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[Frontispiece: Going to Barbara's Wedding]

Little Prudy Series -----

LITTLE PRUDY'S COUSIN GRACE

BY

SOPHIE MAY

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LITTLE PRUDY'S COUSIN GRACE

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COUSIN GRACE -----

CHAPTER I.

THE CUP AND SAUCER.

Grace Clifford and Katharine Hallock were such dear friends, and spent so much time together, that you could not think of one without thinking of the other, and people linked their names together, and spoke of "Grace and Cassy," just as one speaks of a "cup and saucer" or a "hook and eye."

Yet they were not in the least alike. There was something very eager and vivid about Grace, with her bright blue eyes, auburn curls, and brilliant color. She had an ecstatic way of laughing, and a wild, agonized way of weeping. She clapped her hands for joy, or wrung them for grief. Her tears fell in showers, but afterward the sun was sure to shine out clearly.

Cassy, on the other hand, was a gentle, brown-eyed little maiden, with long lashes sweeping her cheeks, and brown hair lying quietly behind her ears. She never stormed nor raved.

It was a very rare thing for the girls to disagree. They had such a dear love for each other that they decided never to marry, but to live together in a charming cottage adorned with woodbine, and keep chickens, pigeons and a cat.

At the beginning of our story they were nearly twelve years old, and closer friends than ever. They had exchanged rings as pledges of everlasting fidelity. The ring which Cassy gave Grace was set with gems—ruby, emerald, garnet, amethyst, ruby, and diamond—the initials spelling the word "Regard." This regard-ring had once belonged to Mrs. Hallock; but after being broken and mended it was too small for her, and she had given it to Cassy.

In exchange, Grace put on her friend's third finger a pretty emerald, which had been a good-by present from Mr. Augustus Allen.

One day in March these two Hoosier girls were walking hand in hand down Vine Street, where there was always a fine shade in the summer. Now the trees were leafless, and the bright sun shadowed forth little flickering pictures of their branches on the girls' shawls and hats.

"Why, Cassy Hallock," said Grace, shading her face with one hand, "this sun is bright enough to blind an eagle."

"But it doesn't blind *me*," laughed Cassy. "I can almost look at it without winking."

"Then you must be a half-eagle, Cassy. Why, you don't mind the weather, or any of the bothers! You never fly out of patience! O, Cassy Hallock, I think you're splendid!"

As this was not the first time Cassy had been eulogized as "splendid," she was by no means astonished, but continued to move quietly along, with her usual composure. Grace Clifford seemed a little nervous. Every now and then she would drop her friend's hand, and gather a few blades of grass, or pick up a pebble, then seize Cassy's hand again, and walk on. Cassy watched her companion with some curiosity. "Now, Gracie Clifford," said she at last, "you're keeping something to yourself; I just know you are."

"What if I am?" said Grace, tossing an orange into the air and catching it as it fell; "I needn't tell you every single thing, Cassy!"

"Yes, you must, Gracie Clifford," was the firm reply. "I'm your dearest friend, and am I not going off next week visiting?"

"Well, I've nothing to tell, any way, but just thoughts," said Grace, pocketing her orange, and taking Cassy's hand again, while they each hopped on one foot like happy little robins. "I've a great many thoughts whizzing in my mind all the time, Cassy. I've been thinking lately about— I mean, I've been wishing, for ages and ages, that I'd been born a boy; but it's silly, and so I never say it."

"Why, Gracie Clifford, I've heard you say it five hundred times! I'd as soon be a girl, because I *am*, and there's the end of it."

"But to grow up and be a woman!" said Grace, with a shudder. "Do you ever think of the wrinkles, and the cross kitchen girls, and the children that have to cut their teeth? And you can't sleep nights; and then they won't let you vote!"

"I don't want to vote, Gracie; what would *I* vote for?"

"O, child! For union and liberty, and all the good things. Don't you go to encouraging slavery, Cassy!"

"No," laughed Cassy, "I won't."

"And don't let such swearing people as Mr. Blake go to Congress. But there, *you* can't help it, Cassy; *you* never'll vote, neither will I. And there's Horace, —what do you suppose that boy cares about politics? But *he'll* vote fast enough."

"O, yes," chimed in Cassy, beginning to grow indignant, "only because he's a boy!"

"And he'll come to me, Horace will, just as likely as not, Cassy, and I'll have to tell him which way to vote."

The girls looked rather scornful as they pictured to themselves an imaginary Horace, tall and twenty-one, anxiously inquiring of his sister what ticket he should throw into the ballot-box.

"Now, you see," said Grace, "it's very absurd to make a fuss that way over boys. They feel it. It sets them up on a throne."

"O, yes, I reckon it does, Gracie. Isn't it right funny now to look at boys, and see the airs they put on?"

"It is *so*," said Grace, sweeping back her curls with a gesture of disdain. "There's their secret societies, Cassy."

"Yes, Gracie, and I don't approve of any such goings on. Johnny looks so wise and important! How I wish I knew what it's all about!"

"Why, Cassy, I wouldn't know if I could. I'd scorn to care."

"So would *I* scorn to care," replied Cassy, quickly. "O, of course! It's of no account, you might know."

"What vexes me, Cassy, is the way they look down on us girls, and boast that they can keep secrets and we can't, when it's no such a thing, Cassy Hallock, as you and I very well know—we that have kept secrets for years and years, and never, never told, and never will to our dying days!"

Cassy nodded her head emphatically, implying that words could not do justice to the subject.

"Cassy, dear, you asked me, a little while ago, what I was thinking about; and now I'll tell you. I've been wondering if we mightn't get up a secret society our own selves!"

Cassy stopped short, laughed, and said, "Capital!" forgetting that not five minutes before she had expressed contempt for such "goings on." "How many girls will we have, Gracie?"

"Why, our graduating class, that's seven. We don't go much with the other girls, you know. I'm so glad you like the idea, Cassy! and, now you do, I'm going to have it. I've just made up my mind!"

"But suppose the others don't approve?"

"O, pshaw, Cassy! that's of no sort of consequence! What you and I think *they'll* think—all but Isa Harrington, and we'll soon manage her."

"Well," replied Cassy, drawing a long breath, "don't let's walk quite so fast, Gracie, we'll be at the schoolhouse before we know it, and you and I must have everything arranged between us. What name, Gracie?"

"What think of calling ourselves Princesses of the— the— some kind of a seal? The seal must be

golden, or diamond, or something else that's precious."

"The Ruby Seal," suggested Cassy.

"O, that's it, dear! Our *lips* are the ruby seal, Cassy, and never, never will they open to utter the secrets of our order. We'll promise to love, honor and protect one another as long as we all shall live. Our motto will be, "*Vera ad finem*." I suppose you don't know what that means, Cissy; but it's "*true to the end*," Robin says."

"I've only one thing to say," interrupted Cassy; "this mustn't make any difference between you and me, Gracie; we'll be good friends enough with the others, but—"

"Yes, Cassy, good friends enough; but it's you and I that are the *dear* friends. We'll be "*vera*" —that's *true* —to the others, but never the least speck intimate. But hush! Here we are at the schoolhouse. Don't you breathe a word, you know, Cassy! We'll take our seats just as sober as if nothing had happened!"

CHAPTER II

THE RUBY SEAL.

The graduating class of the Girls' Grammar School comprised seven young misses, of whom Grace Clifford was the youngest, though by no means the most timid and retiring. They all met on Saturday afternoon at Mrs. Hallock's to talk over the new project.

The vote was unanimous in favor of the Ruby Seal. Isabel Harrington opposed it for a while, it is true; but this may possibly have been because she was not the very first one consulted.

"Now," said Grace, when she saw that, as usual, Cassy expected her to manage affairs, "here I sit with pencil and paper; and now we'll pass resolutions, if you please. I'm secretary."

"First place," said Isabel Harrington, with a toss of the head, "I'd like to ask what's the good of a society, any way?"

"What's the good?" repeated Grace; "ahem! it's to— to— make us better, of course."

"Then mightn't we pass one resolution to read the Bible?" asked gentle Mahla Linck, the lame girl, whom everybody loved.

"Yes, we will, we will!" cried every voice.

"It's a vote," said Grace, writing down: "We hereby solemnly pledge ourselves to read two chapters in the Bible daily."

"And say our prayers," suggested Mahla again.

"O, that's all understood," replied Grace. "I'd be ashamed to put that down. It looks like we could ever forget our prayers!"

"Now," said Judith Pitcher, "I move we forbid the use of all unladylike words."

This vote was passed.

The next was against falsehoods of every hue, from little white lies up to the big black ones.

"We mustn't talk about 'oceans of tears,' and 'biting our tongues out,' I suppose," said Isabel, demurely, but with a sly glance at the secretary.

"That means me," said Grace, blushing. "And now," continued she, pausing and looking at Cassy, who would not speak for her, "—now let's all agree never— never to be married. If that be your minds, please to manifest it."

The girls looked astonished.

"I've been reading Mythology," pursued Grace, "and some of the nicest goddesses and nymphs didn't marry — Diana, and Minerva, and Clytie, and Sappho."

"We're not goddesses and nymphs, I hope," said Diademia Jones, shaking her head.

"Nor heathens," added Isa, with spirit.

"O, no; but if ladies want to be very great, and do oceans of good, and write poems and everything, why, they mustn't be married. You see how it is, girls; there's so much housekeeping and sewing to attend to."

"But, then," added Lucy Lane, mournfully, "if we're not married, we'll be—old maids!"

"O, no, indeed," said Grace, positively. "Why, if you're great and splendid, you never will—no such a thing! Maria Edgeworth was splendid, and she never was an old maid that ever I heard of. And there was—"

"Grace Greenwood," suggested Cassy, in the tone of one who has added the finishing stroke to an argument.

But the girls exclaimed,—*"Why, Grace Greenwood is married; what are you talking about? There, there, people can be married, and be splendid, too."*

Grace felt that her cause had received a blow.

"Now, girls," said she, after a pause, "I'll tell you how it is. Grace Greenwood was married a long while ago. If she was a little girl now, and saw such acting boys, she'd say, 'It's an awful thing!' Why, girls, I think, for my part," Grace went on with much dignity, "we lower ourselves, we degrade ourselves, when we associate with boys. They smoke, and chew, and use very improper language. It does seem to me we're white lilies, and they're nothing but—but thistles. Let's faithfully promise not to converse with boys, —unless it's to try and reform them, you know."

"Our brothers," urged soft-voiced Lucy Lane, timidly.

"Yes, our brothers," murmured the other girls.

"And our cousins, you know," added dashing Diademia Jones.

No one was quite so enthusiastic over this non-marrying resolve as Grace had expected; still, the vote was passed with much solemnity, the girls resigning themselves to the prospect of single lives like a little band of heroines. They were now certain of becoming distinguished, and might be doctors, judges, or ministers, just as they liked, though, as Grace very justly remarked, they need be in no haste about choosing professions.

It was decided that Grace should be queen of the Ruby Seal Society. The girls bound themselves to one another by solemn pledges, and if any member should, by word or deed, do anything to the injury of a princess, the offender was to be expelled at once. The name, and even the existence, of the society must be kept a profound secret. They agreed that a lecture should be delivered once a month, the queen leading off, and the princesses following in turn, according to ages.

Isa Harrington tried to pass a resolution against any two members of the society being especially intimate, and setting themselves up for "particular friends." She was quite eloquent upon this resolution, but was frowned into silence by Grace, who would have cried, "Down with the Ruby Seal," sooner than she would have given up Cassy for an intimate friend.

The society broke up mutually pleased, every one of the princesses sealing the compact with a kiss, and parting with the password for the month, "*Vera*." The only discontented face was Isa's, and her handsome eyes darkened with jealousy as she looked back and saw that Grace lingered, talking with Cassy. What was there about Cassy Hallock so very remarkable? For Isa's part, she couldn't see that she was better than other folks! Ah, Isa Harrington, look out for that tiny serpent of jealousy. Crush it before it grows to a monster.

[Illustration: Grace and Cassy]

Grace and Cassy walked slowly along, their arms about each other's waists, chatting socially, and making the most of the time, for Cassy was to go to Kentucky next week. There are few things more pure and delightful than the mutual friendship of two good little girls. Isa Harrington, to be sure, did not think so, but her jealousy was not more than half suspected by Grace and Cassy.

The Cliffords lived a little way out of town, and their beautiful grounds were soon in full view. The broad lawn, enclosed by a trimly-cut hedge, was now of a sleepy brown, in harmony with the freestone house which stood on a terrace overlooking the clusters of evergreen trees and well-trained shrubbery. On the other side of the house was a conservatory filled with choice flowers, and beyond that the cottage of Mr. Sherwood, the English gardener.

The girls parted at their trysting-place, the "acorn-tree," and Grace walked the rest of the way alone, musing upon the glorious destiny which awaited the distinguished Miss Clifford in the rosy future.

When within a few steps of the gate, she saw her mother coming from Mr. Sherwood's cottage in apparent haste. There was evidently some cause of disturbance, for every member of the Sherwood family ran out of the house, one after another, followed by Barbara Kinkle, with her apron over her head.

"What *is* the matter," cried Grace, rushing into the yard in breathless haste.

"Nothing much," replied Barbara, trying to speak calmly. "Your brother has only been and lost himself. But don't you have no fears, Miss Grace; he never did go and fall in the river."

Every particle of color fled from Grace's face. She forgot that Horace belonged to the condemned race of "awful boys." The bare possibility that he might be drowned was too horrible!

"O, Barby," she cried out. "O, Mr. Sherwood, run for the river."

And for her own part, she ran round and round in a maze, wringing her hands, peeping under the hedge, examining the gravel path, and all the places where Horace certainly could not be, even if he had tried to conceal himself. Mr. Sherwood and his wife had gone to the river.

"It is, perhaps, a foolish alarm," said Mrs. Clifford, pacing the yard. "Horace asked me to let him go, with some other boys, shooting squirrels, but I said *No*, very decidedly. I cannot think Horace would disobey me so."

"Hurrah!" shouted a boyish voice from the house. "Here is the runaway, safe and sound. Please come here, Mrs. Clifford, if you want to see a curiosity."

Mrs. Clifford, Grace, and Barbara went up stairs with hearts wonderfully lightened.

"Further yet," said Robert Sherwood's voice from a distance.

Ascending the fourth flight of stairs, they entered the square, unfinished room called the Observatory. Here sat the boy who had caused this anxiety, surrounded by a chaos of tools, blocks of wood, pieces of tin, and coils of rope.

"Now, there!" cried he, bending his elbows into acute angles, and trying to hide his work in his leather apron. "What made you come in my shop? My pa said—"

"My son," said Mrs. Clifford, trying not to smile at the boy's perplexed gestures and eager attempts to put things out of sight, "if you had only told us you kept shop in the roof of the house, we would have been spared this needless alarm."

"Yes, Horace Clifford," said Grace, loftily, "I do despise to see anyone so secret and mysterious."

"I wonders we didn't think he was whittling sticks some-place," said Barbara, glancing admiringly at Horace.

"Well, now you know," said the boy, fidgeting. "You've found me, and I wasn't lost; now can't you go off?"

"Pretty talk to your ma," cried Grace.

"O, ma, I don't mean you. But I just don't want anybody to see this thing I'm making till it's plum done."

"Plum done!" repeated Grace; "where did you pick up such droll words? and why will you twist your mouth so, Horace?"

The boy threw down his jackknife with a jerk of despair.

"There, now, can't you go away?—I mean you and Barby. 'Tisn't fair play. This is my own shop-room, and my pa said I could keep my tool-chest in it, and there shouldn't anybody—"

But Horace found himself talking to empty air, for his visitors had disappeared. He unrolled his leather apron, removed the bit of straw matting from sundry boards, and gazed at them fondly, muttering, "Too good for Gracie, now, isn't it, when she blows me up so?" But for all that, he set to work again till it was so dark that he could not see to guide his jackknife; when he went downstairs, declaring—to use his own words—that he "was hungry enough to eat ginger."

Phebe, the little colored girl, who, during all the excitement about Horace, had been obliged to stay in the nursery with the baby, was glad now to wash dishes for Barbara, and pour into her ears complaints of wee Katie, who was, she said, "a right cross one—as cross as two hundred sticks."

Barbara listened in indignant silence, only asking at last, "What for a baby would she be now, if she goes to cut her teeth and doesn't cry?"

"Bravo! Chalk Eyes," cried Horace, suddenly rushing out upon Phebe, "none of your grumbling."

"O, Horace," whispered Grace, reprovingly, "hush saying Chalk Eyes. Haven't you any feeling for poor *discolored* creatures?"

"Poh, Gracie! *Niggroes* don't feel any worse than we do. Come, let's play catch."

They played till they were called into the parlor to learn their Sabbath school lessons.

Grace's last waking thought was about the new society. Who knew but they might some day build a little asylum for poor children? People would wonder and admire. Well, nobody should know a word about it yet,—not for a year and a day. Just as if girls couldn't keep secrets! And Grace at last dropped to sleep with her finger on her lip.

CHAPTER III.

THE PRIZE.

The princesses quite enjoyed their stolen meetings and their mysterious signs. O, how little the world suspected that they were keeping weighty secrets! So surprised as the world would be if the princesses only had a mind to tell!

It was evident that Isabel was more interested as soon as Cassy Hallock had gone away to Kentucky. Then there was no rivalry, for Isa was sure that she stood next to Cassy in Grace Clifford's esteem.

But an event soon occurred which caused the Ruby Seal to sink into comparative insignificance. The graduating class walked home from school one evening, looking, one and all, as if they had something on their minds. They were talking of a prize which had been promised to the best scholar at close of school. Judith Pitcher, the girl with long features and melancholy eyes, looked discouraged. Diademia Jones, who usually wore a Berlin iron breastpin, which looked like an ink-blot, pouted, and said she wouldn't try: what did she care? Weak little Lucy Lane was nervous, and declared, if she hadn't staid home and got behind in her lessons, she might try; but, as it was, she didn't call it quite fair.

All agreed it was a pity that Cassy Hallock should be away; they wondered her ma would allow her to go visiting in the midst of the term.

One little girl, with bright and animated face, listened to all these remarks, but said nothing herself.

Grace Clifford and Isabel Harrington were walking together, hand in hand. This was not quite to Grace's fancy. If she might have had her way, she would hardly have joined hands with any one but Cassy, certainly not with Isa, who was not a particular favorite of hers.

They happened to be walking directly behind Mahla Linck and Diademia Jones. Diademia, or Di, as she was called, was saying, "I reckon you'll get the prize, Mahla, dear. I'm sure I hope so."

A pink color flushed Mahla's pale cheeks, and she looked very eager, but said, sadly,—

"No use, Di. I could, perhaps, if it wasn't for Gracie Clifford; but she's so smart in arithmetic she'll get it. O, I'm sure she will."

And as Mahla spoke she seemed to lean more helplessly on her crutch, and to limp more painfully than ever. She little knew that every word she spoke was overheard by Grace Clifford, and was sinking deep into her heart.

Mahla was a gentle, studious girl, pitied by every one for her incurable lameness, and beloved for the sweet patience with which she bore her great sufferings. It was certainly Grace's intention, and had been ever since the promise of a prize, to try for it; but when she heard Mahla's hopeless words she was grieved, and felt an impulse to rush forward and throw her arms about the poor girl's neck, and say, "Now don't be afraid of me, Mahla. I'll not stand in your way."

But this impulse Grace checked at once. In the first place, it would have been a silly parade of

sentiment, she thought; and, in the second place, ambition was a strong feature in Grace's character; she could not, without a struggle, give up the hope of a prize.

By this time she and Isabel had crossed the street, and heard nothing more that passed between Mahla and her companion.

"Well, Gracie, dear," said Isa, "I'd be ashamed, if I was Di Jones, to talk about Mahla Linck's getting this prize, when Di knows well enough Mahla isn't half so good a scholar as you are."

"O, but she is, though, Isa," said Grace, faintly. "Mahla's very studious, very, indeed."

"Studious? Yes, she stays in from recess because she can't play. Now, if Cassy was here, she'd try for the prize—wouldn't she, Gracie?"

"I dare say—I don't know."

"Well, she's the last person to be afraid of," said Isa, sharply. She could never speak of Cassy without a feeling akin to anger. The thought of the tender friendship which existed between Grace and Cassy was like gall and wormwood to the unhappy, jealous little girl.

"Why, Isa, to hear you talk, one would think that Cassy was dull! I'm sure Cassy's smart!"

"O, dear me," said Isa, "how you do take a body up! I said Cassy's the last person to be afraid of,—I mean for you to be afraid of. She's smart, Cassy is; but then everybody knows, Gracie, she isn't so smart as you are, and don't begin to be."

"I'd like to know," thought Grace, as she parted with Isa, and walked from the acorn-tree alone,—"I'd just like to know what does possess Isa to be so spiteful about Cassy! I wish that darling old Cassy was here this minute! I don't see what I did without her all last summer, when I was east!"

"Ma," cried Grace, rushing into the parlor, swinging her hat by one string, "just guess what a splendid thing has happened! The three live trustees were all in school this day, and you never saw the like of the way they smiled and patted us on the head, ma! And they're going to give a beautiful prize to the one that improves most between this and July, and passes the best examination for the High School, you know."

"Indeed, and shall you try for it, my dear?"

"I don't know, ma," replied Grace, with quivering lips; for just at that moment Mahla's words, "Grace Clifford will get it; I'm sure she will," came back and rang in her ears.

Mrs. Clifford saw that something was troubling her daughter, but refrained from asking any questions. She always preferred that Grace should confide in her of her own free will.

"I don't know, my child," said she, "that I can say I am glad of this project."

"But wouldn't you be proud to have me get it—not the least bit proud, ma?"

Mrs. Clifford smiled meaningly.

"O, no, ma; not exactly *proud*; pleased and gratified, I mean."

"You always gratify me, my child, when you do your best. As for your excelling your schoolmates, why should I care for you to do that?"

Grace thought her father would not listen to her story as coolly as her mother had done.

"What's this I hear about a prize?" said he that evening. And Grace grew quite eager again, describing the benevolent looks and manners of the trustees, and declaring that the prize must be something elegant, everybody said. "But how did *you* hear of it, pa?"

"Your head trustee and I talked the matter over yesterday."

"You didn't approve of it, Henry?" asked Mrs. Clifford, looking surprised.

"I did, Maria; why not? Dear knows there's need enough of ambition in our schools."

"But, Henry, I don't like children to strive so hard to outdo one another. Don't you think prizes are likely to awaken envy and ill-feeling?"

Grace listened with her eager mind all awake. She very well knew that on such a question a little

girl's opinion is worth nothing; still it seemed strange that her mamma could talk of "envy and ill feeling" in the same breath with the Girls' Grammar School. Mrs. Clifford, however, did not know of the Ruby Seal, which had united the girls in such strong bonds of friendship that it would never be possible for a trifle like this to part them.

Captain Clifford settled himself into his dressing-gown and slippers. "I know," said he, "there are various opinions with regard to giving prizes; but so far as my own experience goes, they are real helps to industry. Begging your pardon, Maria, I highly approve of anything that quickens the ambition."

Grace's eyes shone.

"Yes," continued Captain Clifford, stroking his daughter's hair, "and if our Grace can win the prize, I'll promise to give her a handsome present to go with it."

Grace gave a little scream of delight. "O, pa," cried she, throwing her arms about Captain Clifford's neck, "you're just the greatest darling! I do believe nobody else ever had such a father."

Mrs. Clifford looked at her little girl's flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, and feared a sleepless night for her. "Remember this, Gracie," said she, gently: "'The reward is in the race we run, not in the prize.' Do your best, and then never mind who wins."

Grace laughed nervously.

"Ma doesn't care a speck," she thought. "You can't get ma eager about anything; but pa cares. O, dear me, won't I work hard just for the sake of pleasing pa!"

It occurred to Grace that she must write at once to Cassy, and tell her what Mahla had said. Those mournful words, "Grace will get it," haunted her. It seemed to the child that she could not press forward and gain the prize without walking right over Mahla's heart. So Grace seated herself at the centre-table, and opened her little writing-desk; when her father, who had been quietly reading to himself, suddenly exclaimed, "Really, Maria, this is horrible," and began to read aloud an account of the last battle.

When Grace heard any mention of the war, she either stopped her ears or ran away. Now she hastily gathered up her writing materials, and went into the kitchen, where Barbara sat with her unflinching black knitting-work. Barbara was very glad to have her tidy premises honored with a visit, and insisted upon bringing an arm-chair out of the dining-room for her guest.

Grace seated herself at the kitchen table, which was as white as it could be scoured; but scarcely had she smoothed out her paper and written "Darling old Cassy," when Horace appeared in the door-way, making mysterious signals to Barbara. What could the boy mean? The good, foggy-brained German girl was sorely puzzled,—did not know the deaf and dumb alphabet, and could never take a hint.

"Come here, then, Barby," cried the boy; "I'll make you '*ferstand*.'"

"So I'm the one in the way," said Grace, quickly; "you're so mightily mysterious, all of a sudden, Horace!"

"Good evening, Grace," said Robert Sherwood, appearing at the door; "what about the prize?"

"O, dear, I don't know, Robin."

"What think I heard? That the trial would lie between two of you girls—Grace Clifford and Mahla Linck."

Grace flushed to the temples.

Then other people thought that, as well as the school-girls.

"What are you doing, Grace?" said Horace, returning from the dining-room, and eying his sister's writing-desk with some curiosity.

"Writing a letter, or trying to," replied Grace, flourishing her pen nervously in the air.

"Why is your letter like the equator?" said Robert.

"Equator? Don't know. Can't stop to guess conundrums."

"Because it's only an imaginary line."

"My letter? O, Robin, how smart! It always will be imaginary, I reckon, while you boys stand there

looking at me. Do, please, let me alone!"

"O, good by, South Carolina," said Robert, bowing. "I'm off."

"Good by, Car'line," echoed little Horace, with a patronizing sweep of his thumb.

Grace returned to her writing, her feelings still somewhat ruffled. She had proceeded as far as "I want to see you more than tongue can tell," when Horace burst into the room again with a second message to Barbara.

"Is there, or is there not, a place in this house where a body can go to write a letter?" cried Grace, rising and pushing back her paper. But her remark was unheeded. Barbara and Horace went on whispering together, and seemed to be enjoying their little secret, whatever it might be.

Grace's nerves were quivering from the day's excitement. "I'm not cross," thought she. "O, no, not cross; but I'd like to give that boy a good shaking. It's not my temper, it's my 'nervous system.' The doctor said my nervous system was torn to pieces by the chills."

Grace would never forget this unfortunate remark of her physician. But she was a sensible girl, and it suddenly occurred to her that her "nervous system" could never go to scolding unless she opened her mouth. Bitter, sharp words sprang to her tongue; but if her tongue was only "kept between her teeth," the words couldn't fly out. "I'll just 'lock my lips,'" mused Grace, "for, as ma says, 'A spoken word no chariot can overtake, though it be drawn by four swift horses.'"

Tedious little Horace at last made an end of his story, and left the kitchen whistling either Dixie or Yankee Doodle, no mortal could tell which; for out of Horace's mouth they were one and the same thing. Barbara seated herself, and resumed her knitting. She usually nodded over that black stocking as drowsily as if it had been a treatise on philosophy, or something quite as stupid; but to-night she was painfully wide awake.

"O, my patience!" thought Grace; "can't she look at anything but me?"

There by the stove sat the glaring white kitty, staring at Grace with winking eyelids, and on the mantel stood the clock ticking at her, and in the corner sat Barby clicking needles at her; every tick and every click seeming to go through Grace's ears like percussion caps.

"Miss Grace," said Barbara, picking up a stitch, "be you writin' to Susy Parlin?"

"No, Barby," replied Grace, frowning at her paper.

Barbara went on with her knitting, the clock went on with its ticking, and the cat still stared at Grace. Presently Barbara dropped another stitch. "Miss Grace," said she, "does you write to little Prudy Parlin?"

"No, Barby; to Cassy. But seems to me you're amazingly wide awake."

"Yes, dear; I doesn't feel sleepy a bit."

Sharp words were on Grace's tongue again; but she said gently, after a pause,— "Barby, will you please not talk? It troubles me."

"Bless your little white heart," cried Barby, turning about, and putting her feet on the stove hearth, "not a word more will I speak." Grace felt quieted. She had fought against her "nervous system," and conquered a peace. Now, for the first time, she could write, and forget clocks, cats, and knitting-needles in her subject. She told Cassy just what her father said, what her mother said, and how "there never was anything she wanted so much as that splendid prize."

Then she spoke of Mahla Linck, and asked Cassy to be sure and write what she thought about her. Would it be a shame to try to get ahead of a poor lame girl? Why need one mind Mahla more than the other princesses? Hadn't one a right to push by all that came in one's way?

Somehow Grace did not wish to tell her mother of the strife going on in her mind. "Ma wouldn't care a picayune about my winning," thought she; "she'd say, 'Give it up to the little German.' Ma is almost too good to live. But pa cares about it; O, I can see that pa cares very much."

Grace's mind was settling itself. By writing the facts in black and white they had become clearer to her. Now she was fully decided what course to take about Mahla. She wrote till nine o'clock, then signed herself, "Yours, like everything—Gracie."

"Now, Barby," said she, "yon may talk as much as you please, for I've no more writing to do. Much obliged to you for keeping so still."

Barby laughed in high good humor, and going into the pantry, brought out a funny little table, about a foot and a half long. It was a miniature extension table, of black walnut, freshly polished with sweet oil. Grace clapped her hands, screaming with delight.

"Why, where did this come from? Just what I've wanted for my dining-room department, Barby, ever since I had my cabinet!"

Barbara took out the inside leaves, making an oval centre-table.

"O, so cunning! Whose is it, Barby? I haven't felt like I could give dinner parties for my enormous doll on that tea-poy—it's too tall."

Barbara laughed quietly, by and by telling Grace that this new article of furniture was hers, made on purpose for her by Horace. Grace could hardly believe it, for even a small extension table requires much mechanical skill.

"O, but he has worked at it all the days for so long!" said Barbara, who was extremely proud of Horace.

Upon inquiry, she confessed that he had been to see the "tischler" (joiner) "two times," and that Robin had helped him a little.

"O, where's Horace?" cried Grace; "I want to see him this minute, to thank him for my beautiful present."

"Sound abed and asleep," replied the German girl, yawning.

When had Barby been known to sit up so late? Faithful creature, she had kept her sleepy eyes open for the sake of presenting this pretty table to Grace; for, as she said, "I just does like to hear her laugh!"

"Deary me," thought Grace, "if I'd spoken up pettishly when she bothered me so, I'd want to bite my tongue out! Reckon I know of something as good for my 'nervous system' as quinine; and that's *patience*."

CHAPTER IV.

A SNAKE IN THE GRASS.

Next morning, when Barbara was building the kitchen fire, she heard the sound of small boots, and, looking up, saw Horace, who had run down stairs in such haste that as yet he had put on but one sleeve of his jacket.

"Ho, Barby!"—Horace considered it a waste of breath to say "good morning,"—"what were the first words she said?"

"Let's me think," replied Barby, with an air of deep reflection.

"'Where did this thing came from?' Them's the first words she said."

"That all? Poh! If I'd known that, I wouldn't have touched to make it! Did you tell her Ike Davis couldn't? and he's learned the joiner's trade, too."

"There, now, if I didn't forget to say dat!"

"Why, Barby, I wouldn't have thought that of you, now!"

"But she liked it. She was just as pleased."

"Pleased, was she? Did she clap her hands?"

"Yes; clapped 'em hard, she did, and laughed."

"Will she put it in her cabinet, think, Barby?"

"O, yes; she said it's what she did always want."

Horace's face brightened like the moon sailing out of a cloud. Grace's cabinet held nothing but choice articles, and was kept as orderly as a paper of pins.

"See here, Barby; you needn't tell Gracie I asked you any questions."

When the children met that morning, Grace threw her arms about her brother's neck,—

"O, Horace, dear, there never was anything so nice as my little dining-table."

"Poh!" exclaimed the boy, dipping, swallow-like, this way and that, to avoid a kiss.

"Why, you dear little brother, mayn't I kiss you for thanks?" said the affectionate sister, trying to find a spot on his face which was not in motion. She succeeded at last in touching his forehead with her lips.

"There, *once'll* do," said Horace, impatiently; for he considered kissing an amiable weakness, and only submitted to it as a painful duty.

"O, pshaw!" said he; "such a fuss over just nothing!"

And this was all the remark he would deign to make concerning a piece of work which must have cost him many days of hard labor. Still, he was proud of his success, and for a long while afterward felt the keenest delight in seeing that table brought out for exhibition to visitors, or standing in a corner adorned with his sister's work-box.

Grace had a bright face this morning, as Mrs. Clifford noticed at once. She sent her letter to the post-office by her father, then had a frolic with Horace, who was rather "wildish," and with little Katie, who, for a wonder, did not appear to be cutting a tooth that morning, and was "as cunning as a baby can be and live."

As Grace entered the school-room, she met Mahla Linck, whose white face warmed to a glow at her friendly greeting.

"She's the girl that thinks it's of no use to try for the prize," thought Grace. "Poor thing, I'll soon make her understand that she needn't be afraid of Grace Clifford."

The school was called to order, and the teacher, a tall, fine-looking young lady, began to read the morning lesson in the New Testament. A part of the beautiful Sermon on the Mount was repeated by teacher and pupils. When they came to the words, "Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so to them," Grace involuntarily glanced across the room to Mahla, who sat resting her head on her hand. Such a hand! You could trace its veins as easily as the blue lines in white paper. Her pale hair shone in the sun like threads of gold.

Grace's eyes were fixed on the little girl with a sort of fascination. If anything could be done to help poor Mahla, she would do it. What though by helping her she should lessen her own chance of the prize? Never mind. Hadn't Christ made the Golden Rule? Grace had fought out the battle with herself the night before. She had put her hand to the plough, and would not look back.

When recess-time came, Mahla had no heart for play, but kept her seat, still vexing herself over a question in analysis, which was buried in a fog.

Grace watched her with real pity. It was almost unaccountable, she thought, how any one who had ever studied "Colburn's Mental" could be puzzled by anything in analysis. But Grace was a natural mathematician, and Mahla was not.

When school was over at noon, the pale young German girl still sat biting her slate pencil, and pressing one colorless hand upon her throbbing temples.

"Now, what is it, Mahla?" said the sweet voice of Grace Clifford, as she came and leaned over her friend's shoulder, her face covered with smiles. "I do believe you're puzzling over the same thing that vexes everybody so to-day. Want me to show you just a speck? For you'll catch the headache, Mahla, if you think so hard."

Mahla gave a sigh of relief.

"I don't know, Gracie; things seem to spin round and round; I can't get a start."

[Illustration: Grace helping Mahla.]

"Let's look at it, Mahla. Do piece work—three men—how many days? It's that same old firm of A, B, and C. How long suppose they've been in company? I just believe they set up a shop in the ark?"

Mahla laughed a little, the first time for that day; and it did her good. "Well, now, if those old patriarchs A, B, and C—" But we will not follow Grace in her explanation. She never wearied till Mahla's eyes brightened, and she cried out, "O, how stupid! Why couldn't I see that before? You make things so clear! You do beat everything in arithmetic, Gracie!"

Then Mahla laid aside her slate and book with a smile of heartfelt satisfaction, and made ready to eat her dinner of plain bread and butter and Dutch cheese. Grace dropped an orange into her basket.

"Good by, Mahla. If you have any more trouble with those horrid questions, let me know, please. Remember, we belong to the Ruby Seal and are bound to help one another."

Mahla looked up with a face full of joy and gratitude, and tried to speak her thanks. But a swelling in her throat choked her voice.

Grace felt strangely happy as she bounded out of the school-yard; yet the exquisite joy which throbbed at her heart, and called tears to her eyes, was not so much happiness as blessedness. She had obeyed the Saviour's Golden Rule in a sweet, unselfish spirit, and had her reward.

Just outside the gate she met Isa Harrington, who had been waiting for her impatiently. "What did keep you so long, Gracie?"

"O, I was talking with Mahla," replied Grace, who did not care to make a parade of her generous deeds.

"It's right kind in you to take so much notice of Dutch girls," pursued Isa, who was extremely anxious to make the most of Cassy's absence, and win Grace's favor as far as she could, not caring how much flattery she used for the purpose.

"Why, Isa, she's a respectable German—Mahla is."

"O, yes, Gracie; but her ma used to work at your house before she was married. Wouldn't catch Cassy Hallock making so much of their hired girl's children. One of the kid-glove sort Cassy is, or would be if she was only rich."

"Not proud, Isa Harrington."

Isa cleared her throat.

"Deary me, no! I declare, I forgot I was talking to *you*! You'll never hear a word against Cassy, and I don't blame you, Grace Clifford."

Grace's joyous mood changed; she looked vexed. Why would Isa persist in saying little hateful things, which pricked like cambric needles?

"We girls would like to see Cassy Hallock stand up so for you—that's all," added Isa, shutting her mouth firmly, as if her teeth were all on edge.

"Well, so she would. Cassy never would hear me abused. She's not a milk-and-water sort of person; and that you know, Isa Harrington!"

Isa cleared her throat again with a provoking cough, which said, as plainly as words, "O, couldn't I tell you something surprising if I only would!"

"Isa Harrington," said Grace, impetuously, "what's that you say?"

"I said nothing at all," replied Isa, demurely.

"But you *look* mighty wise. I'd sooner a body'd speak right out than to look so wise; I would *so*, Isa."

"Ah, Gracie. I could tell a heap of things I reckon; but no good—you wouldn't believe a word."

"Speak out," said Grace, severely, as she proceeded to curl a dandelion stem.

"Ahem! Remember that time you had the oyster supper at your house, don't you, Gracie? Well, did you stay in the room with the company? I always wanted to know."

"Yes, Isa, part of the time. Why?"

Isa rolled her eyes, and looked unutterable things.

"O, nothing, only Mrs. Hallock was there, you know. Ahem! Well, next day, Mrs. Hallock said to her

husband, and Cassy was right there in the room—"

Isa hesitated. It seemed to be her painful duty to stop.

"Do go on," said Grace. "If it's ever so bad I want to hear it."

"I just happened to think, Gracie, dear, you haven't promised not to tell."

"And I'll not promise any such thing, Isa," cried Grace, spiritedly.

"Then I've said all I'm going to," replied Isa, folding her arms in a hard knot.

"But you're not going to leave off right in the middle! Now, Isa, that's not fair."

"Well, no more it isn't fair for you not to promise."

By this time they had nearly reached Captain Clifford's, for Isa had walked a long distance out of her way to accompany Grace.

"Isa Harrington, I think you might tell."

"Gracie Clifford, I think you might promise."

"Isa, I'd never dare. 'Twould fly out of my lips when I saw Cassy, and I couldn't help it. Don't make me tell a lie!"

Grace ate her dinner that noon in silence. What dreadful thing could Mrs. Hallock have said to her husband?

"Nothing much, I reckon; Cassy wouldn't go and tell stories about me! I'll trust Cassy as long as I live."

Grace twirled her regard-ring about her finger. "I'd be crazy if I believed my best friend was false!"

Still the thought troubled her. Grace had asked Cassy's views regarding the prize. To her it seemed a thousand pities that Cassy should have gone away, and so missed all chance of it. Cassy's reply was just like her. She didn't care her little finger for the prize. "It wouldn't probably be worth more than five dollars, any way; and as she had five dollars already, what could she want of any more?" She didn't see why Grace should want it, either; but if she did, Cassy hoped she'd get it. "If Mahla feels badly, you can give her something," added Cassy, sagely.

Grace pondered over this letter for some time. It was short and to the purpose, for its writer never wasted words. Grace fancied, too, that it was rather cool; but every time a doubt tried to creep into her mind, she shut it out, saying to herself,—

"Cassy's my dear friend: I'll trust Cassy as long as I live."

From this time Mahla Linck seemed to take a fresh start in arithmetic. Grace knew very well that as much as she helped Mahla, just so much she hindered herself. In everything but figures Mahla excelled. Her copy-book was a pattern of neatness; she could spell quite accurately; and as for geography, she was at home all over the world. But if left to herself, she was sure to spoil the whole by her dulness in arithmetic.

Miss Allen was not possessed of "long patience," and dear little Mahla could make nothing of her scientific explanations. But Grace had a way of shedding light on that dismal book, which, though called *Ray's Arithmetic*, was quite rayless to Mahla. So the poor child turned to her new friend with joyful eagerness.

Grace did not falter; but she had one trial. Every night Captain Clifford said, smiling,—

"Well, daughter, how comes on the studying? Any nearer the prize?"

And Grace had to answer, slowly, "O, pa, don't go to expecting I'll get it, please! Mahla's the one."

When she had said this, her father would turn again to his newspaper, looking slightly disappointed. Then Grace felt a pang of regret; but it soon passed away, and never left a sting.

CHAPTER V.

FORTUNES.

All the school-girls were talking just now about a wonderful woman, who had suddenly dropped down, perhaps out of the moon—a woman who could tell what had happened, and what would happen, as easily as she would wink.

"Why," said the graduating class, talking two or three at once, "she can tell you when you were born, how your parents look, what's your given name, and all about your friends, whether they're light or dark complexion, and—"

"Well, there," said Grace, contemptuously, "that's smart! Does anybody want to hear it all over again, when they knew it before? I'd like her to tell something new."

"So she does," cried the girls, with breathless eagerness; "she can foretell things, and they do come to pass, too,—things that make your hair stand on end."

"I wonder!" said timid Lucy Lane, shivering, and looking behind her.

"O, fie! Lucy," said Grace, patronizingly; "don't you be a bit afraid, dear; it's all a sham. I can foretell as well as Mrs. Gypsy. I'll foretell what we're going to have for dinner—a dog in a blanket."

"There, now," laughed Diademia; "I've heard of eating roasted horses, but I didn't know it ever came to cats and dogs."

Grace explained that a dog in a blanket was a roly-poly pudding.

"But about this gypsy," continued Di; "anybody'd think, to hear you, Grace Clifford, that you supposed we believed in her."

At this speech the girls all declared, by gestures and exclamations, that nothing could be more absurd than to suppose that they had any faith in such nonsense. What did they care about it? Only it was so queer! True, they knew of girls who had been to see this strange being,—young ladies who never told a lie in their lives,—and these young ladies all "deposed" and said that the gypsy was a perfect wonder!

Grace listened with curling lip to the strange stories which the princesses narrated. There was Panoria Swan,—the proud young lady who, the boys said, had swallowed a whalebone and couldn't stoop,—even Panoria Swan sailed down in all her majesty to this gypsy, who sent her home so terribly frightened that she ran every step of the way, and forgot to scowl for six hours. Then there was the large girl with the geographical name, Missouri Arkansas Smith, who had found a pot of gold, or was going to; and a man who had had a splendid future foretold, which had come to pass; that is to say, all that had happened beforehand had come to pass, every speck of it.

The arrival of this singular stranger was the most startling thing which had fallen to the notice of the Ruby Seal Society since its birth. For a day or two the usual game of skipping the rope was voted tedious, and the princesses formed a group by themselves, greatly fascinated by hearing and telling stories of this weird woman of the woods.

How delightful if they could make up a party and go to consult her! It would be an appalling thing to venture alone; but there is strength in numbers.

"Now, Gracie Clifford, if you'll only go ahead!"

"O, yes, Gracie; what a gay time we'll have! Not that we, any of us, believe such witch stories. Just for the frolic, you know."

"But I have a perfect *despise* for fortune-tellers; it's not respectable; it's silly, and—I'd be ashamed."

Grace did not add what she really thought—"and I'm afraid it's wicked."

"I'm right glad you feel so, Gracie," said gentle Mahla Linck, laying her hand caressingly on their queen's shoulder. "I just know it's not right to go."

But in spite of her assumed indifference, Grace had as much curiosity as any of the others. True, she declared, over and over again, that she didn't care about going within fifty miles of this gypsy; that, let the crazy creature say what she might, it would surely turn out exactly the reverse.

Still, after having cleared her conscience by all this preamble, she consented to go, "just to please the girls." They were all delighted; for, in their opinion, Grace's presence gave an air of respectability to the enterprise.

They decided that this was one of those affairs which could not be mentioned to any of their mothers. It was not probable that their mothers could be brought to understand the case; so difficult is it for grown-up women to perceive that there is no harm in a little frolic! Grace was very uneasy; still she freely acknowledged, with the others, that the thing must be done by stealth, or not at all. The princesses shook hands in all solemnity, promising secrecy till death.

They arranged, all but Mahla Linck, to meet for a walk the next "evening," which with New Englanders means "afternoon." Delay was dangerous, for the gypsy might not stay long in town. She lived on the wing, and was no more to be depended upon than a butterfly.

Saturday "evening" came, clear and cloudless; and at two o'clock the girls met by appointment. Did Grace Clifford feel no twinges of conscience when her kind mother packed a basket with dainties, and kissed her good by? Did she think the queen of the Ruby Seal had a right to keep such secrets from such a mother? Ah, this was not the conduct one might expect from a little girl who reads two chapters in the Bible every day. It is to be feared, however, that Grace only tripped carelessly over her task, instead of studying the Best of Books with real attention.

After much chatting and laughing, and losing their way a few times in the "green gloom of the woods," the girls reached a settlement in the country called "Small's Enlargement," passed a romantic log church, and came in sight of the fortune-teller's dwelling, an unpainted cottage snuggled in among gooseberry-bushes, tulip-trees, scrub-oaks, persimmon, and Judas-trees. The tenement was owned by Mr. Harrington, Isa's father, but was so sadly out of repair that no respectable person would rent it; and it was usually occupied only by rats, or for a short time in the summer by some wandering family.

Grace pulled something which seemed to be the remains of a door-knob; but if it was connected with a bell, the bell was certainly tongue-tied, for it would not ring.

"Let's walk right in," said Grace, lifting the latch. Like many Western houses, this cottage had no front hall, and you stepped at once into the parlor. The girls were greeted by a dense cloud of smoke, which quite filled the room. Grace fancied for a moment that this strange woman had been invoking some sort of a spell with the aid of magic, and looked about her, half expecting to see "black spirits and white" floating in the air. But if spirits there were, they could not be discerned through the smoke, which was pouring out through the acorn-shaped stove in the corner.

The occupant of the room did not come forward to greet her guests, but said in a low tone, as if muttering to herself, "Whatever is to be will be! Can't help your fate! As well go set an army of grasshoppers to fighting against the United States army! Yes, go set 'em to fighting, I tell you."

This singular speech startled everybody. Poor Lucy Lane trembled, and caught fast hold of Grace's hand, while Grace, for her part, felt, as she had declared she should feel, ready to laugh, though partly from nervousness.

The strange hostess glared at Grace in silence, but with much displeasure, and very likely from that moment marked out for her a dark future.

This mysterious woman was dressed in a half barbaric costume. She had on a garment which resembled a coat, only the sleeves were loose and flowing, like those of a lady's dress. She wore Turkish drawers of green calico, gathered into a band at the ankle, and her feet blazed with red slippers, brilliantly adorned with "gold spangles." Over her shoulders she now threw a loose robe, like a cloak, made of scarlet moreen, for all the world like a pulpit curtain, down which dangled two huge tassels.

By the time this robe of state had been carefully adjusted, the gypsy came forward and welcomed her visitors. Isa she patted on the shoulder with much cordiality, shook hands with Judith Pitcher and Lucy Lane, but passed by Grace with only a glance.

The old crone's face was as strange as her dress. Her eyes were intensely black and bright; they seemed to have burned out the rest of her face, which was very thin and haggard. These wild eyes sank far into her head, "like birds' nests under the eaves of a house." To crown all, she wore a fierce turban of soiled white lace. Altogether, she was weird-looking enough to frighten a person of tolerably strong nerves. Well for the more timid of the little girls if they should escape from her with no worse effects than horrible dreams!

"Well, my pretty dears," said she at last, "what can I do for you? Whatever is to be will be! We're nothing but a handful of grasshoppers! Do you dare to have me tear down the *mountainous* veil of futurity?"

It seemed necessary to make some reply. "Yes, 'm," said two or three of the girls, in tremulous tones.

"Please, may I raise the window, ma'am?" said Grace. The fortune-teller deigned no reply, but went on talking as if to herself:—

"The proper and true way to cure smoke, is to start a roaring fire, then pour on salt and water, and the steam will choke out the smoke. There are," continued she in the same tone, "some children of this generation who think they know more than their betters; but they never'll set the river afire. Now, you mark my words, such knowing children never'll set the river afire."

The smoke growing worse, Isabel proposed that they should hear their fortunes out of doors. The gypsy readily consented, for from the first she had looked upon Isabel with a friendly eye. The truth was, she remembered the little girl's babyhood, and had often held her in her arms, though of this Isa knew nothing.

Seated on a rude bench under the budding trees, the little girls and their dark hostess formed a picturesque group. All hearts beat high with awe and curiosity, as the gypsy drew out from the folds of her scarlet robe a pack of soiled cards, "shuffled" them with much deliberation, and passed them to Isabel, saying, "Tell me, young miss, shall I predicate your fortune by astrology, by cards, or by the lines on the palm of your hand?"

Isa looked at the other girls, hoping for advice in this important matter.

"What *would* you do, Gracie?"

"Suppose we each have it different?" replied Grace. "You take the cards, I'll take the astrology, and some of the others can use the lines on their hands."

"Very well," replied Isa, turning to the gypsy, "I reckon I'll take the cards. Aren't they just as good?"

"First," replied Mrs. Gypsy, with a solemn glance sky-ward, "first you may cross my palms with silver."

"We've nothing but scrip," replied Grace, who was obliged to do the financial business for the whole party.

"They said you asked six bits apiece for your fortunes, and we've brought it," added she, putting into the woman's hand three dollars and seventy-five cents in paper bills, the joint sums which the girls had brought with them. They might have made a vastly better use of their money by throwing it into the acorn-shaped stove for kindling. Grace's "six bits" was all she had left of her monthly allowance, and this she had been setting aside for the soldiers in the hospital; but the soldiers could wait a while for their currant jelly, whereas it is not every day one can have one's fortune told by a black-browed gypsy, with a turban on her head.

The woman pretended to be surprised at the scarcity of silver, and the girls trembled lest she should, even now, send them off with no fortunes, just when they were on tiptoe with awe and curiosity.

CHAPTER VI.

MISFORTUNES.

But to the immense relief of the girls, the gypsy at last consented, most kindly, to accept the money, and after the cards had been "cut," proceeded to assort them, and read from their dirty faces Isabel's future destiny. "Dark complect?" said she, looking up at Isa. "Yes, yes, coal-black hair, or will be, and a pair of eyes! There's two kinds of eyes in this world, little miss: one's the oily blank eye, and the other's the snapping black eye. Yours is the snapping black eye. 'Twill break the hearts, my dear—break the hearts," repeated Mrs. Gypsy, approvingly. "Here you are, the queen of spades, the queen of beauty, and behind you there I see trouble."

The gypsy scanned the cards closely.

"Ah, I know it all, now. It's a child, a girl, dead since way back. Your sister: you were named for her."

The girls were dumb with surprise, and gazed at one another with parted lips. They had all heard of "the other Isa," and had seen her little head-stone in the graveyard.

"You have one brother," continued the gypsy; "light hair; name begins with a T."

"Thomas," cried the girls in a breath.

"Where could she have heard of Tommy?" cried Grace.

"Where, to be sure, miss?" was the tart reply. "Never heard of him till he looked up at me out of the cards."

By this time five pairs of eyes had grown very large, and five little hearts were throbbing high with awe and curiosity. How could these children know that the gypsy was acquainted with the history of her landlord's family? How were they to imagine that she purposely told Isa's fortune first in order to excite their wonder?

"I see here," said the gypsy, fumbling at the cards mysteriously, as if she could pierce quite through them with her sharp eyes, "I see a present for you: it's worth a power of money. I see a journey for you: it's across the waters. Here is a great nobleman; and O, how rich! He rolls in gold! He'll set great store by you, miss, and when you grow up you'll marry him, and you'll roll in gold, too."

Isa smiled; and it is worthy of notice that she did not wonder at all at this future husband, though, according to her promise to the Ruby Seal Society, she could no more think of marrying than a veiled nun.

"Such a lady as you'll be. You know of girls now that are pretty *thin* with you. You wish yourself as rich and grand. But never mind. The day'll come when they'll be glad of a smile from you."

The wicked woman continued this harangue for some time, painting in gorgeous colors the splendor which was to shine upon the happy Isa one of these days; while Isa sat listening to the romance in a tumult of delight. "What girls were those who felt themselves better? That must mean Grace Clifford, if anybody. She would come humbly to Isa Harrington, begging for a smile. Cassy Hallock would then have sunk into a nobody. O, how exquisite! Grace was cool and indifferent now—was she? Ah, well! the tables were about to be turned, and then maybe somebody else would know how to be cool and indifferent too."

"O, Isa," laughed Grace, "think of the lovely dresses you'll wear! Please give me one, Isa. I hope you'll not forget your old friends."

The gypsy scowled, but was keen to take observations.

"I reckon I'll know who are my real friends better than some people do," replied Isa, meaningly. "I'll have so many friends that I just hope I'll not have to pick out the meanest of the whole to go with; I just hope I'll not be such a stupid as that, and then feel cross when anybody says she isn't perfect."

Grace smiled, and so did the other girls. It was plain that Isa was so dazzled as to come very near fancying herself a great lady already. The glances which passed between the girls did not escape the sharp eyes of the gypsy.

"Ah, ha! I see how it is. Somebody jealous! I'll soon study it out."

Next came Diadema's turn, and she chose to have her fortune read by the zigzag lines on the palm of her hand. The woman declared that these lines were curved in just the right way on the little brown hand of Diadema, who was therefore sure to live in peace and plenty, and to receive a large legacy in five years. So it was with all. The gypsy fairly buried them under heaps of gold and precious stones, till it came to poor Grace Clifford. She bent her black brows, and looked upon this last candidate with a frown, pausing some time before she spoke. Grace did not understand this ominous scowl, but looked into the woman's face with a bright smile of anticipation.

"I'd like my fortune told by astrology, please, madam. That's the stars—isn't it?"

"First give me your hand, miss; not that—the left one, like the others did. Alas!" sighed the artful woman, poring over the soft little palm, "life-line short and crossed, matrimony-line and line of riches cut clean off! I daresn't to lift the tempestuous veil of fortune. Black, mighty black!"

Grace might have answered, "Very well, madam; then pray don't take the trouble to do it, but give me back my 'six bits,' and I'll buy that jelly for the soldiers." But Grace was by far too much interested; she could not go away now without hearing her fortune, however dark it might prove.

"Please go on, ma'am," said she, with a brave smile, though her heart quaked for fear.

"What day and year was you born, miss?"

"September 3d, 1851."

"Then you are under the influence of the planet *Mercury*," said the gypsy, after an intense study of

the sky, during which she looked as wise as an astronomer calculating an eclipse. "Mercury, sorry to say. You have friends who have been—ahem!—who will go to the war." Here the gypsy paused and gazed at the heavens again, lost in thought.

"She means your pa," whispered Lucy, "when you supposed he was dead, and he wasn't."

"As I was saying, you have a very dear relation who was killed, or almost killed, in the wars," continued the gypsy, starting up from her reverie, and beginning where she had left off, without appearing to pay the slightest attention to Lucy's whisper. "I had to study a while to find out if he died; but the truth is, he's alive now—your father, I mean."

If possible the girls were more amazed than ever. What didn't the gypsy know? Wasn't it awful?

"Yes, at the time you was born, poor thing! the planets Mercury and Haskell were disjunctive. Whatever is to be will you'll see trouble. You have a dear friend: you set store by her."

Here the gypsy perceived that she had made another happy hit, for Grace looked surprised again.

"This friend pretends to have a heart for you; you think she's true; but mark my words,"—and the prophetess dropped her monotonous voice to a hoarse whisper; "mark my words: you never were more mistaken in your life."

Here Isa's face took on an expression of pleasure, and she touched Grace's elbow, whispering, "Didn't I tell you so? There now!"

Grace grew an inch taller; would not look at Isa, but tossed a reply to her over her shoulder:—

"Please don't say any more, Isa. The woman may have told the other things right, but she's made a mistake about Cassy Hallock."

"Cassy Hallock! ah, that's the name," spoke up the gypsy. "What do you say about mistakes? I don't make mistakes! I tell you that smooth friend of yours is a snake in the grass. Flies buzz, girls talk. Don't trust that girl. Trouble's coming thick as sand."

The girls cast pitying glances upon Grace, as if they already saw her the victim of sorrow.

"Needn't curl your lip; you are soon to have a fever and lose all your pretty hair. When you're twelve and some odd, your father'll die, and the next year your mother'll die too. You're one of them that considers every rain-storm nothing but a clearing-off shower; but you'll find one storm that won't clear off. You'll near about come nigh starving, miss. It's an awful way to die; but you won't die so. You'll be bit by a rattlesnake, and won't live a day after you're sixteen year old."

Grace tried to laugh. "Come, girls," said she, "let's go."

"You're an awful unlucky child," cried the gypsy, pointing her finger at Grace, who did not look quite humble enough yet. "You're very *peart* now; but trouble's coming: now you mark my words."

So saying, the crazy woman arose to enter the house; but as she saw the smoke still clouding the air, a new freak seized her bewildered brain. She quite forgot her character of fortune-teller, and shouted aloud, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Tell me one thing before I have you, little army of grasshoppers: what did John Baptist do with the locusts? Did he eat 'em raw, or did he smoke and roast 'em?"

Then with "tinsel-slipped" feet, the gypsy entered the house, and closed the door. The girls heard a shout of wild laughter. Could it be from the gypsy? They started with one accord, and ran till they were out of breath.

"Where are the baskets with our picnic?" cried Diademia, suddenly pausing.

"Under one of the 'simmon-trees," replied Lucy Lane, who was a natural housekeeper, and had carefully collected the scattered baskets, and put them together in what she considered a safe place.

Now, who would dare go for them? Tho girls were hungry, but they were also in a panic. Who could it be that had laughed so wildly? How did they know that the strange creature might not spring out upon them, and drag them into her den? Grace at last summoned courage, and the girls followed her, hoping that nothing dreadful could happen to any one but Grace, after such excellent fortunes.

They went to the persimmon-trees, but found no baskets. Lucy, usually timid and irresolute, was firm

enough in this case. She had placed the baskets under a certain tree; but they were not there now, neither could they be found.

"Magic!" murmured Di.

"I wonder," said Grace, "if they've been magicked off? What if I go ask our gypsy?"

She stepped cautiously along towards the house.

"Gracie Clifford, you don't dare."

"How do you know that, Isa?"

"Don't go," whispered the girls, crouching together behind the trees. They were divided in their minds between superstitious terror and sharp hunger.

Grace's eyes were flashing with strong excitement. She was as much frightened as any of the others; but a spirit of desperation had seized her, and she walked up to the house and entered it in spite of the feeble remonstrances of the girls.

She did not come out again for several minutes, and by that time her companions were alarmed. Not that they really believed the "fortune-woman" was an ogress, who ate children; but they did not know clearly what they did believe, and herein was the chief perplexity. If the gypsy had only been like other human beings! But that she certainly was not.

Grace came out of the cottage at last.

"Did you find her?" cried the girls.

"Yes, but not the baskets. Where, think, she was? Sitting on the stove, muttering over some magic to top the smoke. There was her red robe, or whatever it is, on the floor, with something under it. I went up to her, and said I, 'Do you know, ma'am, where our baskets are?'—I reckon she doesn't like me. Why, girls, she glared at me like a wild tiger, and told me if I touched a hem of that red thing I'd be sorry, for she was the voice of one crying in the wilderness, and I don't know what all."

"O, fie! I wouldn't have minded that," said Di. "Why didn't you go right along and take up the cloak? I'd have done it in a twinkling."

"Then you may go do it, Di," retorted Grace, who thought such a scornful remark was but a poor return for her own valiant conduct. Di was dumb. "But," continued Grace, "I just feel as if those baskets were under that cloak; I do *so*."

"If she eats my cookies," said Isa, "I hope they'll choke her."

"There now, Gracie, what shall we do?" sighed Lucy Lane, trying to conceal her tears. "I brought three custards, and a silver teaspoon, and six slices of pound-cake; and Jane covered them up with one of ma's nice napkins. O, dear, dear, dear!"

"My basket," said Judith Pitcher, "was ma's sweet little French bird's-nest, they call it, with a bird at each end for a handle. I'd starve to death and never mind it; but it's that basket that breaks my heart."

"Girls, I'm going home to tell my pa to get a search-warrant, and a policeman, and a protest; see if I don't," cried Diademia, half frantic.

"Di Jones, if you do," interposed Isa, "if you let on one word about this fix, you'll be turned straight out of our society. Didn't we promise secrecy till death?"

"Hush!" said Grace, soothingly; "let's hunt the baskets a little longer."

Accordingly they searched in all directions as long as they dared, then set their faces towards home, tired and discouraged. Lucy Lane stealthily wiped a few tears from her eyes.

"Pretty doings!" whispered Di, confidentially. "*Gracie* has got us into a curious fix."

Lucy wondered how Grace could be blamed, but had not the courage to take her part; so she merely gave a little groan, which Di understood to mean, "Yes, dear; just so."

Lucy was what Grace Clifford called a "yes-yes sort of girl;" she agreed with everybody.

"You see now, Lucy, if Grace had said, up and down, she wouldn't go to see this horrid old witch, why, we would not have stirred a step. Grace is our queen; oughtn't she to keep us out of mischief, pray?"

"Yes," said Lucy, "I think so too.—O, my silver teaspoon!"

Grace and Isa were also talking in confidence. In spite of the lost baskets Isa "walked on thrones."

"So queer, Gracie, what she said about Cassy Hallock!"

"O, Isa, I believe she's the Witch of Endor."

"Now, Grace Clifford, I'll tell you how Cassy slanders you, only you can't make me say where I heard it. A forward little miss, she says, you are, always speaking up when you aren't spoken to. Mighty grand you feel. Right vain of your hair, she says; but it's not auburn—it's fire-red."

"Why, Isa Harrington," cried Grace, breathless with surprise, "Panoria Swan has fire-red hair. I'll leave it to you—does it look a speck like mine?"

"Dear me, no, indeed, Gracie. Nobody ever dreamed of such an idea but just Cassy. But that's not all, nor half. She says her ma don't like her to go with you so much. There, that's all I'll tell."

"Isa Harrington, I can't believe one word of that last part," said Grace, indignantly; "it's a mistake, and you may take it back."

"I can't take back the sober, solemn, honest truth," returned Isa, firmly.

"Seems to me Cassy's changed amazingly, then," said Grace, with a quivering voice.

"Hasn't she seemed rather odder since the oyster party, Gracie? I mean Mrs. Hallock?"

"Why, no," said Grace, hesitating; "no, indeed! Let me see: once or twice she wouldn't let Cassy go home with me farther than the acorn-tree; but that was because she must have her mind the baby.—Here we are at home."

Grace was not ready to believe that her friend and her friend's mother were both so treacherous; still, she entered the house in a state of much perplexity.

CHAPTER VII.

THE REGARD-RING.

Mrs. Clifford wondered why her daughter should return from a picnic so eager for supper.

"Why, ma, we lost every single thing we carried to eat."

"Lost it! What, not all your five baskets?"

"Yes, ma," replied Grace, uneasily; "that's the solemn truth."

Mrs. Clifford was naturally surprised.

"But, ma, it's a secret. Don't ask me to break my promise, please. Some time, may be, I'll tell you. I will when I can."

At the tea-table, Horace's curiosity was very active. He wanted to know where the girls spread out their picnic, what games they played, and would have gone on with his trying questions if Mrs. Clifford had not kindly come to her daughter's relief, and turned the boy's attention to something else. Grace was grateful to her mother, but a sense of guilt weighed heavily on her mind. She had sunk very low in her own esteem, and envied little Horace the innocent frankness with which he dared look people in the face.

Added to these twinges of conscience, Grace was in a state of wretched doubt regarding Cassy. What charm would be left in this bleak world, she thought, if this only friend should prove false!

Grace's sleep was haunted that night by witches and goblins. She felt the fever which had been predicted "coming to pass" in her burning veins, and was greatly relieved next morning when she awoke as well as usual.

But the terrors of witchcraft still haunted her. In a few days another mysterious event took place. Grace lost her regard-ring. When she came from school one evening she was sure she had it on her finger. It must be lost in the house. All possible and impossible places were searched. So strange that Cassy's ring should disappear! Had it melted away like Cassy's friendship? At last Grace settled down

to the conviction that Phebe, the little nurse, had stolen it. "What else could have gone with it, unless that wild woman had magicked it away?"

Flying into the nursery, she met Phebe walking the floor with little Katie, who was wailing with the ache of some invisible little teeth.

"Black people have light fingers, everybody knows," thought Grace, by way of fortifying herself.

"Phebe Dolan, my beautiful regard-ring is gone—gone; and who do you suppose took it, Phebe Dolan? *You* did!"

Phebe's eyes rolled like wheels. In her surprise, she almost dropped the baby.

"Why, now, I done declar, Miss Grace, I never took it—never seen it; much as ever I knowed you had a ring."

"O, Phebe Dolan, you're trembling this minute. What could you want of my ring, you little wretch?"

"I declar for't, Miss Grace, I hope to die fust!"

"No, you mustn't hope to die, Phebe: you're too wicked to die!"

"Then I never, never, in all my born days in this world, and never did, and never will," moaned Phebe, looking about for a handkerchief.

It was the first time Grace had spoken sharply to her. She had been in Mrs. Clifford's family for two years, and in that time her excellent mistress had taught her much in regard to her duty; so, if Phebe had now broken the eighth commandment, it could not have been a sin of ignorance.

The moment Grace's whirlwind of anger was over, she regretted her hasty words to the desolate little orphan. "Everything has gone wrong since Cassy went away," mused Grace. "I wonder what I'll do or say next? But there, Phebe needn't steal, I declare! It's good enough for her, if she did; and where's my ring if she didn't?"

Grace would as soon have suspected one of Horace's pet doves, as Barbara Kinckle.

Up to this time the little girls had not found their baskets. But one noon, Captain Clifford came home with a strange account of a crazy woman who had escaped from an almshouse in an adjoining county. She had been wandering about the woods for weeks, fancying herself a prophetess, and sometimes crying out to passers-by, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness; prepare ye the way." She had entered a country church and cut down one half of a pulpit curtain for a cloak. She had just been found now at Small's Enlargement, and had become so raving that she was carried away in a strait jacket.

"They say," said Captain Clifford, helping himself to venison, "she has been telling fortunes with a pack of dirty cards. I must confess I was surprised to hear that our Grace had been one of the rabble to visit her, Maria."

Mrs. Clifford looked at her husband in surprise. "Our Grace?"

"Yes, our Grace. It seems to be new to you. Mr. Harrington told me to-day that she was ringleader of a party of little girls who went out to Small's Enlargement on a picnic excursion. The woman stole their baskets, and said such hobgoblin things that his Isabel has been nearly frantic ever since."

"My daughter!" said Mrs. Clifford, in a sorrowful voice.

"O, ma, I've wanted every hour and minute to tell you, and pa too; but I promised not to!"

"Shame, shame!" cried Horace, pointing his index finger at his sister; "before I'd sneak off to a gypsy that way!"

"That will do, my son," remarked Captain Clifford. "You may finish your dinner."

"O, pa," said Grace, pushing back her chair, and burying her face in her handkerchief, "we all promised not to tell, you know, and I wouldn't, not for my right hand; and here's Isa, pa, she's gone and broken her word."

"Wrong, I grant," replied Captain Clifford, with a provoking smile; "there should be honor even among thieves."

Grace winced at this proverb. The subject was now dropped, for what Mrs. Clifford said to her daughter she preferred to say to her alone.

Cassy Hallock came home. Her father, mother, and brother Johnny were at the wharf to meet her.

"Where's Gracie?" was her first salutation, after she had quietly kissed her relatives.

"Why, my dear, I've hardly seen Grace since you went away," said Mrs. Hallock.

"Goes with Isa Harrington nowadays," remarked brother John, thrusting his thumbs into his vest pockets: "just the way with girls. It's all their wonderful friendships amount to."

"O, Johnny!" replied Cassy, faintly; and then she walked on in silence, for Cassy Hallock was not a little girl who wore her heart on her sleeve; it was kept out of sight, and usually did its aching in secret.

The next day was Saturday; but Grace did not come to see Cassy, who was quite wretched, but too proud to let any one know it. At last, a happy thought struck her.

"Ma, mayn't I go round to see Gracie, and carry a bottle of your cream beer? I reckon she doesn't know I'm home again."

"Strange," thought Cassy, as she drew near her friend's house, and paused to rest. "Strange Johnny should say Grace has changed! Why, I've only been gone two months, and folks don't change in two months."

Yet she felt strangely agitated as she entered the yard. Gracie must know she was home again; she almost wished she had waited to see if she would call.

"I declare, if there isn't Cassy Hallock coming, bless her heart. O, dear me, no, the hypocrite!" said Grace, looking out of her chamber window. "I reckon she hasn't seen me; I'll run and hide. She needn't come here and pretend to be friends!"

Grace stole into the library, and locked the door.

"Miss Gracie," cried the sorrowful voice of black Phebe. No answer. At last, Phebe came to the library door and rattled it.

Grace whispered through the key-hole,—

"Ask the person into the parlor, Phebe, and say I'll be down very soon."

The person!

"O, won't I be dignified?" thought Miss Grace, walking the floor with a queen-like tread. But the affection of years was tugging at her heart-strings.

"I'll not cry." She flung off the bright drop which fell on her hand. "I'll not be caught crying, when anybody I've loved as I did that girl—"

Grace hastened down stairs, and "turned her tears to sparks of fire."

"How d'ye, Miss Cassy?"

Her old friend stood looking out of a window, her back towards the door. She felt the chill in Grace's voice, and was frozen stiff in a minute.

"How d'ye, Miss Grace?" without moving her head.

"Pleasant day. Please be seated, Miss Cassy."

"Thank you, Miss Grace; I must be going."

Cassy moved forward. The sun shone straight into her honest face. Grace saw its expression of astonishment, mingled with pride and grief.

"Cassy Hallock, don't go yet."

"Thank you, Grace Clifford; can't stop—only came to bring your ma some beer. In the music-room, on the piano."

"Cassy Hallock, what's the matter with you?"

"Gracie Clifford, what's the matter with YOU?"

"You've been talking about me, Cassy," Grace burst forth, impetuously. "You've slandered me worse than I can bear. You think I'm proud and forward. Your ma don't like us to be friends. You say my hair is fire-red. O, Cassy Hallock!"

Cassy's eyes expanded. "Who said that?"

"Isa Harrington."

"The biggest lie that ever was told!"

"O, Cassy Hallock: then *'tisn't* true!"

"True, Gracie Clifford! and you my best friend!"

"Are you right sure you never said so, Cassy?"

"There, that's enough, Gracie Clifford. I'll not deny it again. If you believe Isa, and won't believe me, it's just as well. Good by." And Cassy moved to the door with "majestical high scorn."

"Cassy Hallock," cried Grace, throwing her arms about her friend's neck, "you're not going one step. I don't believe a word of that lie, and never did!"

Cassy allowed herself to be detained, but still held the door-knob in her hand.

"I'll tell you what it is, Gracie Clifford. I'll not say how much I think of you, because you know; but if you can't trust me, there's the end of it."

"O, I can trust you, I do trust you, Cassy. You're one of the salts of the earth—salt, I mean."

"A small pinch," suggested Cassy, almost smiling.

"O, Cassy, there's nobody in this world so splendid as you are!"

But Cassy's indignation was not quite appeased. "Where's your ring, Gracie?"

"Lost. O, you don't know how I feel about that. I'm afraid our Phebe stole it."

"Glad of it."

"Why, Cassy, you're crazy! That regard-ring, dear, that your ma gave you, and you gave me for my emerald, down by the acorn-tree! Why, Cassy!"

"I said I was glad," replied Cassy, in a softer tone. "I mean glad you didn't take off the ring and go hide it. I supposed you did, just to let me see you didn't care for me any more."

A complete revulsion of feeling had come over Grace: she laughed and cried in a breath.

"O, you old Cassy! to think I ever could—"

"There," said her friend, placidly, "let it all go."

"But I can't let it go; it's a downright wicked shame. Now, Cassy, I ask you if we ought to allow such a girl as Isa in our R. S. S.?"

"Not if I was queen, we wouldn't," was the decided answer.

Now that the reconciliation was complete, Cassy declared she had a world to say, and Grace replied that she had "a hemisphere to say, herself." Then she told the story of the gypsy, and made confession that her dismal fortune had kept her awake "night after night."

"Humph!" said Cassy; "nothing ever keeps *me* awake! Thunder can't, nor cannons; and I'm sure that crazy old woman couldn't. What about the prize, Gracie?"

"O, I don't know, Cassy; I've taken Mahla into Square Root."

"Why, Gracie, what made you? You won't get that splendid present from your pa!"

"O, Cassy," sighed Grace, "I thought I'd be good, just once, and do as the Bible said, and see how it

would seem."

"The Bible says so many things!" said Cassy, thoughtfully.

"Yes, Cassy; but I mean the Golden Rule. Why, I never mistrusted that rule was so beautiful. It just makes me love Mahla dearly."

Cassy's brown eyes kindled with sympathy; but she exclaimed, suddenly,—

"Come, let's go in the kitchen and talk German with Barby."

Horace set by the white table, sighing over his Geography.

Robert came in, looking mischievous. "What say to a story, girls?" said he, glancing at Grace. "I'll begin with a landscape, book-fashion:—

"Twas a lovely evening in May. The aged stars were twinkling as good as new; the moon was 'resting her chin' against a cloud: the serene heavens—"

"Stop," cried Horace; "that's not a landscape: it's a skyscape."

"What's that you say? You've interrupted me, and now I'll have to begin again:—

"The new moon was shaking down her silver hair most mournfully, or, in other words, she looked at a distance like a slice of green cheese. I had been giving a few elegant touches to the flower-beds, pulling out the weeds, pig and chick, you know, and—well, suffice it to say, I wended my way across a verdant lawn, not twenty miles from here. I went into a house. It was all papered and pictured. The master of the house offered me no seat, for he was not at home; but I helped myself to a sort of feather-bed chair near a window. I took my handkerchief out of my pocket in this way; a key came out with it, as you see now, and dropped into the chair. It slipped between the stuffed cushion and the back of the chair. I put in my thumb, and drew out—"

"A plum," suggested Horace.

"The key."

The children looked as if they had been trifled with.

"But the key was not all. To my surprise, I also drew out what you now see me holding up to view."

"My ring!" cried Grace, darting forward. "O, Robin, where did you find it?"

"Where I told you, in the Elizabeth chair in the parlor."

[Illustration: "My ring! cried Grace."]

Grace's first act was to clap her hands; her next, to rush out, calling for Phebe, who was in her own room, having a good cry. The child appeared at the head of the back stairs, and answered, in a subdued and husky voice, "What is't you want, Miss Gracie?"

"I want *you*, you poor little dear," cried Grace, flying up the stairs, and hugging the disconsolate Phebe, whose wits were scattered to the four winds with surprise. "I've found my ring—my regard-ring, you forlorn little thing. Robin picked it out of the Elizabeth chair; and if you don't forgive me, I'll bite my tongue right out."

"O, I've done forgive you, Miss Grace, if you'll forgive me too," sobbed poor Phebe, who had a confused idea that she must be somehow to blame for crying so hard. She had for two days been in the depths of despair; and now, this sudden turn of the wheel of fortune made her fairly dizzy with delight. Many were the choice tidbits which Phebe found beside her plate after this, and many were the snips of bright ribbon or calico which were given to her to put away among her treasures. If Grace had forgotten that "charity thinketh no evil," and had spoken rashly, she surely did all she could now to atone for her fault.

CHAPTER VIII.

PRUDY PARLIN.

Isa Harrington's surprise was great when she saw all her artful plans overthrown, and Grace and Cassy the same "cup and saucer" as ever.

"O, Gracie," said she, "you don't love Isa any more, now Cassy has come home."

Grace drew coldly away. "You tried to turn me against my best friend, Isa."

"O, Gracie, I never! I only told what I heard, and Lucy Lane was the one that said it. You may ask her."

Lucy was as harmless a fly as ever got caught in a spider's web. Isa thought she could manage her finely. So the moment she had done talking with Grace, she made Lucy tease Miss Allen to let them both go into the recitation-room to study their lessons.

"We'll promise, solemnly, we won't say a word only grammar," said Isa, earnestly. "Can't you trust us?"

The teacher hesitated, looked at timid little Lucy, and said, "Yes. But if you break your word, girls, remember, 'tis the last time you'll ever go in there to study."

Isa had no intention of keeping her word. She wanted to have Lucy to herself for the purpose of "managing" her.

For a while the girls studied in silence, their heads close together, and covered by a shawl.

"O, Lucy," said Isa, suddenly, "I've a compliment for you."

Lucy put her finger on her lip.

"Dear me, Lucy, didn't I speak good grammar? That's all the promise *I* made—that I wouldn't say anything but *grammar*, and I won't, unless I make a mistake. A certain person said you had lovely hair. Got a compliment for me?"

"Why, yes," said Lucy, innocently; "I heard a lady say you might be a right good little girl perhaps, but you're rather homely."

Isa bit her lip.

"It was Cassy Hallock that told yours, Lucy. By the way, did you ever hear her say Gracie's hair is fire-red?"

"Why, Isa, no, indeed!"

"Didn't? Why, that's nothing to the way she's slandered her; and Grace her best friend, too."

Lucy was horrified.

"Do you remember when you, and I, and Cassy staid, ever so long ago, to scrub our desks? Well, don't you know how Cassy spoke of Mrs. Clifford's oyster party?"

"Yes, I do. She said Grace appeared like a lady."

"There, Lucy Lane, is that the way you hear? Didn't understand it, did you, any more than a baby? She was hinting that Grace talked like old folks—very pert and bold."

"O, was she?"

"Of course she was, Lucy. Can't you see through a mill-stone, child? I wouldn't want any one to hint about me the way Cassy does about Grace."

"Nor I wouldn't, either," echoed Lucy.

"Didn't you think, Lucy, by what Cassy said, that her ma wanted to break up the friendship? You told me at the time that you thought so, now certainly."

"O, what a story!" Lucy spoke very loud in her surprise.

"Very well," said Isa, adjusting the shawl, "you've forgotten, perhaps. Your memory is about as long as my little finger, Lucy. But no matter; I know what Cassy meant if you didn't. Reckon I've got eyes in my head."

"Well, I knew what she meant, too, I suppose, at the time of it," said soft-voiced Lucy, anxious to prove that she had eyes in her head, and could see through a mill-stone. Foolish fly! When a cunning

spider said, "Will you walk into my parlor?" Lucy always walked right in.

"I hate Cassy Hallock," cried Isa, unconsciously raising her voice very high: "I just hate her. She's no business to make believe friends with Gracie. Let's you and I put a stop to it."

"Hush, Isa; don't speak so loud."

"I didn't mean to. Peek out, Lucy, and see if the door is shut."

Lucy pushed the shawl to one side and peeped out. Terror-stricken, she drew back again, glad to hide her head. The door was wide open, and the school so still you might have heard a pin drop! Not a word had been lost. There stood Miss Allen by the desk, her finger up to hush the faintest noise. Having opened the door and found the girls talking, she decided to let the whole school know it.

Isa was in an agony of unavailing remorse. Not only had she lost her teacher's respect, but she had forever ruined her cause with Grace. She longed for the earth to open and hide her shame; but as the earth refused to take her in, the best she could do was, to steal home, her proud head bent low and concealed under her sun-bonnet. It was a bitter punishment; but Miss Allen, who had long understood her crooked conduct, was sure she deserved it.

She was discharged from the R. S. S. Angry and mortified, and not knowing of any better way to annoy the girls, she told their secrets to the wide world. Grace had never dreamed of this.

"What are we to do with that little black cow?" said Robert to Grace. "She always wants to be somewhere else. She's a regular tornado at tearing down fences. What say to her joining a secret society?"

Grace was helping train a prairie-rose.

"Don't know what you mean, Robin."

"Just what I say. These strong-minded cows ought to form a Mutual-Improvement, Cows' Rights Society. I've thought of a good name," added Robert, with a twinkle in his eye: "Princesses of the Crooked Horn."

"Now, Robin, what do you mean? Tell, this minute," cried Grace, dropping her ball of twine, and blushing.

The boy whistled.

"Tell me, Robin, have you heard something?"

"I've heard something, yes."

"What have you heard?"

"Shan't tell. Reckon *you've* heard of the Ruby Seal!"

"That'll do, Robin," said Grace, suddenly looking down to watch an ant with threadlike limbs dragging off a cold shoulder of fly.

"See here, Gracie: what cute hands girls are to keep secrets!"

"Don't want to hear another word, Robin."

"Cassy," said Grace, a little later, "what'll we do about the R. S. S.? Isa's been and spread it all over town!"

"You don't believe it, do you? Why that makes me think what Johnny said to-day. He's sorry I'm such a broken-hearted old maid at this time of life. Now I know what he meant."

"But what'll we do about our R. S. S.? I'm so mortified!"

"Let it die: who cares?"

"O, Cassy, I care. Don't let's give up at trifles."

"Then turn it into a Soldiers' Aid." Grace clapped her hands and waltzed across the street.

"So we will, Cassy; so we truly will! That's so very respectable!"

"We'll marry, too, if they're going to make such a fuss," suggested Cassy.

"I won't—unless I please. I'll never be married to keep people from laughing, Cassy Hallock."

Here Grace set her little foot firmly upon a toad, which she mistook for solid ground.

"Cassy," continued she, after a little scream, "let's work for those darling old soldiers in the hospital. What have we been thinking about? Don't you let on! After a little, you know, when school stops, Cassy! O, can we wait that long?"

Meanwhile, we must attend to a new arrival. Uncle Edward Parlin dropped in suddenly, as good and smiling as ever, and with him little Prudy, blushing like a rose, but so dusty that she almost made you sneeze. But where was Susy? It seemed that Mrs. Parlin had not had time to prepare both the children for such a hasty journey.

Horace shouted like a young Indian. Grace clapped her hands, and laughed in every note of the scale up to the second octave and back again.

Prudy threw her arms about Mrs. Clifford's neck.

"O, aunt Ria," she whispered, "bimeby I shall cry."

"Aren't you well, darling?"

"Yes'm; but I feel as if I wasn't *going* to feel well."

It had been a hard journey for the poor little thing. She was soon nicely bathed and put in a comfortable bed, where, for about a minute, she lay wondering at the mosquito-bar, and then forgot all her trials in sleep. Next morning, Horace asked what she had dreamed.

"O," said Prudy, much refreshed, "I slept so fast I never heard my dreams. There, aunt Ria, you know Mrs. Mason, that gave Susy the bird? She's dead: I thought you'd be glad to hear that!"

"I didn't know the lady," said Mrs. Clifford, smiling; "yet I am not glad she is dead."

Prudy was constantly espying wonders. Her fear of pigs was extreme, and the whole Ohio valley seemed to her one vast pig-pen without any fence. The creatures had such long noses, too! From a safe distance, Prudy liked to watch them cracking nuts. She thought they could not have picked out the meats better if they had been gifted with fingers.

She wandered with Grace and Cassy about the beautiful garden and green-house in a maze of delight. She might have been too happy if the mosquitos had not laid plans to devour her. Grace bathed the poor child in camphor. "It hurts," said Prudy, the quiet tears rolling down her cheeks; "but Gracie bathes me for my good, and I won't cry. O, aunt Ria, when I'm naughty, and you want to punish me, you can just put me to bed, and let the skeeters bite me."

Owing to the savage conduct of these bloodthirsty creatures, there was no trace left of Prudy's beauty, except what Horace called her "killing little curls." Grace was disappointed, for she had hoped to exhibit her charming cousin to great advantage.

However, the mosquito-hills disappeared from her face in time, and then Prudy was quite "a lioness," as Horace said. The princesses admitted her to their social meetings. All they did now was, to state that they had read the required amount of Scripture, had told no wrong stories, and used no language which they regarded as unladylike. For the present, they met and played games, intending during holidays to begin work for the soldiers in earnest.

When Prudy visited the school, she sat with every one of the Princesses in turn, and liked them all but the discarded member of the society, Isa Harrington.

In private, she told Grace that Isa looked "like the woman that killed the man," meaning Lady Macbeth, whose face she had often seen in a picture.

"Don't you like me, darling?" said Isa, offering her a handful of peppermints.

"O, yes, I like you," said the child, accepting the sugar-plums, "but I don't like the *spirit* of you."

"What does that mean, you funny thing?"

"I don't know, but that's the way they talk."

Prudy loved Mahla Linck at once. She said she had had just such a lameness her own self, and knew how it felt. "Ah, little dear," said Mahla, laying her wasted cheek close to Prudy's, "but you can walk now without a crutch, and I never can."

"O, Mahla, yes, you can *never*; you can when you grow an angel."

The Princesses liked to escort Prudy through the streets, and hear her exclamations of surprise. She told them the "Yankees wouldn't 'buze their horses so;" for it seemed to her rather unkind to braid their tails like heads of hair, and tie them up in knots; though Grace assured her this was done to keep them from trailing in the dust. The mules were another curiosity. Prudy was also amazed at the "loads of oxen" driven by men who sat in the carts, and "drove 'em and whipped 'em same as if they was horses." "Yankees," she said, "walked with the oxen, and talked into their ears."

She informed the girls that the Hoosier sky was very odd-looking. "It's Quaker color," she said; "but the sky to Portland is as blue as a robin's egg, 'cept when it fogs."

She described feathery snow-storms, "frost-bitten" windows, and the nice fishing in "Quoddy Bay;" told her listeners that eastern people "*shave*" their grass in summer, and when it is dry it's good to jump on.

For the short time Prudy staid in Indiana her sunny face was a pleasure to everybody.

"Why, aunt Ria," said she, "do you think I'm good, though? Well, I'm ever'n ever so much better away from home."

CHAPTER IX.

BARBARA'S WEDDING.

Barbara had now been at home for some time making preparations for her wedding, and had cordially invited all the children to see her married,—Grace, Cassy, Prudy and Horace; everybody but little "Ruffle-neck," as Horace sometimes called the baby.

They set out in the morning in high spirits, Grace and Cassy walking under one umbrella, Horace and Prudy under another. Prudy was bareheaded, and her "killing little curls" were blown into wild confusion by the breezes.

The June air was very sweet, for it was "snowing roses." Prudy asked Horace if he didn't think "the world smelt nice?" Horace put on a look of calm superiority, and replied that "the flowers were very much like essence bottles, to be sure, what we call *odiferous*, Prudy."

Some way behind the two children sailed the other umbrella, marked, in white paint, "Stolen from H. S. Clifford;" while under it Grace and Cassy talked confidentially.

Prudy had heard they were going to a place called the Bayou, and supposed it to be some sort of a house. But after a walk of two miles, they came to an immense field, where the corn shot up very tall and luxuriant.

"There's the bayou over yonder," laid Horace, with a sweep of his thumb.

"Where?" said Prudy, straining her eyes. "I don't see a single thing but sugar-canes."

"*Corn*, you mean! Well, it's a bayou, and the water runs up over it in the spring, and that makes bottom-land rich as mud."

Prudy stared at the cornfield, then at the river.

"You don't mean that that little thing went over it," said she, waving her hat towards the Ohio.

"Poh! you needn't think our river looks that way," dropping the umbrella over his shoulder. "Tell you what it is: that river rises out of bed every spring, but it's hung out to dry in the summer, Prudy."

The little girl stopped short and swung her hat off into space. Horace gallantly restored it.

"O, what is that big thing there? a whale, or an ice-bug?"

Horace laughed. "Whales in the river! Goodness sakes, that's a sand-bar, miss. A man waded across here the other day. Tell you what, if he could do it, I could—want to see me?"

Prudy was alarmed, agreeably to expectation.

"Well, now," said the boy, holding the umbrella upright once more, "here we are at the Kinckles'. Come ahead, girls."

Prudy looked, and saw nothing but a crooked fence. Horace waited till Grace and Cassy came up, then let down the bars. Prudy trembled, and caught fast hold of Horace, for Farmer Kinckle's calves were wandering about the field, eating grass, or playfully biting one another. Tall hickory, persimmon, peach, apple, and mulberry trees cast a deep shade. For some time nothing was to be seen of the house; but at last it appeared in view—dark, unpainted, with chimneys built outside.

A cooking-stove stood in the yard, its long, black funnel puffing out smoke; and, strange to tell, under the stove a nest of young ducklings enjoying the heat and the smell of the cooking.

"Understand it to me, please," said little Prudy. "Do the folks know their stove is out here?"

Barbara appeared at the door with peony-colored cheeks and pleasant smiles. She would hardly have consented to be married unless the "childers" might be there to see.

There was no entry, and the front door was at the side of the house just opposite the back door. A huge fireplace spread itself over a large part of the room; but it was never used except for smoking hams or mosquitos. It was the only fireplace in the house. On the high mantel stood a candlestick, a pipe, a beer bottle, a wooden clock, and a bowl of blackberries. On one side, exactly in the way, were two or three long drawers of black walnut, which ran nearly the length of the room, and on the top of the drawers were tubs, buckets, and clothes baskets.

The house was propped on four feet. Horace discovered, under the house, a cat and kittens, a brood of chickens, and a dog. He called Prudy to admire this domestic menagerie, then crept under the house, and, by accident, overturned the cat's saucer of milk; whereat Pussy looked up at him with a glance of mild reproach. He next thrust both hands into a pool of corn-meal dough, which was meant for the chickens.

"O, Horace," said Grace, shocked at the dismal plight of her brother's clothes, "I did think you'd try to keep clean for the wedding."

This was expecting too much. Grace felt that it was a trial to take Horace visiting. At the table he declined mutton gravy, saying he never ate "tallow," and remarked about the cheese, that it was "as mouldy as castile soap;" yet Horace could not see that this was rude.

Mrs. Kinckle wore a small black cap, which reminded Prudy of a wire cover which is used to keep off flies. Horace thought it looked about as big as a percussion cap. Prudy watched the good woman doing work just like anybody, though she was a German and a Jewess, and therefore could not have known the "truly name" of a single dish she touched.

There were a few articles to be ironed for the bride, and Prudy had a mind to try the Jewish flatirons; so, with Barbara's leave, she smoothed out some handkerchiefs on a [text missing from book]

But soon the rabbi, or Jewish priest, arrived, and it was time for the wedding. The company formed a circle, as if they were playing the "Needle's Eye," thought Prudy. In the middle of the ring stood Barbara and Solomon, the rabbi before them. The bride's dress was a straw-colored silk, which must have cost many months' wages; but it was quite hidden under a long white veil, which enveloped Barbara from head to foot. The honest young bridegroom wore a solemn countenance; but how the bride's face looked, no one could tell.

The rabbi began to chant something in Hebrew, probably the marriage service. After this, Grace supposed he would pray; but he did not.

Mrs. Kinckle now kissed the bride—not through the veil, however—and then all the rest kissed her, this being the only part of the ceremony which the children fairly understood. Prudy espied a small tear in Barbara's eye, and wished Solomon only knew it, in which case he would never carry Barbara off in the world.

After the bride had been duly embraced, cake was passed around, and a certain Jewish wine, very strong and fiery, which, of course, the children did not taste. A basket of cigars came next, and in a few moments the gentlemen of the party were puffing at them. Thus the affair, after all, ended in smoke; and before sunset the children were on their way home.

It seemed to Grace that the world had begun to fall in pieces. To think that Barby would never more be seen in Mrs. Clifford's kitchen, polishing and scrubbing! To think that just a few little Hebrew words

had made such a dreadful change; spiriting away that splendid Barby forever. Cassy wondered how the Jews could endure their synagogues, and rabbis, and strong wines. Horace thought it a deal worse than keeping pigs. Grace would even sooner be married with candles and crucifixes, like a Roman Catholic. Cassy said *she* should have fifteen bridesmaids, "like they had in Kentucky." Prudy gave it as her opinion that poor Barby was crying all the while the man "sing-songed." "She hates Solomon," added the child; "for I asked her if she didn't think so much whiskers was homely, and she said she did."

Before the children reached home the full moon was rising.

"I didn't use to know what the moon was," quoth Prudy. "I thought it was a chip."

"What put that in your head, dear?" said Grace.

"O, I threw it up, you know, when I wasn't three years old, there at grandma's. I threw it up in the air, and didn't see it go down; and then, when I looked up, there was the moon; and I said, 'O, grandma, see my chip!'"

"But you don't know what 'tis now any better than you did then, I'll warrant," said Horace, sitting down in the road to laugh.

"Don't know, Horace Clifford? I guess I do!"

"Well, tell then, can't you?"

"Silver, of course! Didn't you never know that before?"

"It's a big world, darling," said Grace, laughing.

"I know that, Gracie Clifford; did I say it wasn't? It's a silver ball as big as a house, and there's a man lives there, and I've seen him making up faces."

Everybody laughed, and Prudy tried to be angry; but her fiercest indignation frightened you about as much as a firefly trying to flash out a little chain-lightning.

Mr. Parlin was daily expected back from St. Louis, and Grace and Horace clung to their little cousin, dreading the thought of losing her.

"Aunt Ria," said Prudy, "don't you think 'twould be a good plan for you to get the baby's picture took, and send it to my mamma for a present?"

Mrs. Clifford said she would try; so, on Saturday afternoon, she went to Mr. Drake's photograph-rooms with the little girls, while Horace wheeled the baby in her small carriage.

It was of no use. There were sure to be a dozen noses in Katie's picture, or as many mouths. In vain Horace chirruped to her, calling her dove-names. "Still, now, Brownbrimmer! Ho, little Topknot!" The more he tried to hush her, the more eager she grew for a frolic.

"My fine little fellow," said the artist, "suppose you and the young misses go in the next room for a while?"

They all went. Prudy threw off her hat, and sat down to hold the white kitty which she had carried in her arms all the way.

"Sit still, little youngling," cried Horace; "I'll *take* you!"

So the boy arranged an apparatus by turning down one chair, setting another across it, and throwing over both a table-cover for a screen. Prudy looked solemnly at her finger-nails.

"That's jolly, Miss Parlin. Just keep that little nose straight, so it won't be foreshortened or forelengthened. Now, young lady," continued the little artist, poking his roguish face between the bars of the chair, "afraid your dress won't take! too near—ahem—snuff color."

"Don't say snuff-color, Horace, or I'll sneeze, and that'll spoil my nose."

"O, what foolishness!" laughed Grace and Cassy.

"Hush! There, I've fixed the focus. Now, observe this fly on my jacket (coat, I mean), young lady, and don't you wink." Horace consulted a small bottle he held in his hand for a watch.

"These pictures were all failures," he said. "Some had 'no focus,' while others were 'all focus;' they 'flattered,' and were likewise too '*negative*.'"

Meanwhile, the artist, Mr. Drake, much amused, brought in his photographic apparatus, and made a picture of the little group. This picture Mrs. Clifford purchased for Mrs. Parlin, instead of the many-nosed miniature of the baby.

The day before starting for the east, Prudy went with Mrs. Clifford, her cousins, and Cassy, to visit the hospital, which was filled with sick and wounded soldiers. They wanted to give something to every man they saw, and mourned when their "goody-basket" was emptied of its contents.

"O, ma," said Grace, with ready tears, "it just makes me feel like we must get up that fair, and raise money!"

"I only wish *I* could be here to help," said little Prudy.

"Come here, my dear," said a pale gentleman who heard the child's voice. "I cannot see you, for I am blind. Will you tell me who you all are?"

"Yes, sir; this is me, that's got your hand. My name is Prudy Parlin, and that boy that isn't in this room is Horace."

"Horace! Whose son?"

"He's my uncle Henry Clifford's son; but uncle Henry isn't *his* uncle: he's his father. Horace is his only son, and me, and Susy, and Dotty is *my* father's only daughters!"

"Possible! Now, my sweet little one, will you ask Horace to come here?"

It was Mr. Lazelle, with whom the Cliffords had travelled east the year before. They had a pleasant meeting. Horace had once been angry with this very gentleman for boxing his ears; but he forgot it all when he looked at the blind, helpless soldier, and wanted to open his savings' bank at once in his behalf.

Next day Prudy went home. Grace and all the Princesses wept bitterly at parting with the dear child; still, it was better for them that she should go away. She claimed too much of their attention at the very time when they should have thought only of study.

CHAPTER X.

WHO GETS THE PRIZE?

Mahla Linck seemed to grow paler and thinner. Her mother, when kindly advised to keep her at home, replied, "My Mahla loves her book; she must in the school go." The poor woman could not and would not see the danger. But though Mahla looked ill, she no longer seemed discouraged. Since Grace had undertaken to help her, she was gaining confidence.

"Mother, I feel just this way," Mahla would say sometimes: "if I can't get the prize, I hope Grace Clifford will, for she's the best girl in school."

Mrs. Linck was glad that Mahla felt so kindly towards her rival, but sighed as she looked at her daughter's pale face, and thought of the weary hours she had spent in study, while other girls were at play.

Examination-day came. It was sultry even for July. But the girls at the Grammar School, who had drooped like wilted flowers, now bloomed bright and fresh once more. Those who had new dresses wore them on this occasion, and all came to school with hair smoothly brushed the very last thing.

Ah, who does not know the flutter at the heart when the "three committee-men," or "trustees," knock; and are solemnly asked in and seated? Some of us have felt this flutter for the last time; but you children will understand just how the girls felt that day, with parents, older sisters, and neighbors to look on and criticise.

Tall Miss Allen looked serene, but there was a tremulous motion of her mouth and fingers. On her desk was a vase of beautiful flowers, which Grace had brought, carefully shielded under her sun-umbrella.

Mrs. Clifford and Mrs. Hallock, with a few other ladies, occupied the raised platform behind the desk. Mrs. Linck sat near the window, cooling her heated face by the use of a large feather fan.

Mahla was in her old seat; there was a beautiful pink color in her cheeks, which one could see was the flush of excitement, not the glow of health.

And over by the west window sat the bosom friends, Grace and Cassy, their tender friendship undisturbed by a single feeling of rivalry; for, owing to Cassy's long absence from school, she had not the faintest hope of the prize. Grace's sunny ringlets and sparkling eyes danced with eagerness. She looked as tidy as ever, in a thin blue dress, with rivulets of blue ribbon flowing down the skirt. Cassy's pensive face was lighted up with more than usual animation.

It was a pleasure to see these two young friends together. Mrs. Clifford looked at them with a smile which was half a tear, as she remembered just such a friendship in her own childhood. Many other ladies watched Grace and Cassy with interest, and were carried back to the "days that are no more"—days whose dewy freshness can no more be recalled than the sweet apple-blossoms which fell so softly into the grass last year.

But the question of the day was, "Who would get the prize?" Perhaps Captain Clifford, who sat with several other gentlemen near the door, felt more interest in the result than he confessed to himself. Horace stood near his father, as grave as a little judge. He ran over the whole school with his eye, and mentally decided that Grace was the prettiest girl in the room next to Cassy; for Cassy was his beau-ideal of beauty and goodness.

The reading was over, and the copy-books were offered for inspection. Then the trustees began to ask questions. Grace's face lighted up; the hectic in Mahla's cheeks burned brighter still. Mrs. Clifford was sorry to see this feverish eagerness. She had never liked prizes, and now approved of them less than ever. In geography, Isa Harrington held out bravely, but at last yielded to Grace and Mahla, who kept together, neither gaining upon the other.

The audience grew interested: the trustees looked at one another and smiled. Then came spelling. So many odd words were found—words which most of the girls had forgotten were in McGuffey's Spelling-Book.

But though the others hesitated, neither Grace nor Mahla were caught tripping. One by one, all dropped off from the ranks but these two, who resolutely held their ground, though hard words rattled about their ears like bullets. At last came the test-word—one of the easiest, too—"pillory." Grace spelled it with an "a" instead of an "o." She knew her mistake in a second, and Mr. Reynolds paused, hoping she would correct herself. But though others had done this repeatedly, Grace was at once too proud and too generous. The flash in Mahla's eyes, as she spelled the word after her, was not one of triumph. She was really sorry Grace had not done better for herself.

Next came arithmetic. This had always been Mahla's weak point, and Mr. Reynolds at first asked questions slowly, meaning to give her time to think. But it was soon evident that Mahla knew very well what she was doing, and could not be easily puzzled. True, Grace had gone over more ground; but this the trustees would not have known if Miss Allen had not informed them in an aside-whisper.

"Ah, yes, yes," nodded Mr. Reynolds, peeping over his spectacles at Grace, with a glance which meant, "Well done! well done!"

In grammar, again, Grace and Mahla were well matched. If there was any difference, Mahla excelled in giving rules, for her verbal memory was excellent.

The trustees were surprised to find the two rivals so well informed, while at the same time they were puzzled as to any preference. They whispered together. Mr. Reynolds rubbed his spectacles as if they would help him see his way clear; Dr. Snow scratched his learned head, and Mr. Newell leaned backward in his chair to meditate.

The audience felt somewhat as people feel in a court-room when the jury are out deciding an interesting case. From time to time Mrs. Linck looked anxiously at her daughter, as if she feared the excitement would be too much for her.

All the while the prize was lying on the desk, wrapped in brown paper. What it was no one knew; but the girls fancied it was "large enough to be almost anything."

They were growing uneasy, and the teacher herself tapped the floor gently with her foot, as if she thought it high time a decision was made.

At last, when Mr. Reynolds had finished polishing his spectacles, he took from the brown wrapper a beautiful rosewood writing-desk, and held it up to view, opening it to show the elegant workmanship.

"Young ladies, I would like your attention a few moments! Upon examination, we find two of you so nearly equal that it is no easy matter to decide which deserves the prize. Miss Grace Clifford does well—exceedingly well. Her reading we consider superior to Miss Mahla Linck's, and their copy-books are

equally neat. The truth is, we wish we had two prizes to give, instead of one. But as that cannot be, we have at last concluded to award this writing-desk to—Miss Mahla. Now we wish you all distinctly to understand why we do this," continued he, placing the points of his forefingers together. "It is because we think the effort she has made in arithmetic this term deserves a reward. She has always been a good student, but within the past few weeks her progress in arithmetic has been remarkable!"

There was a general hum of satisfaction. Poor Mrs. Linck was fairly trembling for joy, and Mahla looked as if a star had dropped from the sky at her feet.

As for Grace, her heart was so full that she could hardly force back the tears. They should not fall. Nobody would understand that she was crying for joy!

When Mahla whispered to Grace that night, "O, Gracie, I wouldn't have had it but for you, dear!" it would be hard to tell which was the happier girl, grateful Mahla Linck, or noble Grace Clifford.

Nobody but the Lincks, the Cliffords, and Cassy ever knew the whole story. If people had heard it, they would have foolishly praised Grace for her beautiful simplicity of conduct. Then Grace might possibly have grown proud and self-conscious, and that would have spoiled all.

Mrs. Clifford begged leave to furnish the desk with the choicest writing materials. It gave her pleasure to do this, for nothing in her daughter's best deeds had ever touched her like her disinterested kindness to Mahla.

Grace was overjoyed to find that her father did not seem disappointed or displeased with her. He was apparently as glad as any one of Mahla's good fortune. He kissed his daughter that night more tenderly than usual, and there was something in his approving smile which Grace valued, after all, more than a hundred prizes.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CHILDREN'S FAIR.

It was now vacation. Mahla was too ill to go out; and, as for the other girls, they said they had the "sleeps;" and, instead of working for the soldiers, they preferred to lie under the trees and dream away the summer days.

Not so Grace Clifford. She saw so much of the sick men, and heard so much of them from Lieutenant Lazelle, that she was resolved to give the R. S. S. a good shaking, and wake it up. Quiet was Grace's abomination. She made a speech before the society—an off-hand effort, which I will record, first remarking that Grace could have done vastly better if she had stopped two minutes to think.

The Queen's Address.

DEAR PRINCESSES: In our early youth, while in the morning of life, and with the dew yet sparkling upon us like down on the cheek of a beautiful peach, I think (*we* think, I mean) it's our glorious duty, as little girls of the *eighteenth* century (*nineteenth*, I mean), to put our shoulder to the plough of our dear country! O, my Princesses, will we let the rebels, with glaring eyeballs, set their iron hoofs upon our necks, and choke, and grind, and crush, and trample us into—powder? Will we fold our idle arms, and shut our idle ears, and listen to the cry of their war-whoop, which goes rolling over and over the hills and down into the valleys of our glorious Union? Will we see the furious and howling enemy seize, plunder, and wring off the neck of our American Eagle,—that golden, glorious bird; and, while he screams with hoarse, cavernous echoes, pluck the noble eyes out of his head—his *bald* head, O Princesses!

(The queen looked round her for sympathy, and not in vain: she was carrying her audience away with her.)

Think of our great, great, very great grandpas, how they fought and bled in freedom's cause. Hail, ye heroes!—No, I mean to say, Friends, countrymen, *girls*, let's put on our—helmets, and fight for dear life! Are we too weak to fire cannonades? Will we be forbidden to pour out our hearts' blood? And are our limbs too tender to be broken in a thousand pieces? Then we'll fight with our *needles*! We'll make our glorious, splendid, poor, miserable, dying soldier-boys comfortable! If that's all we can do, we'll do that!—Now, girls, I'll tell you what it is, continued the queen, suddenly dropping from her airy flight, let's work like spiders, won't we? and buy jellies, and broths, and things! I'll not have a new dress forever if I can help it. Who's in for a Fair? All that are agreed say, *Ay!*

It "was a vote." The girls concluded to shake off the "sleeps," and go to work. Mahla, who was duly

informed of all that went on, was delighted with the project, and promised to make lace bags and a few little things at home.

At Mahla's urgent request, poor Isa was taken back as a member of the society. She had been wretched enough to satisfy all ideas of justice, and could do no harm now by disclosing secrets. Isa was tolerably subdued and grateful, but a trifle sullen, withal. Her manner said, plainly,—

"O, girls, I'll do anything to make you trust me and like me once more. That's the way I feel; but I don't want you to know it; so I'm trying to look as if I didn't care."

The Princesses were rather youthful, but they had this advantage—they were old enough to know their own ignorance. They chose their mothers for advisers—the wisest thing they could have done.

Twice a week they held meetings in a large chamber at Mrs. Clifford's. Here they kept their pieces of work, each girl having a separate basket. Articles accumulated: unfinished pincushions, babies' socks, bookmarks, dolls' bodies, kettle-holders, and garments of "domestic muslin," known in New England as "factory cloth."

Mrs. Clifford, who was not only a patriotic lady, but an accomplished needlewoman, had a general oversight of matters, and spent an hour or two each afternoon with the children, making suggestions and adding finishing touches.

Before long, a dozen girls from the High School joined the R. S. S. Fancy articles grew apace. It was even hoped now that the Fair could be held before the opening of the schools in September.

Grace was fathoms deep in business. She wanted Horace to work too, and thought he and Phebe should be ready at all hours to run of errands, drive nails, or hold skeins of silk. Horace ought never be complain when called away from play; for what did she ask of him but to help the poor, bleeding soldiers? All he did for the R. S. S. was so much done for his country. Horace had his own opinion upon this subject, forgot his errands, and when sent shopping, stupidly asked if sewing-silk was "cloth," and if tape came in "skeins"? He was willing to work when he could manage for himself, but didn't like to be "anybody's waiter."

Grace's patience sometimes failed; but Cassy could effect wonders with her smiling—"Now, please, Horace." When Cassy wanted anything, the wilful boy put on what his sister called "his heroics," and went to work with a will.

To be sure, the "cup and saucer" were buried in cares; yet somehow they could steal time for long chats "down by the acorn-tree," their heads under an umbrella or a shawl. While thus pleasantly engaged, it was natural that Grace should think she had no time to assist her brother in pasting his scrap-books or making his kites.

"See, now," said Horace, when, after a search, he had found Grace and Cassy under the acorn-tree, "you make mighty small of some folks! Can't lift a finger to help *me*; but when *you* want some work done, it's 'Horace, dear,' and 'O, you darling!' Reckon I know a thing or two!"

The girls' friendship flowed on smoothly. It was hardly in the power of the most designing person to make any more mischief between them. Grace's highest hopes for her baby-sister were, that she might grow up as "smart and good as Cassy."

All this while, though Mahla Linck never lost interest in the society, she was growing weaker every day. Her little nerveless hands dropped the work they had attempted. She had no more use for her crutch, which lay on the table beside her bed, taking a long rest.

Grace and Cassy made daily visits to their sick friend. Mahla assured them that her writing-desk was one of her greatest comforts: it was almost as good as a sister. When she was too feeble to sit up, it was placed on the bed near her elbow, and she would lie and look over its contents, counting the sheets of perfumed note-paper, and feeling their gloss with her fingers.

When strong enough to write, she liked to copy poems in a neat round hand with her gold pen.

"See how she that desk does love!" said Mrs. Linck, breaking her English into small pieces, as she always did when very earnest. "O, Miss Grace, your kindness forget never I shall."

Grace felt inclined to kiss Mahla and to cry. "O, Mahla," said she, "if you're only well, won't we girls have good times in the upper room when school takes up?"

Mahla smiled sadly. "I'm going some-place else."

"Some-place else? O, Mahla, you're too sick!"

"Not too sick to go to heaven, Gracie!"

Grace shuddered, and hid her face in Mahla's bosom.

"It don't frighten me a bit, Gracie."

"But, Mahla, darling, it's so far off!"

"O, Gracie, no, indeed; it seems as if heaven was right in this room."

"So dark and cold down there," sobbed Grace.

"But I'll not be there!" Mahla whispered. "Not in the grave a minute! I don't know what way I'll go up to heaven, but the Lord will know. O, he loves me so!"

After this conversation, Grace and Cassy walked home together very quietly. Grace looked at the fair, green earth and soft sky, and remembered some of the poetry Mahla had copied:—

"The world is lovely. O, my God, I thank Thee that I live."

As Grace repeated these lines to herself, she drew closer to her friend.

"O, Cassy, it's so lonesome to be in the grave!"

Yet Mahla, whom she pitied, was happier on her sick bed than even these joyous girls. Her clinging trust in God was more delightful than opal skies, and ruddy health, and even the dearest friendships.

The Children's Fair was held in the Music Hall, and was fully attended. Robin said there was no room for more people, unless you drove up some nails.

The benevolent enterprise had been undertaken by a handful of young girls, who had worked with great zeal in the very warmest days of summer; and since this fact was well known, it was enough in itself to bring a crowd of people out of mere curiosity.

The little heroines of the evening, dressed in white, with wreaths on their heads, looked as fresh as lilies, but kept modestly in the background, leaving the management of affairs to older people.

It was very much like other fairs—ice cream, cake, chicken salad, sandwiches, saucers of peaches and cream; then singing, some of which "jingled," Horace said, and he liked it.

Grace held up her hands in horror.

"You queer boy, a 'jingle,' as you call it, is a discord, and it sets my ears on edge! It's worse than the creaking of a horrid grindstone!"

Then there were patriotic remarks, no speaker omitting to praise the "fair and noble young misses" who had been the means of raising hundreds of dollars for the soldiers. If these enthusiastic gentlemen had used less flattery, it might have been wiser; for I fear that some of the Princesses went home that night fancying their own little heads and hearts to be running over with wisdom and benevolence.

The very next day Mahla Linck passed quietly away to the Saviour who "loved her so."

It did not seem like death. Grace and Cassy looked at the face which Mahla had once lighted up. It was quite still, now, and changeless; but the sweet, trusting look was there yet—the very look she gave, her Saviour when she saw him coming to take her in his arms and bless her, and bear her away to heaven.

Grace kissed the cold forehead, but it no longer thrilled to her touch. The purified spirit of little Mahla was not there.

"O, Cassy, do you remember what she said?" whispered Grace through a mist of tears. "She said heaven was right in this room; and seems to me I can feel it!"

The quiet of the spot was indeed hallowed. One might almost believe that the peace which had filled little Mahla's heart still lingered about her sleeping form.

"She loved God dearly," thought Grace. "O, I wish I loved Him so!"

Mrs. Linck took Grace's hand and laid it upon the beautiful writing-desk which stood on a table by the

bed. "Keep it," said she; "my Mahla said it must to you belong. She will not, in heaven, need it any more."

Grace sobbed out her thanks, and said she would "always love that desk, and never, never part with it."

She preserves it now among her choicest treasures. It reminds her of the blessed Golden Rule; and she thinks—though I hope never with pride—of the happiness she was once able to give a tired and sick little friend.

It is yet fresh and new; but the years pass so swiftly, that only a little while, and that very desk will be a relic of the past, which another generation of young people will regard as a sacred memento of Grace Clifford's happy girlhood.

[Transcriber's note: Many of the characters in this book speak in dialect or mispronounce words. The many misspellings in the text, including "declar" for "declare" and "mountainous" for "mountainous" have been carefully checked against the hardcopy. The all-caps YOU near the end of the story also appears, as such, in the hardcopy.]

End of Project Gutenberg's Little Prudy's Cousin Grace, by Sophie May

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