?”—this was addressed, in stentorian tones, to the girl in the back kitchen, “where have you locked that young rascal up?”

“Oh, Busson, Busson, let him be till the morning,” the girls heard Mrs. Busson entreating her husband, her voice shrill with alarm.

Evidently she was trying, by main force, to hold the infuriated man back. “It will be plenty soon enough to punish him to-morrow.”

Involuntarily, Phoena thought of the scenes they had so often enacted in their ogre games, where the pitiful ogress sought to gain time for the luckless victims.

But how far Mrs. Busson would have succeeded or not was doubtful, if, at that critical moment, the doctor had not appeared on the scene. His presence produced at once a comparative calm.

“I wonder if poor Di will soon be better,” said Phoena, as they heard Dr. Forbes going upstairs to Di’s room, whence her screams still came at very short intervals.

Libbie had put her to bed in another part of the house.

“Do you suppose that she really will be blind?” asked Faith. “Oh, how could she and Andrew have done such a thing!”

“I thought they were up to something,” said Phoena; “but I never thought, after all we had said about it, that they would have done *that*.”

“And I’m so sorry for poor Mrs. Busson,” said Fay, “it seems so hard that she should get such a scolding for our ill-doing.”

“Yes, and after she’d been giving us such a happy afternoon. What’s that?” added Phoena.

“Only me,” said Marygold, peeping through the door of an adjoining room, where she was supposed to be asleep. “Is all the people downstairs in a turkey-cock rage still, do you think?” she added, in a quivering tone.

Before anyone could answer, the door opened, and Nanny appeared.

Grim as she looked, the girls greeted her gladly.

“Oh, Nanny, do tell us what’s happening,” they implored.

“Get back into your bed *at once*, Miss Marion, if you don’t want a slapping,” was the first utterance of the late nursery-tyrant; “you were never trained under me, or you would know better than to run about barefoot.”

And it was not till Marygold was tightly tucked into her bed, and the door closed behind her, with a recommendation to open it again if she dared, that Nanny would answer the elder girls’ questions.

“Suffering, indeed,” she said, “yes, I believe you, Miss Di is suffering. There, if you could see her now, it would cure you of wishing to meddle with what doesn’t concern you. It’ll be ever so long, the doctor says, before she’s quite over it. She’ll have to be kept shut up in a dark room for many days to come. The only wonder is, that she’s likely to recover at all.”

“Oh, poor, dear Di!” said Faith.

“Poor Di, indeed!” echoed Nanny, indignantly; “naughty Di, that’s what she is. But then, she and Master Andrew always were the most troublesome pair that you could find on a long summer’s day. It’s poor Mrs. Busson, I pity. A nice time she’s having with the farmer. He’s just beside himself with rage, and no wonder, either. A proper pig-stye they’ve made of all that part of his house. And if Joe Wintle hadn’t had a head on his shoulders, I can’t think where the mischief would have stopped.”

“But,” enquired Faith, “do tell us what actually happened. What was the bee-room? We never heard anything

about it before."

"No, and you never were meant to hear about it, either," was the grim rejoinder, "if those children hadn't been prying about as they had no right to have done, they wouldn't have known anything of it, and all this terrible business would never have come to pass."

"But when you say a bee-room," asked Phoena, "do you mean a room full of bees? I thought bees were always kept out of doors."

"Well, and so they always are," said Nanny, "but that was the odd thing about this room. Years and years ago, so long ago, that no one can remember when, a swarm of bees took possession, first of the real roof over that room, and then of the false roof—that space, you know, between the outer and inner walls of the upper storey—till at last, they ended by invading the room itself. It was used, no doubt, as an odd sort of lumber room, never as a living room, for though it has a door and a chimney, there's no proper window to it. Clouds of bees are always flying round the chimney, and very often swarms come from there. There must be thousands and thousands of bees at home in that room now. One gentleman, so Mrs. Busson told me, who was a visitor in this neighbourhood, and heard of the room, was very anxious to open it at his own risk and expense, for he was specially curious about bees and their ways, but the farmer wouldn't hear of it being touched. He always vowed that it should never be disturbed in his time, as his father and grandfather had said before him."

"Why, of course, the risk of such a thing must have seemed dreadful," said Faith, in awe-struck tones.

"Risk! I should think so," said Nanny, "there, as I said, if it hadn't been for Joe Wintle, I don't believe we'd any of us been left here."

"But what did Joe Wintle do?" enquired Faith.

"Well, you see, those children had smashed in half the lower part of the door, so they had made a fine disturbance amongst all the bees they had dislodged, and they all came flying about like mad. So Joe, like a wise man, rushed down to the village, and got hold of a sheet of zinc, which he nailed right over the broken panel of the door. He put on his regular bee-dress first; then he fitted a thick shutter over the whole door, so there's no likelihood now of any more bees escaping. But, oh, the hundreds and thousands that came buzzing out, at first, you wouldn't believe. Every one of us got pretty nicely stung, I can tell you."

"Were you badly hurt, Nanny?" asked Fay, politely.

"Of course I was, Miss Faith, but a blue-bag, and some sweet oil set me right. Poor Libbie was badly punished, her left hand is just a sight; she worked so hard to get Miss Di free."

"I suppose Di and Andrew were dreadfully frightened when they found out what they had done?" enquired Phoena.

"If you'd heard their screams as we heard them down in the brew-house, you wouldn't have much doubt of that. Both Libbie and I thought they must have set themselves on fire, and be calling out of the flames."

"I suppose Di was dreadfully stung," said Faith.

"I tell you that it was only a wonder that she didn't die, then and there," said Nanny, "what with the shock, and the pain. As it is, she hasn't come to herself yet. But there, I repeat it, I don't pity her, not as I do Mrs. Busson."

"I suppose Mr. Busson takes a long time to get over things," said Fay.

"I should think he'd take a long time to get over *this* thing. There, however the poor old lady will make it right with him, I can't think. Never did I see anyone fly all to bits, as he's done. 'Twouldn't do Master Andrew any harm to have a taste of his displeasure."

"Oh, but he won't beat Andrew, will he, Nanny? You won't let him," implored Faith.

"I *would* let him, gladly, if I could," was the merciless rejoinder—as a matter-of-fact, Nanny had taken effectual measures to prevent such a thing happening—"only I believe that it would break Mrs. Busson's heart, if anyone laid a finger on him in her house, and I'm sure I don't want her troubles added to."

"But," faltered Phoena, "shall we all be sent away to-morrow?"

"More than likely. All that is, but Miss Di. I shouldn't be surprised if the farmer sends her to the nearest hospital. But now I must go back to her room; I've promised that I'll sit up the night with her. And the sooner that you two get to bed, and out of the way of doing fresh mischief, the better. Good-night to you both."

"Good-night, Nanny," responded the girls. They were too dejected to resent the glaring injustice implied in her last sentence.

The next morning they woke with very heavy hearts.

"Won't it be an awful disgrace, Phoena," sighed Fay, "if we really are sent back to-day. What will mother say?"

"I shall be so sorry for Mrs. Busson," said Phoena, "because, you see, she will be so sad if it all ends so badly. Perhaps the farmer has waked up in a better temper."

"I rather hope he has," chimed in little Marygold, "for I'm werry afraid of seeing him, if he's still in that turkey-cock rage."

And so, in sooth, were her elders, whose courage was at a very low ebb when they reluctantly left the shelter of their room for breakfast.

Even Jack and Phil were unusually subdued.

They had heard the whole story from Joe Wintle, the hero of the zinc sheet, and they had heard also how Mr. Busson had vowed that every one of them was to be cleared off the premises that day.

"And Joe says that the farmer is a man of his word," said Phil.

No one had seen Andrew. Jack had tried the door of his room, but had found it still locked.

"Poor beggar, he must be having a lively time of it," said Phil.

"Serve him right," said Jack, "it was a dirty trick to play."

"Hush," said Phoena, "here comes Mrs. Busson. Oh dear, what will she be like?"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WELL knowing all that she had gone through for their sakes, the children felt terribly shy of meeting their hostess.

But, save that her face was a little pale, and that her eyelids showed narrow red rims, there was nothing in her quiet, pleasant greeting, no lack of warmth in her bright smile, to betray that anything had gone wrong with her.

For the first time, perhaps, in their lives, Fay and Phoena realised how much elder folk may suffer for the misdoings of the young, and how unselfishly they may conceal that suffering from its authors.

"Well, now, my dears," she began, and there was a certain jerkiness in her tone now, which, to older ears would have told its own story, "I want you all to make an extra good breakfast, and I'll tell you the reason why."

Oh, then they *were* going to be sent away. Faith felt sure of that.

"We're going to have such beautiful weather to-day," Mrs. Busson went on—as if a fine day during that remarkably dry season were quite a novelty—"that I've thought of a little treat for you all."

The elder girls breathed freely.

"And it's this. You've often heard talk of the old oak at Barnby."

"Under which Queen Elizabeth is said to have drunk a cup of cider?" asked Phoena, eagerly.

"Yes, quite right, that's the tree. Well, suppose now you all make an expedition to see it. It's seven miles there, every step, but you can take the little donkey-trap, and that'll carry four of you at a time, as well as the dinner and tea baskets, for you'd best not set out to come home till it's got cool. Now, do you think you'd like to go?"

"Of course we should," cried the children in chorus.

Phoena, noting the look of relief on Mrs. Busson's face at the unanimous consent to her plan, guessed the old lady's good reasons for arranging that they should be out of the house for that whole day.

"And now you'll finish your breakfast nice and quietly," besought Mrs. Busson, "and then you'll just stop indoors out of the sun, till you are ready to start. The house is still topsy-turvy after yesterday's upset, so we don't want more little feet running about than can be helped. Besides, poor Miss Di must be kept quiet."

"Is she better to-day?" asked Fay, timidly, feeling almost guilty in asking after one of the culprits.

"Not much, I'm afraid; she hasn't had a wink of sleep."

"And Andrew," asked Jack, "will he come with us?"

"No, sir, that he certainly won't," said Nanny, appearing at the door, to fetch a cup of milk for Di, "Master Andrew's got to stop at home to be punished, and a rare punishment we've thought out for him, too, Mr. Busson and I."

Without another word, Nanny took the milk, and departed.

Mrs. Busson hurried after her.

"What a horrid old crab-stick," cried Jack, "no wonder that you all hated her, when she was your nurse."

"Small blame to Andrew that he didn't want to see her again," said Jack.

"Her bark is worse than her bite," said Faith; "she always used to threaten us with a great deal more than she ever carried out."

"I expect," said Phoena, with her natural shrewdness, "that she has really been doing Andrew a kind turn, and that whatever the punishment may be, she only invented it to get Andrew off the merciless beating he seemed likely to get last evening."

"It won't be much fun," said tender-hearted Marygold, "to go to our picnic, and not know all the time what dreadful things may be happening to Andrew."

"Yes," chimed in Hubert, "it does seem werry sad to leave him behind in disgrace, when we are going to enjoy ourselves."

"He has no one to thank for it but himself," said Phil. "No one asked him to go and kick up all this shine, and do us out of our supper last night. He ought to be licked for it."

A little later, Jack was quite ready to endorse Phil's opinion.

Forgetting Mrs. Busson's directions as to staying indoors, Jack strayed round to the straw-yard, where he ran up against Mr. Busson.

Not heeding the signs of the times, Jack accosted the farmer—who had rather pointedly turned his back upon him—and asked if they might have the ponies.

The old man turned on him in a fury.

"Now, clear out of this," he cried, seizing Jack by the ear, "I've told the missus, and I'll tell you, that I'm not going to be walked over in my place by a parcel of ill-behaved youngsters."

Therewith, he dragged Jack across the yard, pushing him through the gate, and slamming it after him with quite unnecessary violence.

"Bother Andrew," cried Jack, indignantly, rejoining the others, "I do call it a beastly shame that he has gone and spoilt everything for us. Look here, Phil, he's done us out of the ponies now, for old Busson has cut up rusty, and won't let us have them."

"I'd like to kick Andrew," said Phil, with more heartiness than heart.

"I think," said Fay, "that you may leave Andrew to the tender mercies of Nanny and Busson. I expect that he'll get all that he deserves."

"I hope to goodness that he will," said Philip, whose disappointment about the ponies made him very vengeance-thirsty.

"Well," said Jack, gloomily, "he has made the farmer as cross as a bear with *two* sore heads."

"I hope we'll soon start now," said Marygold, "I don't want to see Mr. Busson, I don't, at all."

"Not much fear of your seeing him," said Fay, "if you keep indoors, like a good little girl."

But Faith proved a false prophet.

For, just as the children were thinking of setting off, the door opened, and Mr. Busson put his dreaded head in.

"Now, you little gentlemen and ladies," he began, "just you come along with me, and see what comes of meddling with what does not belong to you. Never too late to learn, or too early, says I."

These last words were aimed at Marygold, who was shaking with fear.

So a very subdued procession followed the farmer, as he strode down the garden, and across the fowl-yard to the orchard, beloved of Gaston.

On plodded Mr. Busson through the long, rank grass, till he reached nearly the middle of the orchard. Then he paused.

"Now, here's a pretty sight for you," he said, "look at it. *Look* at it!"

This recommendation was entirely superfluous, however.

Faith and Phoena were standing with eyes and mouth wide open, and fixed in a rigid stare, whilst Hubert and Marygold were backing like the traditional crabs.

"What is it? What is it?" they all asked.

"Why, it's your brother, Andrew, doing penance, my dears," said the farmer. "Take a nearer look at him."

In the middle of the orchard was a big, artificial mound, surmounted by a flagstaff.

This table-mountain, as Phoena had christened it, had been described by Marygold, in a letter to her mother, as being "a mile high," and affording a view "all over the country."

As a matter of fact, it was about twenty feet high, and from its top you could command a good view of the lane, which ran alongside of the orchard. But though the surface of the mound was now so thickly overgrown with coarse weeds and grass, that to the unknowing it might almost appear a natural hillock, it was really entirely made up of broken brick-bats, and crockery, and all the other miscellaneous objects which go to form a rubbish heap. But it was a rubbish heap of ancient date, and of very literal long-standing.

It was this table mountain that Mr. Busson had selected as the theatre of Andrew's punishment. A wide-bottomed tub, turned topsy-turvy, was set at the foot of the flag-staff, and in the middle of the tub was placed a chair, and on the chair was what appeared to be a monster straw bee-hive.

It was of the old-fashioned extinguisher shape, wide at the edge of the skirt—as the cottagers term it—whence three wooden legs projected, and tapering upwards into quite a narrow circumference round the neck.

Above this neck, and struggling out of a thick garnish of stiff, struggling straws, Andrew's head was just apparent. In front of the brim of his straw hat was a huge card, bearing the words, in Nanny's largest writing, "Who would be a curious boy?"

A further decoration was added to the hat, in the shape of Libbie's scorched and rent apron, which was spread over it after the fashion of those cloths which sometimes serve to protect hives from the undue heat.

"There now, don't you call that a pretty picture, and all made with a truss of straw, and a good-for-nothing youngster?" asked the farmer, turning upon Jack and Phil, who were holding their sides with laughter, so absolutely ludicrous did Andrew appear.

"Go away, all of you, you nasty cowards," howled Andrew, "if you were not such a sneaking lot, all of you, you would never let me be treated like this."

"Oh, I say, none of your cheek, old bee-hive," said Jack, "you chain up, after all the row you've kicked up for everyone."

"I wish I'd kicked up ten times more," snarled Andrew, "you're all traitors and snea—"

"Look here, old straw-sides," said Phil, "you'd better take your punishment meekly, or you may get something worse than that shied at you," he added, flinging a pellet of grass, which he took care should only shave Andrew's face.

"Ay, that's it, my lads, pelt him a bit," said Busson, "it won't do him no harm. As I tell him, if I'd had my way, I'd have given him a good lathering last night, but there the women folk interfered, so he has got to do bee-hive penance instead, and get no honey either. Eh, sonny?" and the farmer brought his heavy stick down on Andrew's straw envelope with a playful energy, which set a cloud of dust whirling about that unfortunate boy's eyes and nose.

"Get away with you, get away with you," whimpered Andrew, "if you don't go soon, I'll—"

"Make your mind easy, my lad," said Busson, "we're all going away now, for it's not everyone that is so mighty fond of bee-hive company as you. So just you bide nice and quiet there, until such time as I see fit to relieve you, and *ponderate* over your misdoings, that's my advice to you. But, just remember, that, perched up aloft as you are, I can keep my weather eye on you from all over the place, so you'd better behave yourself, else it will be the worse for you, and for this here stick too, for it shall be broken in your service then, and no mistake," and Busson's laugh was not pleasant to hear. "Now, young 'uns, march off, and leave him to himself."

"Oh, Andrew," said Fay, screwing as close to him as she could, "are you very miserable?"

"Get away, I hate you all," was the spiteful reply.

"Oh, please, Mr. Busson," implored Faith, as they trooped out of the orchard, "you won't leave Andrew very long up there; suppose he got very tired of standing up on that chair, and tumbled off."

"No fear of that happening, missy," said the farmer, who had worked off the worst part of his temper by now, "for before we put that comfortable straw jacket over him, we stood him up on the chair, and tied him pretty tightly to the back of it. Then, to make sure that the chair itself wouldn't budge, we slipped a chain round the legs of it, and so made the chain taut to the flag-staff, so you see that it's all been carefully arranged. I've told him that most likely he'll be there till the sundown, but I'll let him off, may be, in a couple of hours."

"Well, really," said Faith, as they started on their expedition, "I think after all he has done, that Andrew has got off uncommonly well. Of course, Nanny invented that punishment, she always used to concoct the most fearful chastisements for us."

"It must be disgustingly stuffy inside all that straw," said Jack, "I'd sooner have had twenty lickings."

"And I'd sooner have had forty than been made such a tom-fool of," said Phil.

"Yes, but then you are not Andrew," remarked Fay.

"Well, at any rate," said Phoena, "I'm very glad that we know the worst of what is to happen to him, because now we needn't feel so very selfish, going off to our picnic and not knowing what dreadful punishment Andrew might be undergoing all the time."

"That's true," said Faith, "but where's Gaston, I thought he started with us."

"So he did," said Phoena, "I expect he has gone round by the road, with Ruth, and the infants, and the donkey cart."

"And we had better hurry up," said Jack, "for they are going to wait for us at the stile by the barley-held."

CHAPTER XXIX.

"WHERE'S GASTON?"

"FAITH, Faith! Phoena! Marygold! Oh! Somebody come and release me, I can't, I can't bear this any longer! Oh! oh! how can you all leave me here alone? How can you, how can you?"

These dolorous complaints, repeated at very short intervals and interlarded with despairing howls, were kept up by Andrew, with praiseworthy persistency.

But so far as any visible result was concerned, he might as well have held his peace. His cries fell apparently only on the apple trees around him, and the grass at his feet.

"Oh! do somebody help me, do somebody help me," he implored afresh, as the clock struck twelve, "I've been here for such hours."

He had been there for nearly two whole ones. For it was a little past ten when Mr. Busson, with his assistant Ned—who had thoroughly enjoyed the job—had completed the new sort of bee-hive, and gone in search of spectators.

This time, Andrew bellowed so loudly that he did bring Mr. Busson on to the scene.

"Now look here, sonny," he said, "I told you to keep quiet, didn't I? What do you mean then by carrying on this way? Chances are I'd have let you out, if you'd behaved yourself, but I shan't now, you'll have to bide there, till sun-down or moon-rise, may be, if I hear any more of that hollering."

Nevertheless, when he had turned his back on the orchard, Busson went straight to the back-door, and called for Libbie.

"She ain't here, Master," said Polly, the odd girl.

"Well, you'll do. Just you tell her that I've gone to the sale over at Warren's, but say that I leave it to her to look after that young master down in the orchard. If he keeps pretty quiet, she can let him out in another hour, but not any sooner, mind you that."

"All right, Master," said Polly, "I don't expect that Libbie will be in much of a hurry about it, the longer he is kept out of mischief the better, she will think."

"Well, remember to tell her, any way."

"Oh! I'll remember," said Polly, and straightway forgot all about it.

And little wonder! Presently no one in the household—not even Mrs. Busson who had wept over Andrew's punishment; not even Nanny, who had so carefully planned it—had a thought to bestow on the culprit in the orchard.

For Dr. Forbes had paid his visit, and his verdict on Diana's condition had filled everyone with grief and dismay. She was so much worse after her restless, suffering night, and her temperature was so high, that it was impossible to say if she would recover from the effect of the terrible shock that her whole system had sustained.

At any rate, Mrs. Durand must be summoned at once.

"Lose no time in wiring for her," the doctor had said, as he left, promising to return towards evening.

"Poor lady, poor Miss Agatha," sighed Mrs. Busson, "to think of all the trouble she has had already, losing the Colonel when Miss Marygold wasn't out of long clothes, and then for this to happen now, and to think that she's away in Edinburgh, and that she can't get here before to-morrow morning at earliest."

Thus it happened that it was not till after the doctor had paid his evening visit, in the course of which, he chanced to ask if Andrew had been much stung, that Mrs. Busson remembered the latter's existence.

"That child has never been left all this time in the orchard," she cried, rushing back into the house. "Surely someone has seen to him."

"Oh! good me!" exclaimed conscience-stricken Polly, "I clean forgot to tell Libbie to let him go, and now it's past six."

"Why the poor lad must be half dead," cried Mrs. Busson, "fly to him Polly, do."

Polly's flight was a short one. In the backyard she met Ned.

"No need to trouble about he," said Ned, "the master let him out I believe before he started. He's down in the strawberry beds, as you can see for yourself," added Ned, putting aside some thick growing privet bushes, and pointing in the direction of the kitchen garden.

There sure enough was Andrew, cowering under the shelter of a big fir tree, which grew against the wall in a corner of the strawberry beds.

"He's mighty ashamed of himself, for he's doing his best to hide," laughed Polly, as she ran back to relieve Mrs. Busson's fears.

"Well, that is a comfort to be sure," sighed the poor old lady, "and now, mind Polly when the other children come home, don't say one word about poor Miss Di. The doctor says that there won't be much change to be looked for till to-morrow, and there'll be no good done by telling the poor dears the worst till one's obliged. They needn't know till to-morrow that we've sent for Miss Di's mamma."

And so, little guessing the dread shadow that was hanging over the Farm, the picnic party came merrily home; and though, as they entered the house, they lowered their tones lest they should disturb Diana, they never guessed

that she was far too ill to heed sounds of any sort.

"What has become of Andrew?" they asked, after their first questions about Di had been answered with suitable vagueness.

"Oh! he's all right," said Libbie, "I saw him an hour ago, he came to the larder and helped himself to a meat pasty and a bun. He didn't think that anyone saw him, but I let him go, for it was natural enough that he should feel shame-faced."

"Beastly mean of him though, to steal from the larder," said Phil.

"Poor beggar, I expect he was hungry," said the more merciful Jack.

"I wonder if he'll come to supper," speculated Hubert.

"Here he comes," said Phoena, as Andrew, emboldened by a call from Libbie, stole out from his hiding place, and came rather sheepishly to take his place at the supper-table.

"Where's Gaston?" asked Faith, "where has he been all day, Libbie?"

"Why, surely," answered Libbie, who was coming in with a dish, "he has been along with you all? He started with you."

"Yes, but he very soon ran home again," said Faith.

"He didn't run back here," said Libbie, "we've seen nothing of him all day."

"But then where did he have his dinner and tea?" asked Phil, in consternation. "Mrs. Busson," as the latter came into the room, "What has become of Gaston, no one has seen him since this morning?"

"Gracious alive, you don't mean to say that anything has happened to *him*?" cried poor Mrs. Busson; "what will come next?"

"Why, Andrew, how red you've got!" cried Jack, suddenly.

"Yes, you *are* red," echoed several voices, whilst all eyes were turned on Andrew's guilty face. "Oh! *you* know something about Gaston, that's quite clear."

"I asked—no—he wanted," faltered Andrew, "at least I went to look through the bushes, a long, long time ago and *it* was gone, he must—"

"Oh! I guess," cried Phoena, and in another minute she had dashed out of doors, across the garden, and on to the orchard, with all the others following her.

Yes, Andrew was right! *It* had gone! There was no monster bee-hive to be seen on the empty chair in the middle of the table mountain.

Only a cry of great dismay rang out on the still evening air, as Phoena was seen to sink on her knees and half disappear in the high grass.

For there at the foot of the hillock, a heap of straw lay motionless, whilst from under the straw, Gaston's little face, ghastly and drawn with suffering, looked out.

"Gaston! dear, dear little Gaston, do speak," implored Phoena.

The lips moved, but no sound came from them.

"Do you see," cried Phoena, her eyes flashing indignantly through her tears, as she turned to follow Ruth and Libbie, who between them were tenderly carrying Gaston indoors, "do you see Andrew must have put him up there and got off himself."

"Did you, Andrew, did you?" asked the boys, closing round their cousin, who was making an attempt to run away.

"He—he heard me calling out, and he—he offered and—and—I only meant him to stand there just a minute whilst I rested, but—but I found that I couldn't get back again—and then—then I thought that he must have broken his promise to me and got away, because when I peeped through the bushes, ever so long ago, I—I didn't see the straw thing any more. Oh! don't—oh! don't, it wasn't my fault, it—oh! don't—oh! *don't*."

For Mr. Busson had seized Andrew by the arm and was brandishing his stick over his head.

"Well if ever I saw such a poor mean-spirited creature," he cried. "There, take him you boys and give him a sound thrashing between you," and with a rough shake, the farmer pushed Andrew towards his cousins.

But both Jack and Phil fell back from Andrew, as if by common consent.

"Touch him," they cried, in tones of unfeigned disgust, as if he were something loathsome, and unconsciously echoing poor Gaston's own words, "*Touch him!* ugh! licking's too good for him," and without another word they followed the girls into the house.

CHAPTER XXX.

"THE BESTEST BEST."

"WELL, now my dear Faith, do tell me as clearly as you can what has happened. I find poor Di dangerously ill, and Andrew shut up in deep disgrace, and I hear that all through Andrew's fault, the little French boy has broken his leg very badly. And whenever I ask for an explanation, it all seems to begin and end with a bee-room and a bee-hive. What does it all mean?"

It was poor Mrs. Durand who spoke.

She was tired out by her hurried journey from the North, and shocked by the disturbed condition in which she found Gaybrook Farm and all its inmates, and was really at her wit's ends to comprehend what chain of events could have resulted in these dire consequences.

"It all happened in this way," began Faith, with a heavy sigh. "Di found out that there was a mysterious door in the house, which no one had opened for about a hundred years. And as nobody would satisfy her curiosity as to what was in the room, and why it had been left closed so long, she determined to discover it for herself. So she and Andrew agreed to force open the door, and they chose the day when we had all gone to the fair to do it."

"And that door belonged to the bee-room, I suppose," said Mrs. Durand.

"Yes," answered Faith, who then went on to give Nanny's explanation concerning that wonderful hive of monster dimensions and of extraordinary long standing, and told how it had been the boast of the Bussons, from father to son, that no one should disturb those winged intruders.

"And you mean to tell me that those naughty children broke into that room," cried Mrs. Durand. "No wonder such terrible results followed."

"Indeed, they were terrible," said Faith. "Poor Libbie will talk of that afternoon for the rest of her life, I am sure. And oh, mother, you can't think how angry the farmer was, and what a bad time poor Mrs. Busson has had in consequence. That was why we thought that, after all, Andrew was very lucky to get off with no worse punishment than being dressed up in a monster bee-hive, and tied up to the flag-staff on the top of the mound in the orchard. Of course, it was dreadful to be made such a laughing stock to everyone, and it must have been very tiring and disagreeable altogether," went on Fay, entering more fully into various details of Andrew's form of punishment; "but," she wound up, "though it was hard on Andrew to be forgotten, and left to himself, it was too mean of him to make poor little Gaston stand up there in—"

"Oh, but Gaston did offer," broke in Phoena; "at least, this is what I make out happened from Gaston. He felt so sorry for Andrew, left behind in such dreadful disgrace, that he ran back from us, and went and hid in his favourite ditch, so that he might be within speaking distance of Andrew, and yet not be seen. Then it seems that when Andrew went on crying out so, and imploring that somebody would come and take his place, only just to keep the straw erection upright and visible, whilst he rested,—because, you see," explained Phoena, "Mr. Busson said, if he saw Andrew move, he would beat him—Gaston came out of his ditch, and offered to help him."

"Then did Gaston take his place in the bee-hive?" asked Mrs. Durand, "and so set Andrew free?"

"Yes," said Phoena, "the idea was that he should only stay there for just long enough to give Andrew time to stretch his legs, and rest for a few minutes; for Gaston said the weight of that straw was very tiring, and Andrew promised that if Gaston would undertake not to move from the chair, he would only just go round the orchard, and come back again, and set him free."

"And didn't Andrew keep his word?"

"No," said Phoena, "instead of minutes, he left Gaston standing there hour after hour, for he would not break his promise—Gaston wouldn't, I mean,—till at last, worn out with weariness, and want of food, he fell off the chair, and broke his leg."

"You see," explained Faith, "Gaston wasn't tied to the back of the chair, as the farmer had been careful to tie Andrew, so that he might have a support at his back; for when Gaston had set him free, Andrew was only in such a hurry to get off himself, that he did nothing for Gaston. So poor Gaston had nothing to lean against. Oh, mother, I am ashamed of Andrew, I am ashamed of him," wound up poor Fay, tearfully.

"The boys say that they will never speak to him again," said Phoena.

"None of you will have the chance of doing so for some time to come," said Mrs. Durand; "for I had already arranged for him to go to a tutor, in Edinburgh, where I hope he will be taught better ways, and now I shall telegraph to Sarah to come and fetch him away this very afternoon, and keep him with her at home, till I can settle for his journey north. It will depend on his behaviour there, if I allow him to come home at Christmas."

"It was a terrible pity," said Fay, "that he and Di ever thought of breaking into that room. Is it really true, mother, that yesterday the doctor thought that Di might never get better?"

"It is indeed," said Mrs. Durand, "and though he hopes now, that by God's mercy she may recover, Dr. Forbes says that it will be long before Di is quite well again. She has had a sharp lesson for her disobedience, which she will never forget all her life. And now, children, as regards poor, dear little Gaston, we must all think what we can do for him," added Mrs. Durand.

"He'll have to have the golden prize," cried Hubert, coming into the room, so as to catch the last words, "for we all agreed, didn't we? that the one who did the unselfishest thing, and the thing that hurt themselves the most, should be called the bestest of them all."

* * * * *

The pride of the summer was gone, as Mrs. Busson termed it. The harvest fields had been cleared, and the apple-gathering was about to begin, when the grand feast, which was to celebrate the achievements of the Knights of the Order of Good Intentions, was at last held.

Matters had turned out very differently from what they had expected, when the children had first planned it all.

Andrew was away in disgrace, and Gaston, though he made a brave show of being well again, was still on crutches, whilst as to Diana, with her white face, and closely-shaven head, she looked like nothing but a thin, pale ghost of the merry "scarlet-runner" of the earlier summer days. If the truth must be told, Di, who had not distinguished herself, especially either by her patience or gentleness during her illness, was never heard again to jeer about "pillow-case saints."

"Yes, it has all ended very differently from what we thought," said Faith; "and it seems so odd to think that by this time to-morrow every one of us will be far away from here, even Gaston."

For to Gaston's great joy, his favourite uncle was coming the next day to take him back to France, and the others were all leaving for home by the morning train.

To all, the end of their eventful visit to Gaybrook had come.

Of course, Gaston was the hero of the day.

Ever since his accident, the children had vied with each other in making much of him, whilst Jack and Phil had delighted Gaston beyond words, by declaring that there was not a fellow in their school who would have stuck more pluckily to his guns than Gaston had stuck to his bee-hive.

"And you are glad that you have won the golden prize, aren't you, Gaston; werry glad?" said Marygold,—she had claimed to sit next to him at the feast—"and you will be ever so proud to show it to your uncle."

"Ah, but," broke in Hubert, "you don't know everything yet," and he and Marygold laughed mysteriously.

For before that day was done, there was another surprise in store for Gaston. Another gift was to crown that

proud day.

This was revealed, when, at the end of the banquet, all the boys suddenly disappeared, and all the girls became too excited to be able to answer clearly Gaston's questions as to the boys' movements.

Presently they re-appeared, scampering across the paddock, Jack and Phil leading a little Welsh pony between them, with Hubert perched on its back.

"For it's saddled, and bridled, and shod, you see," cried Marygold, dancing round Gaston in wild delight, "and though it's not much bigger than Dragon, the watch-dog, it's dreffully strong, and goes very fast."

"And it's to go back with you to France," put in Hubert, "because, Phoena says, a real knight *must* have a steed." Gaston was beside himself with joy and astonishment.

Ever since he had seen the boys ride, the possession of a pony had been the theme of his wildest dreams, and now he could hardly trust his eyes and ears. It seemed as if the fairies, he still loved to believe in, had brought him the fulfilment of his dearest wish, straight from fairyland.

The weeks at Gaybrook had been mostly sad and sorrow-stained, but now this one golden day would gild all his memories of the English farm for ever.

"But, but," he cried, "who gives it me, who did think of it?"

"We have all joined together to get it for you," said Phil, "infants and all."

"And Andrew sent all his year's savings out of the bank," said Faith.

"Poor Andrew," said Gaston, deeply touched, "but—but how came the idea to your heads, how came it then?"

"How did you get the idea to help Andrew?" laughed Di.

"Oh, but that was quite different," said Gaston, "that came, because I did know so exactly, oh, so very exactly, what he was feeling."

"But then," asked Marygold, in genuine astonishment, "but then, Gaston, had you ever been tied up in a beehive?"

"No," said Gaston, simply, "but I had been lonely, too."

Typographical errors corrected by the etext transcriber:

she was nurse to years ago=> she was nurse two years ago {pg 2}

their natual protectors=> their natural protectors {pg 10}

Andrew annouced after dinner=> Andrew announced after dinner {pg 29}

to be ignominiously routed=> to be ignominiously routed {pg 46}

It you were one of our fellows at school=> If you were one of our fellows at school {pg 99}

hopping and and dancing a little=> hopping and dancing a little {pg 118}

Gaston dashed passed me=> Gaston dashed past me {pg 119}

Dalzant's Martha's contemptuous pity=> Delzant's Martha's contemptuous pity {pg 120}

pommes de terre sautées=> pommes de terre sautées {pg 120}

teasing was quite as merciless as the boys=> teasing was quite as merciless as the boys' {pg 130}

By this time, Di's curiosity=> By this time, Di's curiosity {pg 134}

you do know all about it quite well, you only pretending not to=> you do know all about it quite well, you are only pretending not to {pg 135}

There wouldn't be be much real=> There wouldn't be much real {pg 152}

said Lobbie=> said Libbie {pg 154}

It sound rather eerie, doesn't it?=> It sounds rather eerie, doesn't it? {pg 155}

cried Hubert and Marygold in one breadth=> cried Hubert and Marygold in one breath {pg 162}

These dorlorous plaints=> These dolorous plaints {pg 187}

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE FORBIDDEN ROOM; OR, "MINE ANSWER WAS MY DEED"

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