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THE HILDEGARDE SERIES

Hildegarde's Neighbors

A STORY FOR GIRLS

BY LAURA E. RICHARDS

Author of

"The Margaret Series," "The Hildegarde Series," "Captain January,"
"Melody," "Five Minute Stories," etc.

ILLUSTRATED

TO

M.C.G.

IN TOKEN OF THE AFFECTION OF MANY YEARS.

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HILDEGARDE'S NEIGHBORS

CHAPTER I.

THE ARRIVAL.

"Mamma," said Hildegard Grahame, flying into her mother's room,
"I have news for you, thrilling news! Guess what it is!"

Mrs. Grahame looked up from her sewing.

"The house is on fire," she said, quietly, "or you have found a Royal Walnut Moth; or, possibly, Hugh has developed wings and flown away. None of these things would greatly surprise me; but in the first case I must take action, while in either of the others I can finish this seam."

"Continue your prosaic labours!" said the girl. "The dress is mine, and I want it."

She sat down, and fanned herself with her broad straw hat. "It is hot!" she announced with emphasis.

"And that is the news?" said her mother. "Astonishing! I should never have guessed it, assuredly."

"Madam, you are a tease! The big yellow house is let, and the family is moving in today, at this moment! NOW, how do you feel?"

"Much the same, thank you!" was the reply. "Slight acceleration of the pulse, with fever-flush; nothing more. But it is great news, certainly, Hilda. Do you know anything of the people?"

Hildegarde quoted:

"I saw them come; one horse was blind,
The tails of both hung down behind,
Their shoes were on their feet.'

"Mr. and Mrs. Miles Merryweather, six children, cook, housemaid and seamstress, two dogs, two cats (at least the basket mewed, so I infer cats), one canary bird, and fourteen trunks."

"Do I understand that Miss Grahame has been looking through the gap in the hedge?"

"You do, madam. And oh, mamma, it was such fun! I really could not help it; and no one saw me; and they came tumbling in in such a funny, jolly way! I rather think we shall like them, but it will be strange to have such near neighbours."

"I wonder what the Colonel will say!" Mrs. Grahame commented.

"He is pleased," said Hildegarde; "actually pleased. He knows Mr. Merryweather, and likes him; in fact, he has just been telling me about them."

"Hildegarde, you are becoming a sad gossip," said Mrs. Grahame, severely. "I think you would better sit down and work these buttonholes at once."

"So that I can repeat the gossip to you," said this impertinent young woman, kissing her mother lightly on the forehead. "Precisely, dear madam. Where is my thimble? Oh, here! Where are the buttonholes? Oh, there! Well, now you shall hear. And I fear I have been a gossip, indeed."

"It began with obedience to my elders and betters. You told me to go down and see how Mrs. Lankton's 'neurology' was; and I went. I found the poor old thing in bed, and moaning piteously. I am bound to say, however, that the moans did not begin till after I clicked the latch. It is frightful to see how suspicious a course of Mrs. Lankton always makes me. I went in, and the room was hermetically sealed, with a roaring fire in the air-tight stove."

"To-day!" exclaimed Mrs. Grahame; "the woman will die!"

"Not she!" said Hildegarde. "I was nearly suffocated, and protested, with such breath as I could find; but she said, 'Oh, Miss Grahame, my dear! you don't know anything about trouble or sickness, and no need to before your time. A breath of air, my dear, is like the bellers to my neurology—the bellers itself! Ah! I ain't closed my eyes, not to speak of, since you was here last.'

"I tried to convince her that good air was better than bad, since she must breathe some kind of air; but she only shook her head and groaned, and told me about a woman who got into her oven and shut the door, and stayed there till she was baked 'a beautiful light brown,' as Mrs. Lincoln says. "T was a brick oven, dear, such as you don't see 'em nowadays; and she was cured of her neurology, slick and slap; but I don't never expect no such help of mine, now Mr. Aytoun's dead and gone. Not but what your blessed ma is a mother to me, and so I always tell the neighbours.'

"Do you want any more, missis? I can go on indefinitely, if you like. I stayed as long as I dared, and managed to hold the door open quite a bit, so that a little air really did get in; and I gave her the liniment, and rubbed her poor old back, and then gave her a spoonful of jelly, and ran. That is the first part of my tale. Then, I was coming home through the Ladies' Garden, and I found my Hugh playing Narcissus over a pool, and wondering whether freckles were dirt on his soul that came out in spots—

the lamb! And I had to stay and talk with him a bit, and he was so dear! And then I walked along, and just as I came to the gap in the hedge, Mrs. Grahame, my dear madam, I heard the sound of a lawnmower on the other side, and a man's voice whistling. This was amazing, and I am human, though I don't know whether you ever noticed it. I looked, I did; and so would others, if they had been there. A wagon stood at the back door, all piled with trunks and bags and baskets; I liked the look of the baskets, I can't tell exactly why. And at that very moment a carriage drove up, with two delightful brown horses, and a brown man who looked delightful, too, driving. I know it must be Mr. Merryweather, mammy, and I am sure we shall like him. Tall and straight and square, with clear blue eyes and broad shoulders; and handled his horses well, and—what are you laughing at, Mrs. Grahame, if I may be permitted to ask?"

"I was only thinking that this charming individual was, in all probability, the coachman," said Mrs. Grahame, with mild malignity.

"Mamma!" cried Hildegard, indignantly. "As if I didn't know a coachman when I saw him! Besides, the Colonel—but wait! Well, and then there was Mrs. Merryweather—stout and cheerful-looking, and I should think very absent-minded. Well, but, mother," seeing Mrs. Grahame about to protest, "she was dressed for driving, not to say travelling, and she—she had a pen behind her ear. She truly had!"

"There were two big girls, and two big boys, and a little girl, and a little boy. I thought they all looked nice, and the girls were pretty, and one of the big boys was so full of fun he twinkled all over. A handsome boy, with red hair and dark blue eyes; but, oh, such a pity! his name is Obadiah, for I heard the other call him so. How can intelligent people call a boy Obadiah?"

She sewed for some minutes in silence, her needle darting in and out with thoughtful regularity, then went on.

"All the family seem to have strange names. The other boy is called Ferguson, and one girl is Toots, and another is Chucky. I detest nicknames; but these people all seemed so jolly, and on such good terms with each other, that I felt a sort of warming to them. The girl named Toots tumbled out of the wagon, and the others all laughed, and she laughed, too. She dropped everything she was carrying, and she was carrying a great deal,—a butterfly-net, and a mouse-trap, and three books, and a bandbox,—and everybody seemed to think that the best joke of all. One called her medicine dropper, and another drop-cake, and another dropped egg, and so on; and away they all went into the house, laughing and shouting and tumbling over each other. Such a jolly family. Mamma!"

"Yes, my dear," said Mrs. Grahame, very quietly, but without looking up.

"Nothing!" said Hildegard. "You are an angel, that is all."

Mrs. Grahame sighed, and thought, as Hildegard had been thinking, how good it would be to have many children, like a crown of sunbeams, about her; and thought of a little grave in Greenwood, where her only boy lay.

Presently she looked up with her usual bright smile.

"This is all very interesting, Hilda, and I fully sympathize with your feelings behind the hedge; but you have not told me how you came to know about our new neighbours. Did Colonel Ferrers join you at your peep-hole?"

"He did, mamma! He did just precisely that. I saw him coming along the road, swinging his stick, and frowning and humming to himself,—dear thing! And when he came near the house, and heard the voices, he stopped and looked, and began to go softly and slowly; so then I knew that he, too, wanted to see what was going on. So I slipped to the gate and beckoned to him, and he came in on tiptoe and joined me. Such fun we had,—just like two conspirators! He could see over my head, so we could both look at once; and he kept muttering scraps of information in my ear, so that it quite buzzed. Yes, I know you are shocked, dear madam, but it really could not be helped; and you said once to Jack—poor old Jack!—that his uncle was a criterion of gentle breeding and manners! So now, Mrs. Grahame!"

"Well," said Mrs. Grahame, "since matters are so, I may as well hear what my criterion had to say about our new neighbours. A pretty state of things, truly! the magnate and the maiden, spying through bushes on these unsuspecting strangers. Say on, unhappy girl!"

"Of course he said, 'Hum, ha!' first, a good many times; and we laughed at each other, under our breath, and were very happy. And then he said, 'Miles Merryweather, my dear! Excellent person! Heard he had taken the old house, but had no idea he was coming so soon. Eminent scientific man, manager of the new chemical works at Brompton, over yonder. Met him once, some years ago; glad to renew the acquaintance. Large family, I see, yes, yes; hum, ha! Boy about Hugh's age; inferior to him in intellect,

my dear, I'll bet a—I should be tolerably certain. Astonishing lad, my Hugh! Ha! Mrs. Merryweather, presumably; literary, I hear, and that sort of thing. Don't care for literary people myself; prefer their books; but looks amiable. Pretty girl that, Hilda, my dear! the tall slip with the fair hair! Yes, yes! "A pretty girl's the noblest work of"—you remember? What's that? "An honest man," in the original? Now, will you hear this girl setting her elders to rights? I wonder what your mother was thinking of when she brought you up, young woman!' and so on, and so on, in his own delightful way. Really, mamma, from what he said, we are going to have a great acquisition to the little neighbourhood. We must call as soon as it would be in any way decent, mustn't we? Oh, but wait! I must tell you the end. We had been so interested in watching the children, and in seeing them go tumbling down and up into the house, that we had lost sight of Mr. Merryweather himself. I suppose he must have driven round to the stable and left the horses there; for suddenly, almost in our ears, we heard a deep voice saying, 'A fine hedge, but needs clipping badly; we must set the boys to work in the morning.' We started back as if we had been shot. Colonel Ferrers turned purple, and I felt every colour in the rainbow flooding my cheeks. We made sure we had been seen or heard, and I think Colonel Ferrers was on the point of stepping forward like a soldier, and apologizing; but I held his arm for a moment, in pure cowardice, and the next moment we saw Mr. and Mrs. Merryweather, arm in arm, gazing calmly at the hedge, and evidently unconscious of any guilty crouchers on the other side. Oh, mammy! if you could have seen us stealing away, how you would have laughed. The Colonel is not very light, you know, bless him! and to see him mincing along on the tips of his dear toes, scarcely daring to draw breath, still purple with embarrassment and suppressed laughter, and looking over his shoulder at every step, as if he expected to see Mr. Merryweather come bursting through the hedge in pursuit,—oh, it was too funny! When we got round the corner we both sat down on the steps and giggled, like two infants; and then he said he was deeply ashamed of me, and bade me go in and make confession to you for both of us. So now I have done it, dear madam, and you are to forgive all our sins, negligences and ignorances, please, and the Colonel is coming to tea, with his compliments."

CHAPTER II.

OLD FRIENDS AND NEW.

It did indeed seem that the advent of the new neighbours might make a great difference in Hildegarde Grahame's life, if, as she hoped, they were the right kind of neighbours. She was an only child. She and her mother had lived now for two years at Braeside, a lovely country place which they had come to look on as home. Hildegarde was always happy, and was unconscious of any want in her life; but her mother often longed for another daughter, or a pleasant girl in the neighbourhood, to be a companion for her dear one. True, Hildegarde had one young friend, Hugh Allen, the ward of Colonel Ferrers, their kind and eccentric neighbour; but Hugh, though a darling, was a little boy, and could not "dovetail" into a girl's life as another girl might. Perhaps Mrs. Grahame hardly realized how completely she herself filled Hildegarde's idea of a friend and companion. The daughter was enough for her; her own life seemed full and running over with joy and work; but for the child she wanted always more and more. So her hopes, as well as Hildegarde's, rose high when she heard of the pleasant-looking girls who had come to the next-door house. The house was a large, old-fashioned one; less stately than Roseholme, Colonel Ferrers' house; less home-like and comfortable, perhaps, than Braeside,—but that might only be because it had been so long uninhabited, Hildegarde thought,—yet still pleasant enough, with its tall columns and broad piazza. The house was yellow, the columns white, and the cheerful colours were set off by the dark trees, elms and locusts, that bent over it and almost hid it from the road. A smooth stretch of lawn lay between the house and the hedge, through which Hildegarde and the Colonel had made their observations: a good lawn for tennis, Hildegarde thought. How good it would be to play tennis again! She had been longing for the time when Hugh would be big enough to learn, or when Jack Ferrers, her cousin, would come back from Germany. How surprised Jack would be when she wrote him that the yellow house was inhabited. What friends he might make of those two nice-looking boys, unless he took one of his shy fits, and would have nothing to do with them. Jack was a trying boy, though very dear.

With these things in her mind, Hildegarde was sauntering toward the Ladies' Garden, on the day after the new arrival. This was a favourite haunt of hers, and she was very apt to go there for a season of meditation, or when she wanted to find Hugh. It was a curious place,—an old, neglected, forgotten garden, with high, unclipped box hedges, overhung by whispering larches. Hildegarde had dreamed many a dream under those larches, sitting beside the little stream that plashed and fell in a tiny rocky hollow, or pacing up and down the grassy paths. For the child Hugh, too, this place had a singular

fascination, and he would hang for hours over a certain still, brown pool at the foot of the garden, thinking unutterable things, occasionally making a remark to his dog, but for the most part silent. Knowing his ways, Hildegard was the more surprised, on this occasion, to hear the sound of voices in lively conversation. Whom could the boy have picked up and brought here? He had no friend of his own age; like herself, he was a lone child; and it was with a little pang, which she almost laughed to feel, that she drew near, and softly parted the branches that hung between her and the pool. The first step was fatal, she thought, and she was apparently condemned to be a peeper and an eavesdropper for the rest of her days.

Hugh was sitting beside the pool, but not in his favourite Narcissus-like attitude. His knees were well up in front of him, his hands were clasped over them, and facing him, in precisely the same position, was a boy in blue jean overalls, with a shock of black hair, and bright, dark eyes.

"What kind of fish?" asked the black-eyed boy, with kindling look.

"Little fish with silver tails," said Hugh, "and shining eyes. They look at me, and sometimes I think they listen to what I say; but they cannot speak, you know."

"Ho! I should think not!" said Black-eyes, scornfully. "I mean what KIND of fish are they, when you catch 'em,—minnows, or dace, or sticklebacks, or what? What are their names?"

"I do not know that," said Hugh. "I never thought of their names; and I don't catch them."

"Why not? Wouldn't you be let? Don't the people in the house allow fishing? I thought you said they were nice people!" and my lord showed a face of keen disgust.

"I don't want to catch them," said Hugh, quietly. "Why should I? They swim about, and I see them shine like silver and purple under the brown water. Sometimes they have crimson spots, like drops of blood, or ruby stones. Look! there is one now, a ruby-spotted one!"

"Oh, my crickey!" cried the strange boy, jumping up, and dancing from one foot to the other. "It's a trout, you idiot! Gimme a line! gimme a net, or something! Gimme—" He snatched off his cap, and made a frantic effort to catch the trout, which flipped its tail quietly at him, and withdrew under a rock.

The boy sat down, breathless, and stared at Hugh with all his eyes.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked, at length "What kind of a fellow ARE you, anyhow? Are you loony?"

Hugh pondered, the question being new to him.

"I—don't—know!" he announced, after sufficient thought.

There was a moment of silence, and black eyes and blue exchanged an ardent gaze. Hugh's eyes were bright, with the brightness of a blue lake, where the sunbeams strike deep into it, and transfuse the clear water with light; but the eyes of the strange boy twinkled and snapped, as when sunshine sparkles from ripple to ripple. He was the first to break the silence.

"Where do you go to school?" he asked. "How old are you? how far have you got in arithmetic? fractions? So am I! Hate 'em? so do I! Play base-ball?"

"No!" said Hugh.

"Isn't there a nine here?"

"Nine?" Hugh turned this over in his mind. "I only know of three at Roseholme. One is carved ivory, carved all over with dragons, and of course one could not play with that; and there are two cricket balls that the Colonel had when he was a boy, and he says I may play with those some day, when I know enough not to break windows. Perhaps you have learned that, if you are used to having nine balls."

The stranger stared again, with a look in which despair was dawning. "You must be loony!" he muttered. And then, aloud, "Can't you play anything? What can you do?"

"I can run," said Hugh, after another pause of reflection, "and swim, of course, and box a little, and fence."

"Fence!" said Black-eyes; his voice took a more respectful tone. "Where did you learn to fence? You're too young, aren't you?"

"I am nine!" said Hugh. "I began to learn two years ago, and I have outgrown my first foil, and the

Colonel has given me a new one, almost full size."

"Who's the Colonel?"

"Colonel Ferrers, the gentleman I live with. My great-aunt is his housekeeper; and he is my dearest friend, except my Beloved and her mother AND my great-aunt."

"Who is your Beloved? What makes you talk so funny?"

The black-eyed boy no longer spoke scornfully, the fencing having made a deep impression on him, but he looked more puzzled than ever.

"How do I talk?" asked Hugh, in return. "This is the way I DO talk, you see. And my Beloved is Miss Grahame, and that is what you have to call her; but I call her my Beloved, because she is that; and she is the most beautiful—"

But here the young gentleman was interrupted; there was a hasty putting aside of the branches, and Hildegarde, with pink cheeks and a guilty conscience, stood before the two boys. They both jumped up at once, having good manners; but Hugh's rising was calm and leisurely, while the black-eyed lad scrambled to his feet, and darted swift looks here and there, preparing for flight.

"How do you do?" said Hildegarde, coming forward quickly and holding out her hand. "You are not going, are you? I think you must be one of our new neighbours, and we ought to make acquaintance, oughtn't we?"

The boy smiled, a little quick, frightened smile, "just the way a bird would do if it could," Hildegarde thought, and laid a small brown paw timidly in hers.

"This is my Beloved!" said Hugh, by way of introduction. "So you can see for yourself."

"And am I not to hear my neighbour's name?" asked Hildegarde.

"I am Will Merryweather," said the black-eyed boy.

"I am very glad to see you, Will. I hope you and Hugh will be friends, for it is so nice to have friends of one's own age, and Hugh has no one. You, of course, have brothers and sisters, and that is the best of all, isn't it?"

There was no resisting Hildegarde's smile; the young Merryweather wavered, smiled, smiled again, and in five minutes they were all seated together, and chatting away like old friends.

It appeared that Master Will was pleased with his new surroundings, but that the absence of a baseball nine was a tragic thing, not lightly to be contemplated. The house was "no end;" the dwelling they had just left was entirely too small for them.

"You see," he said, "when we went to that house we weren't born at all, most of us; that is, there was only Bell and the boys. So it was big enough then, and they had rooms to themselves, and all kinds of things. But then we began to come along, and at last it got so small that the boys had to sleep in the barn, and when there was more than one visitor I had to go on the parlour sofa, and it's a beast of a sofa to sleep on,—haircloth, you know, and you slide off all night; so father thought we'd better move, and we came here."

"Is Bell your eldest sister?" asked Hildegarde, not sure how far it would be right to question this frank youth.

"Yes, that's Bell. She's no end nice and jolly; and she's in college, you know, and we have such larks when she comes home."

In college! Hildegarde's hopes fell. She knew she could not get on with college girls, though she had great respect for them. Dear me! Probably Bell would be very learned, and would despise her as an "unidead girl." Cruel Dr. Johnson, to originate that injurious epithet!

At this moment she heard a fresh, joyous voice calling,—

"Will! Willy boy! W—I—Double—L, where are you?"

"That's Bell," cried Will, starting up. "She's come after me."

"Here I am, Bell!" he shouted. "Here's a jolly place; come along! I say, may she come along?" he added, turning to Hildegarde with a conscience-stricken look. Hildegarde nodded eagerly, hoping that

his request had not been heard. Just beyond the Ladies' Garden was a high board-fence which separated Braeside from the neighbouring place. At the top of this fence appeared two small but strong-looking hands, and following them, a girl's face, blue-eyed, rosy-cheeked and smiling.

"You little rascal!" cried the girl; and then she caught sight of Hildegarde. "Oh, I beg your pardon!" she cried, hastily. "I didn't know,—I was looking for my brother—"

"Oh, please come up!" cried Hildegarde, running to the fence. "Please come over! Oh, you mustn't hang by your hands that way; you'll get splinters in them. You are Miss Merryweather, and I am Hildegarde Grahame; so now we are introduced, and let me help you over, do!"

Hildegarde delivered this breathlessly, and held out both hands to help the stranger; but the latter, with a frank smile and a nod, drew herself up without more ado, perched on the top of the fence, then sprang lightly to the ground.

"Thank you so much!" she said, warmly, taking Hildegarde's outstretched hand. "Of course I didn't know I was trespassing, but I'm glad I came. And oh, what a lovely place! I didn't know there was such a place out of a book. Oh, the hedges! and the brook! and the trees! How can it be real?"

Hildegarde nodded in delight. "Yes!" she said. "That is just the way I felt when I first saw the place. It was some time before I could feel it right to come here without apologizing to the ghosts."

"Your ancestors' ghosts?" said Bell Merryweather, inquiringly. "Aren't they your own ghosts? Haven't you lived here always?"

Hildegarde explained that the place had belonged to a cousin of her mother's, who left it to her at his death.

"Oh!" said Miss Merryweather; then she considered a little, with her head on one side. Hildegarde decided that, though not a beauty, the new-comer had one of the pleasantest faces she had ever seen.

"On the whole," the girl went on, "I am rather glad that my theory was wrong. The truth is less romantic, but it makes you much more real and accessible, which is, after all, desirable in a country neighbourhood."

"Do tell me what you mean!" cried Hildegarde.

Miss Merryweather laughed.

"If you are quite sure you won't mind?" she said, tentatively. "Well, your place is so beautiful,—even apart from this—this—bower of nymphs,—it is so shadowed with great trees, and so green with old turf, that when I saw you this morning walking under the tree, I made up a romance about you,—a pretty little romance. You are quite sure you don't mind? You were the last of an ancient family, and you were very delicate, and your mother kept you in this lovely solitude, hoping to preserve your precious life. And now," she burst into a clear peal of laughter, in which Hildegarde joined heartily, "now I see you near, and you are no more delicate than I am, and you are not the last of an ancient family. At least, I hope you are not," she cried, growing suddenly grave.

"Oh! do you like to make romances?" cried Hildegarde, with ready tact waiving the last question. "It is my delight, too. No, I am not in the least delicate, as you say, and we have only been here two years, my mother and I; yet it seems like home, and I hope we shall always live here now. And are you beginning to feel at all settled in,—I don't know any name for your house; we have called it just the 'Yellow House' as it had no special interest, being uninhabited. But I suppose you will give it a name?"

"If we can decide on one!" said Bell Merryweather, laughing. "The trouble is, there are so many of us to decide. I want to call it Gamboge: brief, you see, and simple. But one boy says it must be Chrome Castle, and another votes for Topaz Tower; so I don't know how it will end."

"When I was a little girl," said Hildegarde, "I had a book, the dearest little book, called 'Pumpkin House.' It was about—"

"Oh, DID you have 'Pumpkin House?'" cried Bell Merryweather, eagerly. "Oh! wasn't it a darling? And didn't you think you never could be perfectly happy till you could live in a pumpkin? And to think of my forgetting it now, just when the opportunity has come! Of course we shall call the new home Pumpkin House!"

"Will the others like it?" asked Hildegarde.

"They'd better!" said Bell. "And they will, of course. It was only because we had not found the right

name that we did not agree. Thank you so much, Miss Grahame! Oh, I must go now, for I have fifty thousand things to do! But,—I am so glad to have met you."

"And I to know you," cried Hildegarde, warmly. "I hope we shall see a great deal of each other. We shall come to call in due form, as soon as you are ready to receive visitors. But meanwhile, allow me to present you with the freedom of the fence and of the Ladies' Garden. See! our two boys are deep in confidences already."

In truth, the black head and the red one were laid close together, and the two round faces wore the same look of deep importance.

"Mine are green and white," said Will. "That is Austrian, but I have them Crusaders a good deal of the time."

"Mine are blue," said Hugh, "and sometimes they are Americans, and sometimes they are Greeks and Trojans. Will you be my friend, and shall we fight great fights together?"

"All right," said Will Merryweather, shyly.

"We will plan a campaign," cried Hugh, his eyes shining with ardour.

"Yes; but now you must come in to your music lesson," said Hildegarde, taking his hand, and frowning at herself for feeling another little pang, as Hugh's face turned toward his new acquaintance.

"Read the Talisman?" cried Will. "I'll be Saladin, and you be Richard."

"Come along, Will," said his sister, taking him by the shoulders and marching him toward the fence.

"Lots of sand that will do for Palestine!" "Plains of Marathon over beyond the stone wall!" "Turbans and lances!" "Horsetail helmets and real armour!"

Still shouting, Will was pitched bodily over the fence by his stalwart sister, while Hugh went away holding Hildegarde's hand, and looking backward as he passed.

"We will fight!" he said, giving a little leap of joy. "Our necks shall be clothed with thunder, and we shall say, 'Ha! ha!' among the trumpets. And will you bind my wounds, Beloved?" he added, looking up in Hildegarde's face. "And will you give me my shield, and tell me to come back with it or upon it? Will you do that? The cover of the washboiler will do beautifully for a shield."

"So it will!" said Hildegarde; and they went into the house together.

CHAPTER III.

PUMPKIN HOUSE.

When Mrs. Grahame and Hildegarde went to call on their new neighbours, two days after the meeting in the garden, they found them already entirely at home, the house looking as if they had always lived in it. The furniture was plain, and showed marks of hard usage; but there were plenty of pictures, and the right kind of pictures, as Hildegarde said to herself, with satisfaction; and there were books,—books everywhere. In the wide, sunny sitting-room, into which they were ushered by a pleasant-faced maid, low bookcases ran all round the walls, and were not only filled, but heaped with books, the volumes lying in piles along the top. The centre-table was a magazine-stand, where Saint Nicholas and The Century, The Forum and The Scientific American jostled each other in friendly rivalry. Mrs. Merryweather sat in a low chair, with her lap full of books, and had some difficulty in rising to receive her visitors. Her hearty welcome assured them that they had not come a day too soon, as Mrs. Grahame feared.

"My dear lady, no! I am charmed to see you. Bell has had such pleasure in making friends with your daughter. Miss Grahame, I am delighted to see you!" and Mrs. Merryweather held out what she thought was her hand, but Hildegarde shook instead a small morocco volume, and was well content when she saw that it was the "Golden Treasury."

"Bell has had such pleasure that I have been most anxious to share it, and to know you and your daughter. Shall we be neighbourly? I am the most unceremonious person in the world. Dear me! isn't there a chair without books on it? Here, my dear Mrs. Grahame, sit down here, pray! It is Dr. Johnson himself who makes room for you, and you must excuse the great man for being slow in his movements."

With a merry smile, she offered the chair from which she had just removed a huge folio dictionary. Hildegarde found an ottoman which she could easily share with a volume of Punch, and Mrs. Merryweather beamed at them over her spectacles, and said again that she was delighted to see them.

"We are getting the books to rights gradually," she said, "but it takes time, as you see. I have to do this myself, with Bell's help. She will be down in a moment, my dear. We have established an overflow bookcase in a cupboard upstairs, and she has just gone up with a load. Ah! here she is. Bell, my dear, Mrs. and Miss Grahame. So kind of them to come and see us!"

Bell shook hands warmly, her frank, pleasant face shining with good-will. "I am so glad to see you!" she cried, sitting down by Hildegarde on a pile of Punches. "I hoped you would come to-day, even if the books are not in order yet. They are so dear, the books; they are part of the family, and we want to be sure that they have places they like. I suppose Punch ought by rights to go with people of his own sort—if there is anybody!—but one wants him close at hand, don't you think so? where one can take him up any time,—when it rains, or when things bother one. Do you remember that Leech picture?" and they babbled of Punch, their beloved, for ten minutes, and liked each other better at every one of the ten.

"Bell, I want Mrs. and Miss Grahame to see our other children," said Mrs. Merryweather, presently. "Where is Toots, and where are the boys?"

"Toots is upstairs, poor lamb!" Bell replied. "When Mary came to tell me of our visitors' arrival I was just putting away Sibbes's 'Soul's Conflict,' and various other dreadful persons whom you would not let me burn; so I dumped them in Toots's arms, and ran off and left her. Being a 'bedient old soul,' she is probably standing just where I left her. I will go—"

But at this moment Toots appeared,—a girl of fifteen, tall, shy and blushing, and was introduced as "my daughter Gertrude." She confessed, on interrogation, that she had dropped Sibbes's "Soul's Conflict" out of the window, and was on her way to pick it up.

"Why didn't you drop it down the well?" asked her sister. "It is so dry, I am sure a wetting would do it good!"

"Sit down, my dear!" said Mrs. Merryweather, comfortably. "One of the boys is sure to be about, and will bring in the book. Sibbes IS a little dry, Bell, but very sound writing, much sounder than a good deal of the controversial writing of—bless me! what's that?"

Something resembling a human wheel had revolved swiftly past the window, emitting unearthly cries.

Hildegarde blushed and hesitated. "I—I think it was your brother Obadiah," she said to Bell.

The latter stared, open-eyed. "My brother Obadiah?" she repeated. "How did you know—I beg your pardon! but why do you say Obadiah?"

Hildegarde glanced at her mother, who was laughing openly. "You will have to make full confession, Hilda," she said. "I do not think Mrs. Merryweather will be very severe with you."

"It is a dreadful thing to confess," said Hildegarde, laughing and blushing. "I—to tell the truth, I happened to be walking in our garden, on the other side of the tall hedge, just when you drove up, the other day; and—there is a most convenient little peep-hole, and I wanted to see our new neighbours, and—and—I peeped! Are you much shocked, Mrs. Merryweather? I heard several names,—Bell, and Toots, and—I—I heard the handsome red-haired boy called Obadiah."

The Merryweathers laughed merrily, and Mrs. Merryweather was about to speak, when a voice was heard in the hall, chanting in a singular, nasal key,—

"Dropsy dropped a book,
And she's going to be shook!
Dropsy dropped a volume,
Which makes her very solume!"

The door was pushed open, and the handsome red-haired boy entered, walking on his hands, holding aloft between his feet the missing "Soul's Conflict."

"My son Gerald," said Mrs. Merryweather, with a wicked smile.
"Gerald, my love, Mrs. and Miss Grahame."

If Hildegarde was crimson (and she undoubtedly was), Gerald Merryweather was brilliant scarlet when he rose to his feet and saluted the strangers; but he was also atwinkle with laughter, the whole lithe, graceful body of him seeming to radiate fun. One glance at Bell, another at Hildegarde, and the whole party broke into peal on peal of merriment.

"How do you do?" said Scarlet to Crimson, holding out a strong brown hand, and gripping hers cordially. "Awfully glad! Please excuse me, Mrs. Grahame, for coming in like that. I thought there was no one here but the mother, and she is as used to one end of me as the other."

"So you are Gerald, and not Obadiah," said Mrs. Grahame. "I congratulate you on the prettier name."

"Oh, Ferguson calls me Obadiah!" said Gerald, laughing again. "He's the other of me, you know. Beg pardon! you don't know, perhaps. We are twins, Ferguson and I."

"And Ferguson, my dear Mrs. Grahame," interposed Mrs. Merryweather, "is my son Philip. Why these boys cannot call each other by their rightful names is a family mystery; but so it is."

"Is your brother Fer—Philip like you?" asked Hildegarde, feeling sure that he was not, as the other boy she had seen certainly had not red hair.

"Not a bit!" replied Gerald, cheerfully. "No resemblance, I believe. 'Beauty and the Beast' we call each other, too. Sometimes I am Beauty, and more times I am the Beast; depends on which has had his hair cut last."

"Or brushed," said Bell, glancing at the curly hair, which was certainly in rather a wild condition.

"Oh, yes! beg pardon!" said Gerald, glancing ruefully at the mirror, and running his hand through his curly mop.

"Beast this time, and no mistake. Grass rather long, you see, and tore my locks of gold. Happy thought! Desiring to tear your hair in sorrow, walk on hands through long grass; effect admirable. Wonder Hamlet never tried it!"

"Hamlet's hair was black," said Toots, seriously.

"And therefore he could not walk on his hands," said Gerald. "I see! Dropsy, you are a genius; that's the trouble with you."

A long gray leg appeared at the open window, and after waving wildly for a moment, disappeared suddenly.

"Ferguson!" said Gerald, turning to Hildegarde. "His mountain way! Becoming aware of your presence, he has retired, to reverse legs, and will shortly reappear, fondly hoping that you did not see him before."

Sure enough, in a few moments another tall boy entered, looking preternaturally grave, with his hair scrupulously smooth.

"Been upstairs, you see," said the irrepressible Gerald, "and slicked himself all up. Quite the Beauty, Fergs."

"Gerald, do be quiet!" said Mrs. Merryweather. "This is Philip, my other twin boy, Mrs. Grahame."

Philip greeted Hildegarde and her mother with grave courtesy, taking no notice of his brother's gibes.

"You find us in a good deal of confusion," he said to Hildegarde, sitting down on a table, the only available seat. "It takes a long time to get settled, don't you think so?"

"Oh—yes!" said Hildegarde, struggling for composure, and conscious of Gerald's eyes fixed intently on her. "But you all look so home-like and comfortable here."

"Especially Ferguson!" broke in Gerald, sotto voce. "How comfortable he looks, doesn't he, Miss Grahame? No use, Fergs! We marked your little footprints in the air, my son."

"Oh!" said Philip, looking much discomposed. "Well, I'll punch your head, Obe, anyhow."

"Suppose we come out and look at the tennis-court," said Bell. "I am sure you play tennis, Miss Grahame."

"Indeed I do," said Hildegarde, heartily. "I have often looked longingly at that nice smooth lawn, and I hoped you were going to lay it out for a court."

"Phil," said Gertrude aside to her brother, who was still blushing and uncomfortable, "you needn't mind a bit. Jerry came in walking on his hands, right into the room, before he saw them at all; and they are so nice, they didn't care; they liked it."

"Did they?" said Phil, also in a whisper. "Well, that's some comfort; but I'll punch his head for him, all the same."

And Gerald cried aloud,—

"Away, away to the mountain's brow, For Ferguson glares like an angry cow. He'll punch my head, and kill me dead, Before I have time to say 'Bow-wow.'"

And the five young people went off laughing to the tennis-court.

CHAPTER IV.

HESTER'S PLAYROOM.

"'THAR!' said the Deacon. 'Naow she'll dew!'"

Hildegarde spoke in a tone of satisfaction, as she looked about her room. She had been setting it to rights,—not that it was ever "to wrongs" for any length of time,—for Bell and Gertrude Merryweather were coming to spend the morning with her, and she wanted her own special sanctum to look its best. She was very fond of this large, bare, airy chamber, with its polished floor, its white wainscoting, and its quaint blue-dragon paper. She had made it into a picture gallery, and just now it was a flower-show, too; for every available vase and bowl was filled with flowers from wood and garden. On the round table stood a huge Indian jar of pale green porcelain, filled with nodding purple iris; the green glass bowls held double buttercups and hobble-bush sprays, while two portraits, those of Dundee and William the Silent, were wreathed in long garlands of white hawthorn. The effect was charming, and Hildegarde might well look satisfied. But Bell Merryweather, when she came into the room, thought that its owner was the most beautiful part of it. Hildegarde was used to herself, as she would have said frankly; she knew she was pretty, and it was pleasant to be pretty, and there was an end of it. But to Bell, in whose family either brown locks or red were the rule, this white and gold maiden, with her cool, fresh tints of pearl and rose, was something wonderful. Hildegarde's dress this morning was certainly nothing astonishing, simply a white cambric powdered with buttercups; but its perfect freshness, its trim simplicity, made it so absolutely the fit and proper thing, that Bell's honest heart did homage to the lovely vision; there was something almost like reverence in her eyes as she returned Hildegarde's cordial greeting. As for the young Gertrude, all the world was fairyland to her, and Hildegarde was the queen, opening the door of a new province. The most important thing in life was not to fall or drop anything on this first visit to the strange and wonderful old house, as all the Merryweathers persisted in calling Braeside. Gertrude was always falling and dropping things. At home nobody expected anything else; but here it was different, and the poor child was conscious of every finger and toe as she stepped along gingerly. Gerald's parting words were still ringing in her ears:

"When you feel that you must fall down, Dropsy, be careful not to fall into shelves of china,—that's all. Bookcases are the best things to fall into, you'll find; and a book is the best thing to drop, too, my poor child. When you feel the fit coming on, put down the teacup and grab a dictionary; then choose the toe you want it to fall on,—superfluous aunt of the family, or some one of that sort,—and you are all right. Bless you, Dropsy! Farewell, my dear!"

Hildegarde took the girls directly up to her room, and they admired all her arrangements as heartily as she could wish. Bell exclaimed with amazement at the size of the room.

"To have all this for your own, your castle and defence," she cried. "What would the girls at college say if they could see such a room as this, and one girl living in it! Twelve by fourteen is our rule, and two girls to that."

"Dear me!" said Hildegarde. "Why, I couldn't live without room."

"Oh yes, you could!" said Bell, laughing. "One gets used to everything. It's rather good fun seeing how closely one can pack. We have sixty-five pictures in our room, my chum and I. Oh, you have my William! I didn't know anyone else had just exactly that portrait."

"Your William, indeed!" cried Hildegarde, laughing. "Why, he is mine, my very own, and no one ever began to love him as I do."

The two girls fell into a friendly discussion, and ran lightly over the history of the Netherlands, with occasional excursions to Italy, the Highlands, or the south of France, as one picture or another claimed their attention. Hildegarde was enjoying herself immensely, and did the honours with ardour, delighted to find that the "college girl" knew all about the things she loved, without being in the least bookish or prosy.

"I thought you would be 'primmed up with majestic pride,'" she said, laughing. "I was frightened when your little brother said you were at college, and I instantly saw you with spectacles, and pale, lank hair done up in a bob on the top of your head. And then—then you came over the top of the fence, looking like—like——"

"Like what?" said Bell. "I insist upon knowing."

"You are sure you don't mind?" asked Hildegarde, as Bell herself had asked the day before. "You looked like an apple,—so exactly like a nice red and white Benoni I was sure you must be good to eat. Oh, I am so glad you came!"

"So am I!" said Bell.

"Do you think we might drop the 'Miss' part?" inquired Hildegarde, "or are you too dignified?"

"Apples must not stand on dignity," replied Bell, gravely. "But I have wanted to say 'Hildegarde' ever since I came into this room, because the name just fits the room—and you."

At this point Gertrude, who had forgotten her destiny in the joy of pictures, and was backing round the walls in silent ecstasy, saw—or rather did not see—her opportunity, and fell quietly downstairs. One special feature of Hildegarde's room was the staircase, her own private staircase, of which she was immensely proud. It was a narrow, winding stair, very steep and crooked, leading to the ground floor. When Gertrude disappeared down this gulf with a loud crash, Hildegarde was much alarmed, and flew to the rescue, followed more leisurely by Bell.

"Are you much hurt, my dear?" cried Hildegarde. "Wait till I come and pick you up, poor child!"

"Oh no!" replied Gertrude, softly, from the foot of the stairs, where she lay doubled up against the door. "Thank you, but I never hurt myself. I hope I haven't hurt the stairs."

Bell came along, laughing. "Dear Dropsy!" she said. "Here, come up! She really never does hurt herself," she added, in response to Hildegarde's look of astonishment. "She falls about so much, and has done so since she was a baby, that she keeps in training, I suppose, and her joints and bones are all supple and elastic. This was a good one, though! Sure you are not bruised, little girl?"

Gertrude picked herself up, declining assistance, and maintained stoutly that she was sound in wind and limb. "If only I did not break anything," she said, anxiously. "I came a terrible crack against the panel here, and it seemed as if something gave as I fell past it."

Bell bent down, in spite of Hildegarde's assurance that everything was right, and passed her hand along the wall of the staircase. "There is no crack," she said. "I think it is all right, Toots." She tapped the panel critically. "The wall is hollow here," she said. "Is this your secret chamber, Hildegarde?"

"Hollow?" cried Hildegarde. "What do you mean, Bell? I know of no hollow place there."

"Have you ever looked for one?" Bell inquired. "Search would reveal something in there, I am pretty sure."

Thrilled with curiosity, Hildegarde came down, and the three girls crouched together on the narrow stair, and tapped and rapped here and there. Beyond a doubt, one panel was hollow. What could it mean?

Bell meditated. "What is on the other side of this place?" she asked.

"I—don't know," said Hildegarde. "Stop a moment, though! It must be,—yes, it is! The old chimney, the great square stack, comes near this place. Can there be any space—"

"Then it IS a secret chamber, most likely," said Bell. "I have heard of such things. Shall we try?"

They tried eagerly, pressing here, pushing there, but for some time in vain. At length, as Hildegarde's strong fingers pressed hard on one spot of moulding, she felt it quiver. There was a faint sound, like a murmur of protest; then slowly, unwillingly, the panel moved, obedient to the insistent fingers, and slid aside, revealing a square opening into—the blackness of darkness.

"Oh, it's a dungeon!" cried Gertrude, starting back. "Perhaps the floor will give way, and let us down into places with knives and scythes. You remember 'The Dumberdene,' Bell?"

"No fear, Gertrude," said Hildegarde. "Nothing more horrible than the dining-room is under our feet. But this,—this is very mysterious. Can you see anything, Bell?"

"I begin to get a faint glimmer," said Bell. "Of course, if it is a chimney-room there cannot be any particular light. Shall we creep in? There is evidently a good deal of space."

"By all means," cried Hildegarde. "But let me go first, to bear the brunt of any horrors there may be. Spiders I would not face, but they must all be dead years ago."

She crept in on her hands and knees, closely followed by the two Merryweathers. Growing accustomed to the dimness, they found themselves in a small square chamber, high enough for them to stand upright. The walls were smooth, and thick with dust; the floor was carpeted with something that felt soft and close, like an Eastern rug.

"We simply MUST have light!" cried Hildegarde. "Wait, girls! I will bring a candle and matches."

"No! no!" cried Bell. "Wait a moment! I think I have found a window, or something like one, if I can only get it open."

Again there was a soft, complaining sound, and then a sliding movement; a tiny panel was pushed aside, and a feeble ray of light stole in. The girls' faces glimmered white against the blackness.

"Something obstructs the light," said Hildegarde. "See! this is it." She put her arm out through the little opening, and pushed away a dense mass of vines that hung down like a thick curtain. "That is better," she said. "Now let us see where we are."

It was a curious place, surely, to lie hidden in the heart of a comparatively modern house. A square room, perhaps eight feet across, neatly papered with the blue-dragon paper of Hildegarde's own room; on the floor an old rug, faded to a soft, nameless hue, but soft and fine. On the walls hung a few pictures, quaint little coloured wood-cuts in gilt frames, representing ladies and gentlemen in scant gowns and high-shouldered frock-coats. There were two little chairs, painted blue, with roses on the backs; a low table, and a tiny chest of drawers. The girls looked at each other, a new light dawning in their faces.

"It is a doll's room," said Gertrude, softly, with an awe-stricken look.

"I know! I know whose room it was!" cried Hildegarde. "Wait, oh, wait! I am sure we shall find something else. I will tell you all about it in a moment, but now let us look and find all we can."

With beating hearts they searched the corners of the little chamber. Presently Hildegarde uttered a cry, and drew something forward into the light of the little window; a good-sized object, carefully covered with white cloth, neatly stitched together. Hildegarde took out her pocket scissors, and snipped with ardour, then drew off the cover. It was a doll's bedstead, of polished mahogany, with four pineapple-topped posts, exactly like the great one in which Hildegarde herself slept; and in it, under dainty frilled sheets, blankets and coverlid, lay two of the prettiest dolls that ever were seen. Their nightgowns were of fine linen; the nightcaps, tied under their dimpled chins, were sheer lawn, exquisitely embroidered. One tiny waxen hand lay outside the coverlid, and in it was a folded piece of paper.

"Oh, Hildegarde!" cried Bell, "what does it mean?"

Gertrude was in tears by this time, the big crystal drops rolling silently down her cheeks; her heart was wrung, she did not know why.

"Hester Aytoun," said Hildegarde, softly. "This must have been her playroom, Bell. She used to live here; it is about her that I wanted to tell you. But first let us see what she has written here. I think she would be willing; we are girls, too, and I don't think Hester would mind."

There were tears in Hildegarde's voice, if not in her eyes, as she read the writing, now yellow with

age:

"I, Hester Aytoun, being now sixteen years old, am putting away my dear dolls, the dearest dolls in the world. Sister Barbara says I am far too old for such childish things; but I shall never be too old in my heart, though I may well busy myself with household matters, especially if I must marry Tom in three years, as he says. So I put away my dear dolls, and I shall shut up the playroom, also, for I could not think to pass by it each day and not go in to see them, and that Sister Barbara will not allow. It may be that no one will find my playroom till I show it myself to my little children, if God wills that I have them, which I shall pray always, now that I may not have my dolls any more. But if that should not be, or I should be taken away, then I think no harm to pray that a girl like myself may one day find my playroom that father made for me,—my own room, where I have been a very happy child. A man would never know what it meant, but a girl would know, and if it should so hap, I pray her to be gentle with the bedstead, for one leg is weakly; and if she will leave my dear dolls, when she has well played with them, I shall bless her always for a gentle maiden, wherever I be. So farewell, says "HESTER AYTOUN."

All three girls were crying by this time, and little Gertrude laid her head on her sister's shoulder and sobbed aloud. Bell smoothed her hair with light, motherly touches, drying her own eyes the while. Hildegarde sat silent for a while, the letter in her hand; then she folded it again, and gently, reverently laid it again in the doll's hand.

"Dear Hester!" she said, "we do know, dear; we do understand, indeed."

And then, sitting on the floor by the pretty bedstead, and speaking softly and tenderly, she told the two girls of that other maiden who had lived and died in this old house,—the bright, beautiful Hester Aytoun, who faded in her springtime loveliness, and died at eighteen years; who had left everywhere the traces of her presence, soft, fragrant, like the smell of the flowers in her own garden.

"I chose my bedroom, that you like," said Hildegarde, "because I felt sure, somehow, that it had been hers. I never had a sister, girls, but Hester seems to me like my sister; and sometimes"—she hesitated, and her voice fell still lower—"sometimes I have felt as if she wished it to be so,—as if she liked to come now and then and see the old home, and give a loving look and word to the things she used to care for so much. I am glad we found this place, but I don't think I shall tell anyone else about it, except mamma, of course, and Jack, when he comes home."

Very gently the three girls laid the white covering back over the little dolls, who lay quiet and rosy, and seemed as content as ever was Sleeping Beauty in her tower. They peeped into the chest of drawers, and found it full of dainty frocks and petticoats, all exquisitely made; there was even a pile of tiny handkerchiefs, marked "Annabel" and "Celia." This sight made Gertrude's tears flow afresh; she was a tender-hearted child, and tears fell from her eyes as softly and naturally as dew from a flower.

When all was seen, they closed the little window, and with a mute farewell to the sweet guardian spirit of the little place,—the girl who had loved her dolls, and so made herself dear to all other girls,—the three withdrew, and softly, reluctantly drew the sliding panel after them.

"I shall not forget," whispered Hildegarde, who was the last to leave the secret chamber; "I shall come sometimes, Hester dear, and sit there, just I myself, and we will talk together, the dolls and I. I shall not forget."

The panel slid into its place with a faint click; no sign was left, only the white wainscoting, one panel like another, and the crooked stair winding up to the open, airy room above.

CHAPTER V.

TEA AT ROSEHOLME.

On a certain lovely evening in June, Hildegarde left the house at six o'clock, or, to be precise, at five minutes before six, and took the path that led to Roseholme. It was her eighteenth birthday, and the Colonel was giving her a tea-party. This was a great event, for many years had passed since guests had been invited to Roseholme. The good Colonel, always delighted to be with Hildegarde and her mother, had still kept up his solitary habits at home, and save for little Hugh, who flitted about the dark old house like a sunbeam, it was a lonely place. Now, however, the Colonel had roused himself and

declared that he, and no other, should give his young friend her birthday treat. The Merryweathers were invited, all except the two youngest, Will and Kitty. Mrs. Grahame was already there, having gone over early, at the Colonel's request, to help in arranging certain little matters which he considered beyond the province of his good housekeeper; and now it was time for the "beneficiary," as Gerald Merryweather called her, to follow.

Hildegarde was dressed in white, of course; she always wore white in the evening. Miss Loftus, her neighbour in the new stone house, sometimes expressed wonder at that Grahame girl's wearing white so much, when they hadn't means to keep so much as a pony to carry their mail; her wonder might have been set at rest if she could have peeped into the airy kitchen at Braeside, and seen Hildegarde singing at her ironing-table in the early morning, before the sun was hot. Auntie, the good black cook, washed the dresses generally, though Hildegarde could do that, too, if she was "put to it;" but Hildegarde liked the ironing, and took as much pride—or nearly as much—in her own hems and ruffles as she did in the delicate laces which she "did up" for her mother. Her dress this evening was sheer white lawn, and she had a white rose in her hair, and another in her belt, and, altogether, she was pleasant to look upon. Gerald Merryweather, who with his brother was making his way along another path in the same direction, saw the girl, and straightway glowed with all the ardour of seventeen.

"I say!" he exclaimed, under his breath, "isn't she stunning? Look, Ferg, you old ape! Ever see anything like that?"

Ferguson, who was of a cooler temperament, replied without enthusiasm, maintaining that there had been, in the history of womankind, maidens as beautiful as Miss Grahame, or even more so. Becoming warm in the discussion, the two grappled, and rolled over and over at Hildegarde's feet. She gave a little scream, and then laughed. "Any one hurt?" she asked. "If not, perhaps I had better brush you off a bit before we go into the house."

"A nice opinion you will have of us, Miss Grahame," said Gerald, as he stood still to be brushed. "We can stand straight, and walk, too, like other people, though you may not believe it. But, you see, Ferguson is so exasperating that he disturbs my equilibrium, and then I have to disturb his, that we may continue in brotherly companionship. He was just saying that the sun was no brighter than the stars."

"No more it is, I suppose," said unconscious Hildegarde, "if you are only near enough to one, or far enough from the other. Shall I brush you, too, Mr. Ferg—I beg your pardon, Mr. Merryweather?"

"Oh," cried Gerald, dancing on one foot, "observe his blushes! Observe the cabbage rose in all its purple pride! Isn't he lovely? But you are not going to call us 'Mister,' in earnest, Miss Grahame? You cannot have the heart! We are not accustomed to it, and there is no knowing what effect it may have on my ardent nature, or on Ferguson's flabby disposition." Ferguson extended a long arm and shook his brother with calm energy, till his teeth rattled together.

"Really, if you wouldn't, please," he said, in his quiet voice. "Gerald is a lunatic, of course, and ought to be kept in a barrel and fed through the bung-hole,—only my mother has scruples; but we are 'just the boys,' and nobody ever does call us by handles, you see. So if you wouldn't mind—"

"I shall be delighted!" said Hildegarde. "Bell and I have already come to first names, and I am sure you boys are both too jolly to be ceremonious with; so—Gerald, here we are at the house, and now you really will have to stay right side up, with care."

They went together into the wide, bare hall, with its dark panels hung with family portraits. Colonel Ferrers came to meet them, erect and soldierly. He kissed Hildegarde's cheek, and greeted the boys with a cordial shake of the hand.

"Glad to see you, young people!" he said, in the gruff voice which held the very spirit of kindness. "Glad to see you! Hildegarde, many happy returns of the day to you, my dear child! Take my arm, I beg!"

With Hildegarde on his arm, he led the way to the pretty drawing-room, all white and gold and yellow satin, which was seldom used in these days. Hildegarde had secretly hoped that they would sit in the library, a delightful brown-leather sort of room, to which she had grown well used; but she appreciated the compliment of opening the drawing-room, and put on her best smile and look of pleasure. Hugh Allen left his station by Mrs. Grahame's chair, and came running with open arms to meet his Beloved. "Oh, glory of the sunrise!" he exclaimed, as he threw his arms round her neck. "I hope you will live fifty thousand years, and have strawberry jam every single day of them!"

"Dear me!" cried Hildegarde. "I should beg for gooseberry once a week, dear boy, if it were going on quite so long as that. Well, my mother, you look like the Queen of Conspirators. What have you and

Hugh been talking about, that you both look so guilty?"

"Guilty, my dear Hildegarde?" said Mrs. Grahame, drawing herself up. "The word is a singular one for a daughter to use to her mother."

"Yes," said Hildegarde, "it is! and the thing is a singular one for a mother to be toward her daughter. If ever I saw PLOT written all over an expressive countenance,—but no more of this! Dear Colonel Ferrers, how wonderful the roses are!"

Surely there never were so many roses as at Roseholme. The house had been ransacked for jars, vases and bowls to hold them, and every available surface was a mass of glowing blossoms. The girls hovered from vase to vase, exclaiming with delight at each new combination of beauties.

Now tea was announced, and this time Colonel Ferrers offered his arm to Mrs. Merryweather, as the stranger and new-comer in the neighbourhood; but the good lady protested against anyone but the "birthday child" being taken in by the host, and the Colonel yielded, it must be said with a very good grace.

Here, in the long, oak-panelled dining-room were more roses,—ropes and garlands of them, hanging in festoons along the dark, shining panels, drooping from the Venetian lustres of the quaint chandelier. Even the moose's head on the wall behind the Colonel's chair had a wreath, cocked slightly on one side, which gave a waggish look to the stately creature. The huge antlers spread abroad, three feet on either side; the boys eyed the trophy with wondering delight."

"Oh, I say, sir!" cried Gerald, "did you shoot that moose? I never saw such a fellow. Why, Roger shot one last year that we thought was the grandfather moose of the world, but he was a baby to this one."

The Colonel smiled, well-pleased, and told the story of his shooting the great moose.

"And who is Roger?" he asked, then. "Have you yet more treasures, Mrs. Merryweather? Surely none old enough, to go moose-hunting?"

"Roger is not my own child, Colonel Ferrers," said Mrs. Merryweather, smiling. "I always have to remind myself of the fact, for he seems like my own. He is my husband's half-brother, many years younger than he,—the dearest fellow in the world, and really a delightful combination of son and brother. I hope he will be here before long. And that reminds me,—have I made my husband's apologies? I am so sorry he could not come!"

"I regret it heartily, my dear madam," said the Colonel, with a courtly bow; and he recalled how Mr. Merryweather had confided to him the other day that he drew the line at going out in the evening, and would not exchange his own fireside for the King of Dahomey's. He thought it probable that the excellent Miles was at this moment sitting with pipe and newspaper on the back veranda of his house; and if it had not been Hildegarde's birthday, the Colonel might have wished himself beside him. As it was, however, he devoted himself to his guests with such hearty good-will that the tea-table soon rang with merry talk and laughter.

The high-tea itself was beyond praise; Mrs. Beadle had seen to that. Mrs. Grahame's Auntie herself might have been jealous of the jellied chicken; and salad was green and gold, and rolls were snowy white, and strawberries glowed like sunset; and over all were roses, roses, making the whole table a floral offering, as Gerald said. Then, just before everybody had reached the "no more" point, the good Guiseppe, who had been standing, stately, behind his master's chair, darted out, and in a moment returned, bearing on a huge silver salver,—what was it? Behind Guiseppe was seen the portly form of good Mrs. Beadle, beaming under her best cap; Guiseppe's own face was one broad, dark smile. A general chorus broke from all save the host and Mrs. Grahame; Hugh gave a squeak of joy in which was no surprise.

"I knew they would like it!" he cried, clapping his hands. "I knew they would be surprised, and that the hair of their scalps would be uplifted. It is yours, Beloved; it is for you!"

A cake! Who had ever seen such a cake? It must have been baked in the biggest cheese-frame that the dairy could supply; or the rim of a cart-wheel might have been used to frame its monstrous circle. Certainly, as Guiseppe set it down before Hildegarde, it seemed to cover the whole width of the great table. On its top the frosting was piled high, in fantastic shapes. There seemed to be little hills and valleys; and from among these peeped—and did they only seem to move?—a number of tiny figures in green and gold. One sat astride of a snowy pinnacle, another lay stretched at full length in a hollow, his pretty face only peering out; some were chasing each other among the elfin hills, others were standing at ease, their hands on their hearts, their forms bent gracefully as if in salutation. In the middle rose a white throne, and on this sat the prettiest fairy of all, with a crown on her head and a wand in her hand;

she was dressed in white and gold, and round her danced a circle of elves; and every elf held a tiny blazing candle.

"Are you too old for dolls, Hildegarde?" asked the Colonel, puffing with pleasure as he saw the delight in the girl's face. "These are birthday fairies, you observe. There are eighteen of them, and every one of them wishes you good luck, my dear, and every happiness, every blessing that Heaven can bestow."

The good Colonel had begun merrily enough, but before the end of his little speech his deep voice trembled, and the tears stood in Hildegarde's eyes. She tried to speak, but the words did not come; so, leaving her seat, she went quietly up to the Colonel and kissed his forehead. "Thank you, dear friend!" she said; and it was all she could say.

"There! there!" said the Colonel, recovering himself at once. "Glad you like it, my child! Glad you like it! The fancy was my mother's; she had a poetic taste, madam." He turned to Mrs. Merryweather, who was beaming with admiration and delight. "She had these little figures made long ago,—for another eighteenth birthday,—a dear young friend of hers. Yes, yes! They have been kept in cotton-wool forty years, madam. Little candle holders, you perceive. A pretty fancy, eh? I happened to remember them the other day,—hunted 'em up,—the result, thanks to Mrs. Grahame and Elizabeth Beadle. Mrs. Beadle, ma'am, I desire that you will come in, and not skulk in the doorway there, as if you had reason to be ashamed of your handiwork. My housekeeper, Mrs. Beadle, ladies and gentlemen: a good woman, if she will allow me to say so, and a good cook. Now, Guiseppe, a knife for Miss Grahame, and we will test the quality of this same cake. Plenty of citron, I trust, Elizabeth Beadle? No little skimpy bits, but wedges, slabs of citron? Ha! that is as it should be. She wanted to make a white cake, my dear,—a light, effervescent kind of thing, that can hardly be tasted in the mouth; but I refused to insult either you or my traditions in such a manner. A birthday cake, Mrs. Grahame, my dear madam, should be as rich as spices and plums, brandy and citron,—especially citron, which I take to be an epitome of the Orient, gastronomically speaking,—as rich as all manner of good things can make it. You agree with me, my young friend?" He nodded to Gerald, whose eyes met his, flaming with approval.

"Oh, don't I, sir!" cried Gerald. "When they talk about wholesomeness and that sort of r—of thing,—well, I beg your pardon, mater dear, but you know you do, sometimes, in a manner to turn gray the hair,—when they do, I always think it's a dreadful shame to have wholesome things on your birthday. And—oh, I say!" Here he relapsed into silence, as the first slice dropped from the side of the great cake, revealing depth upon depth of richness. The two mothers shuddered slightly, and exchanged deploring smiles; but Hugh clasped his hands in rapture, and lifted up his voice and spoke.

"You are King Solomon to-day, Guardian, aren't you,—instead of other kings, as sometimes you are? And my great-aunt is the Queen of Sheba. And—'there came no more such abundance of spices as these which the Queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon. And gold, and precious stones, and knops and flowers'—oh, see them all! And, Guardian,—I mean King Solomon, DO you think there might be an almu tree in the garden?"

When tea was over, the Colonel bowed the ladies out of the room with punctilious courtesy, and motioned to Hugh to follow them; then he turned to the two Merryweather boys.

"May I offer you cigars, young gentlemen?" he asked; and he took a couple of cheroots from the mantel-piece.

The boys blushed bravely, but Phil said, quietly, "No, thank you, sir. We are not going to smoke till we are twenty-one. Father thinks that is soon enough."

The Colonel nodded approvingly. "Your father is right!" he said. "Very right, indeed, my young friend. I beg you to take notice that, though obliged by the laws of hospitality to offer you cigars, I should have thought it unsuitable if you had accepted them. Thirty years ago I should have been obliged to offer you wine, also, but happily that is no longer necessary. Forty years ago,—hum, ha! If you will permit me, I will smoke a cheroot for the party. Your father prefers a pipe, I believe, but give me a Manilla cheroot, and I am satisfied."

"Excuse me, sir," said Gerald, "but weren't you going to say something else?"

Colonel Ferrers smiled. "You are quick, my boy," he said. "I was indeed thinking of something that happened forty years ago,—of my first smoke. Possibly you might be amused to hear about it?"

The boys seemed to think there was no doubt about their being amused; they drew up two ottomans beside the Colonel's armchair, and prepared to listen, open-mouthed.

"Forty years ago, then," said the Colonel, "or, to be more exact, forty-five years, I was a lad of fifteen."

He paused, and smoked in silence for some minutes. Gerald could not help thinking of Alice and the Mock Turtle, and wondered what would happen if he should get up and say, "Thank you, sir, for your interesting story." But he held his peace, and waited.

"Fifteen years old, young gentlemen, and a sad scapegrace, I am sorry to say. My poor mother had an anxious time of it with me. I was in the water, or in the fire, or in the clouds from morning till night, as it seems on looking back. But with all my vagaries, I had one great desire which had never been gratified,—that was, to smoke a cigar. My father was a clergyman, and though he had never forbidden my smoking, I should never have dared to suggest such a thing to him, for he was strict in his notions, in many ways. Not too strict, sir, not too strict, by any means, though he may have seemed so to me then.

"To make a long story short, I fell in with some lads of my own way of thinking, and we determined to have a smoke. We gathered sweet fern and dried it, and rolled cigars for ourselves; odd-looking things they were, but we were vastly proud of them. When all was ready, we chose a dry, warm spot behind a dyke (for it was the fall of the year, and the days growing cold), and there we lighted our cigars and fell to work, puffing away in mighty fine style. Well, sir, they were horrible things, as you may well imagine; not one of us, I'll go bail, liked them in his heart, but we all pretended our best, and praised the cigars, and said what a fine thing it was to smoke, and thought ourselves men, as sure as if we had felt our beards pushing.

"By-and-by—I have the feeling of it still, when I think of it—I chanced to look up, and saw my father standing over the top of the dyke, looking down on us. The other boys, catching sight of my face, lifted their eyes and saw him, too; and there was a pretty moment. He said never a word for some time; no more did we. At last, 'What are you smoking, boys?' he asked, speaking in his usual even voice; yet I did not like the sound of it, somehow.

"So we told him, sweet fern; but he shook his head at that. 'That is poor stuff, indeed,' he said. 'Now, if you must smoke, here is something worth your while. Take these, Thomas, and share them with your friends; they are genuine, and I hope you may enjoy them.'

"With that he took a parcel of cigars from his pocket, and handed them to me; then bowed to us all very grand, and marched off, never looking behind him.

"I was not comfortable in my mind at this, for I knew my father pretty well, and had looked for something different; but the other lads were in high feather, and lighted their cigars on the instant, bidding me do likewise, and crying out that my father was a fine old buck, and that I was a lucky fellow to have such a parent. I could not be behind the rest, so I lit up, too, and for a few minutes all was as gay as a feast. But, Harry Monmouth, sir! in half an hour we were the sickest boys in Westchester County. It was all we could do to crawl home to our beds; and not one of us but was sure he was dying, and cried to his mother to send for the doctor before it was too late."

The Colonel laughed heartily, the boys chiming in with a merry peal.

"What were the cigars?" asked Phil.

"The strongest Havanas that were made,—that was all. Fine cigars, I have no doubt; but I was forty years old before I touched tobacco again, and I have never smoked anything less delicate than a Manilla."

He puffed in silence, chuckling to himself now and then; the boys meditated on the tale they had heard.

"Colonel Ferrers," said Gerald, at last.

"Yes, my boy. You are thinking that it is time to join the ladies? Quite right; we will go in at once."

"I wanted to ask," said Gerald, "if you don't mind telling us, that is—well—I was only thinking that perhaps those cigars you offered us—were they very mild ones, Colonel Ferrers?"

The Colonel looked grave for a moment, then he gave way and laughed aloud.

"Found me out, hey?" he said. "Well, since you ask me, Master Merryweather, I believe they were—not—the mildest that are made. But you—hark! what was that?"

From the next room came the sound of a crash, and then a cry.

"I am very sorry, sir," said the boys in a breath. "It is probably our sister Gertrude, who has broken something."

"She has no fingers to her thumbs," added Gerald, "and the result is destruction."

They passed into the next room, and found that there had indeed been an accident. Gertrude had knocked down a great pink vase, and broken it into fifty pieces; she had also fallen over it, and now sat among the ruins on the floor, too frightened to cry, while the others picked up the pieces as best they might.

"Colonel Ferrers, what will you think of us?" cried Mrs. Merryweather, looking up as her host entered the room. "This unlucky child of mine has done something dreadful. Get up, Gerty, and let me get the pieces from under you. I do so hope it may be mended."

"Heaven forefend," said Colonel Ferrers, hastily. "Is it—I can hardly hope it—is it truly the pink vase, the pink vase with the stag's head on it?"

"Ye—yes!" sobbed poor Gertrude, getting up from the floor, and seeking vainly for her handkerchief. "Oh, I am so sorry!"

"My dear child," cried the Colonel, and he took Gertrude by both hands, "my dear young benefactress, how can I ever thank you! You have relieved me of a heavy burden."

"Why? what?" cried all.

The Colonel pointed to the broken china, and gave a great sigh of relief. "You behold there," he said, "now happily in fragments, the bane of my existence. That—that horror—was given me three years ago by a valued servant and friend, my man Guiseppe. He bought it for my birthday; spent ten of his hard-earned dollars on it, foolish, faithful creature that he is. What could I do? It was,—the enormity you perceive. I was obliged to give it a place of honour,—fortunately, I seldom use this room when I am alone; I was forced to praise its tint, which I abominate, and its shape, which is wholly detestable. What would you? I could not wound my good Guiseppe; the vase has remained, the chief ornament—in his eyes—of my drawing-room. Now, thanks to you, my charming child, I am delivered of this encumbrance, and my poor white and gold can appear without this hideous blot on its purity."

Gertrude wiped her eyes, much relieved at this novel view of her infirmity, and all the others laughed heartily.

"And now," said the good Colonel, "is it not time for some games, Hilda, or something of the kind? Command me, young people. Shall I be blind man, at your service?"

It was a pleasant sight to see the Colonel, a silk handkerchief tied over his eyes, chasing the young folks hither and thither; pulled this way, twitched that, but always beaming under his bandage, and shouting with merriment. It was a pleasanter sight, later in the evening, to see him leading out Hildegarde for a quadrille, and taking his place at the head of the figure with stately, old-fashioned grace. Mrs. Grahame, turning round a moment from her place at the piano, saw his fine face aglow with pleasure, and felt a corresponding warmth at her own heart. She thought of the gloomy, solitary man he had been a year ago, living alone with his servants, scarcely seeing or speaking to a soul outside his own grounds. And who shall blame the mother for saying in her heart, with a little thrill of pride, "It was my child who helped him, who brought the sunshine into this good man's life. It was my Hildegarde!"

CHAPTER VI.

ANOTHER TEA-PARTY.

It was the very day after the great affair at Roseholme that Hildegarde had her own tea-party; in fact, it had been planned for the birthday itself, and had only been postponed when Colonel Ferrers made known his kind wish. This was a piazza party. The broad, out-door room was hung with roses,—some of the very garlands which had graced the dark walls of Roseholme the night before; but here they were twined in and out of the vines which grew on all sides of the piazza, screening it from outside view, and making it truly a bower and a retreat. The guests had been asked to come at five o'clock, but it was not

more than three when Hildegarde, coming to the door by chance, saw two or three little figures hanging about the gate, gazing wistfully in. At sight of her, their heads went down and their fingers went into their mouths; they studied the ground, and appeared to know neither where they were, nor why they had come.

"Euleta!" exclaimed Hildegarde; "is that you, child? and Minnie and Katie, too. Why, you are here in good time, aren't you?"

She ran down and took the children by the hand, and led them up to the piazza. "I am very glad to see you, chicks," she said. "Shall we take off the hats? Perhaps we will leave them on for a little," she added, quickly, seeing a shade of distress on Euleta's face; "they look so—gay and bright, and we might want to walk about the garden, you see."

Euleta beamed again, and the others with her. They were sisters, and their careful mother had given them hats just alike, dreadful mysteries of magenta roses and apple-green ribbon. Their pride was pleasant to see, and Hildegarde smiled back at them, saying to herself that the dear little faces would look charming in anything, however, hideous.

Soon more children came, and yet more: Vesta Philbrook and Martha Skeat, Philena Tabb and Susan Aurora Bulger,—twelve children in all, and every child there before the stroke of four.

"Well," said Hildegarde to herself, "the tea-table will not be quite so pretty as if I had had time to make the wreaths; but they would rather play than have wreaths, and I should not have left it till the last hour, sinner that I am." She proposed "Little Sally Waters," and they all fell to it with ardour.

"Oh, little Sally Waters, sitting in the sun,
Crying, weeping, for your young man;
Rise, Sally, rise, wipe your weeping eyes," etc.

Martha Skeat was the first Sally; she chose Susan Aurora, and Susan Aurora chose Hildegarde. Down went Hildegarde on the floor, and wept and wrung her hands so dramatically that the children paused in alarm, fearing that some real calamity had occurred.

"Oh! oh!" moaned Hildegarde; "my young man! Go on, children. Why are you stopping? Oh, where IS my young man?" she sobbed; and the children, reassured by a twinkling smile, shrieked with delight. "What shall I do?" sobbed the girl. "I—haven't—got—any young man! Now, children, you MUST say 'Rise, Sally,' or my foot will be sound asleep, and then I couldn't get up at all, and what would become of your supper?"

Aghast at this suggestion, the children began to chant, hastily,—

"Rise, Sally, rise,
Wipe your weeping eyes;
Turn to the east,
Turn to the west,
Turn to the one that you love the best!"

Hildegarde sprang to her feet, whirled to the east, with her hands clasped in entreaty; turned to the west, holding out her arms with a gesture of intense longing; turned to the south,—and saw a stranger standing and gazing at her with a look of intense amusement.

For once Hildegarde thought that her wits were gone; she stood still, her arms dropped to her side, and she returned the stranger's gaze with a look of such simple, absolute dismay that he could hardly keep his countenance. Hastily advancing, he lifted his hat. "Miss Grahame," he said, "I beg your pardon for breaking in in this way. My sister—I am Roger Merryweather, I ought to say first—Bell wanted to know at what time she should come over, and as none of the boys were at hand, I ventured to come over with the message."

His eyes,—they were kind eyes, as Hildegarde noticed in her distress,—his eyes seemed to say, "I wish you would not mind me in the least, my child! Have I not sisters of my own, and don't I know all about Sally Waters?" It almost seemed as if the words were spoken, and Hildegarde recovered her composure, and came forward, with a burning blush, it is true, but holding out her hand with her own sweet cordiality.

"I am very glad to see you, Mr. Merryweather. You are very good not to laugh at poor Sally's distresses. Tell Bell that the children are all here, and the sooner she comes the better. But—will you

not come in, Mr. Merryweather? My mother will be delighted to see you. We have heard so much of you from all the children."

Roger Merryweather excused himself on the ground of letters that must be written, but promised himself the pleasure of an early call; and so, with another kind, sensible look, and a smile and a friendly word to the children, he withdrew, and Hildegarde saw him leap lightly over the fence,—a tall, well-knit figure, springy and light as Gerald's own.

The girl drew a long breath of dismay, but it quavered, and finally ended in a hearty laugh.

"And how PERFECTLY he behaved!" she said aloud. "If one had to make a spectacle of one's self,—and apparently it is to be my fate through life,—surely no one could choose a kinder looking spectator."

Here she became aware of the children, standing at gaze, and evidently waiting for her next word.

"Why, what am I thinking about?" she cried, merrily. "Do you think we have had enough of 'Sally,' children? I—I think perhaps I have. And what shall we play next? I fear it is too hot still for 'I Spy;' we must keep that till after tea. What are you saying, Martha? Speak out, dear, and don't be afraid to say just what you would like best. This is your own party, you see, and it is to be the kind of party you all think pleasantest."

Martha murmured inaudibly several times, but spurred by digs in the ribs with several pairs of sharp elbows, finally spoke aloud with a sudden yelp. "Oh, PLEASE!—Susan Aurora Bulger, I'll go right and tell your mother this minute!—please, 'The Highland Gates to Die.'"

"What?" asked Hildegarde, in amazement. "Say it again, Martha, please. The Highland—what?"

"Gates to Die!" said Martha Skeat, and all the children took up the chorus. "'The Highland Gates to Die,' please, Teacher!"

Hildegarde repeated the words to herself, but no light came. "I don't understand," she said. "You will have to show me how to play, for I never heard of the game. Highland Gates—well, I shall learn it quickly, I hope. Euleta, will you take the lead?"

Euleta, a sheep-faced child, with six whitey-brown pigtails, motioned to the others, who at once joined hands in a circle. Then she began to pace slowly round the circle, and all the children broke out into a wild chant:

"Go round and round the level,
Go round and round the level,
Go round and round the level,
The Highland Gates to die."

Now the arms were lifted, and the leader wove her mystic paces in and out among the children, while the words changed.

"Go in and out the window,
Go in and out the window,
Go in and out the window,
The Highland Gates to die."

Euleta took Vesta Philbrook by the hand, led her into the circle, and knelt solemnly before her; and the others sang, wildly,—

"Kneel down and face your lover,
Kneel down and face your lover,
Kneel down and face your lover,
The Highland Gates to die."

"What ARE, you playing?" cried Bell Merryweather, who had come in quietly, and was watching the proceedings in amazement.

"Don't ask me!" Hildegarde replied, "watch and listen, and learn if you can. Oh, this is tragedy, indeed!" For Euleta had thrown herself backward, not without a certain dramatic force, and now lay prone at Vesta's feet; and the children chanted, solemnly,—

"She's dead because she loved him,

She's dead because she loved him,
She's dead because she loved him,
The Highland Gates to die."

This ended the game, and the children smiled joyously, while Euleta plumed herself like a little peacock, taking to herself the credit of all the interest shown by the young ladies.

"But what an extraordinary thing!" cried Bell; "Hildegarde, have you an idea what it can mean?"

Hildegarde shook her head. "It must be something old," she said. "It must come from some old story or ballad. Oh, if we could only find out!" They questioned the children eagerly, but could learn nothing. It was merely, "The Highland Gates to Die," and they had always played it, and everybody else always played it,—that was all they knew.

At this moment a well-known brown bonnet was seen bobbing apologetically up the drive; the Widow Lankton had been making frantic efforts to catch Hildegarde's eye, and now succeeding, began a series of crab-like bows.

"Oh!" cried Hildegarde, eagerly, "there is Mrs. Lankton, and she will know all about it."

"Yes," chimed in the children, in every variety of shrill treble.
"Widder Lankton, SHE'LL know all about it, sure!"

Mrs. Lankton was surrounded in a moment, and brought up on the piazza. Here she sat, turning her head from side to side, like a lean and pensive parrot, and struggling to get her breath.

"It's ketched me!" she said, faintly, in reply to the girls' questions. "Miss Grahame, my dear, it's ketched me in my right side, and I like t' ha' died on your thrishold. Yes, my dear," she nodded her head many times, and repeated with unction, "I like t' ha' died on your thrishold."

"Oh, I am so sorry, Mrs. Lankton!" said Hildegarde, soothingly, while she quieted with a look Bell's horrified anxiety.

"I think you will be able to go in and get a cup of tea presently, won't you? And that will take away the pain, I hope."

Mrs. Lankton's countenance assumed a repressed cheerfulness. "You may be right, dear!" she said. "I shouldn't go to contradict your blessed mother's darter, not if she told me to get a hull supper, let alone a cup o' tea, as is warming to the innards, let him deny it who will. There! I feel it a leetle better now a'ready," she announced. "Ah, it's a blessed privilege you have, Miss Grahame!"

Without stopping to analyze these remarks too closely, Hildegarde said a few more soothing words, and then went straight to the matter in hand.

"Mrs. Lankton, can you tell us anything about a game the children have been playing, the game of 'The Highland Gates?' We are very much interested in it, Miss Merryweather and I,—this is Miss Merryweather,—and we want to know what it means."

"To be sure, my dear!" cried the Widow Lankton. "'The Highland Gates to Die.' Dear me, yes! if ever a person could tell you—and Miss Bellflower, is it? Ah! she looks rugged, now; don't she? and livin' in the old Shannon house, too. 'T is dretful onhealthy, they say, the Shannon house; but havin' a rugged start, you see, you may weather it a consid'able time, dearie, and be a comfort to them as has you WHILE they has you. My Philena, her cheeks was just like yours, like two pinies. And where is she now? Ah! I've seen trouble, Miss Bellwether. Miss Grahame here can tell you of some of the trouble I've seen, though she don't know not a quarter part of it."

"Oh yes, Mrs. Lankton," said Hildegarde, with what seemed to wondering Bell rather a scant measure of sympathy; "Miss Merryweather shall hear all about it, surely. But will you tell us now about the game, please? We want to know so very much!"

"To be sure, dearie! to be sure!" acquiesced Mrs. Lankton with alacrity. "'T is a fine game, and anncient, as you may say. Why, my grandmother taught me to play 'The Highland Gates' when I was no bigger than you, Vesta Philbrook. Ah! many's the time I played it with my sister Salome, and she died just about your age."

"Well, Mrs. Lankton," said Hildegarde, encouragingly.

"Well? oh, bless you! no, dearie! She was terrible sick! that was why she died. Oh, my, yes! She had dyspepsy right along, suffered everything with it, yet 'twas croup that got her at last. Ah! there's never

any child knows when croup 'll get her; girl NOR boy!"

Hildegarde began to feel as if she must scream, or stamp her foot, or do some other impossible thing.

"Mrs. Lankton," she said, gravely, "I am sure Auntie has the kettle on, and you will be the better for your tea, so will you not tell us as quickly as you can, please, about the game? The children are waiting, you see, to go on with their play."

"Jest what I was going to say, dear," cried Mrs. Lankton. "Let 'em play, I says, while they can, I says; for its soon enough they get the play squenched out of 'em, if you'll excuse the expression, Miss Henfeather."

At this apostrophe, delivered with mournful intensity, Bell retreated hastily behind a post of the veranda, and even Susan Aurora Bulger giggled faintly, with her apron in her mouth.

Hildegarde was silent, and tried the effect of gazing severely at the widow, apparently with some success, for after a pause of head-shaking, Mrs. Lankton continued:

"But as you was saying, dearie, about the game. Ye—es! Well, my grandmother, she was an anncient woman; some said she was ninety-seven, and more called it ninety-eight, but she didn't rightly know herself, bein' she had lost the family Bible. Burned up with the house it was, before she came from the Provinces, and some said it was because of starting a new fire in the cook-stove on Sunday; but I don't want to set in judgment, not on my own flesh and blood, I do not, Miss Grahame. And I remember as if it was this day of time, she settin' in her chair in the porch to our house, smokin' her pipe, if you'll excuse me ladies, bein' an anncient woman, and I HAVE heard great ladies took their pipes in them times, but so it is. And she says to me, 'Drusilly,' she says, 'Why don't you play with Salome?' and I says, 'Cause I ain't got nothin' to play.' And she says, 'Come here,' she says, 'and I'll learn ye a game,' she says. So I called Salome, and we two stood there, and Gram'ther she taught us 'The Highland Gates to Die.' Salome, she had been feedin' the hens, and when she come back she left the gate open, and they all got out and went and strayed into the woods, and my father got so mad we thought we should lose him, for sure. Purple he used to get when he was mad, same as a late cabbage, and an awful sight. Yes, children, be thankful if you're learned to keep your tempers. So that's all I know, Miss Grahame, my dear, and you're welcome as air to it; and I do believe I see Mis' Auntie lookin' out the kitching winder this minute, so if you'll excuse me, ladies, bein' I feel a goneness inside, and if I should faint away, how your blessed mother would feel!"

CHAPTER VII.

IN GOOD GREEN WOOD.

They were in the Roseholme woods, all four girls,—Hildegarde, Bell, Gertrude and little Kitty. Kitty was only eight years old, but she liked good times as well as if she were sixteen, and when the sisters said "Come along, Kitty," she had dropped her doll and flown like a bird to join them. Willy shouted after her, having designs on her in regard to tin soldiers; but for once Kitty was deaf to her Willy's voice. Now she was as happy as a child could be, sitting in a nest of warm pine needles, playing at "partridge mother."

The other girls sat near her, making oak wreaths and talking busily. Bell was telling of some college experiences.

"So we found we had not nearly green enough to trim the hall, and I volunteered to get some more, while the rest of the committee made the garlands. I had not far to go, only to the grove, about a mile beyond the campus; but it was growing dark, so I hurried as much as I could. I ran across Professor Thunder's yard, as that cut off nearly half the distance, and there my fate found me. Oh, dear! Hildegarde, you will never guess what I did."

"Nothing, I am sure," said Hildegarde, gravely, "that was not consistent with dignity and decorum. The college maiden is an awful person, I have always understood."

"You shall judge!" said Bell. "Remember that I was alone, with none to help me carry the boughs; that I was late, it being then six o'clock, and the dance beginning at eight. I had to get the greens, help put them up, get my supper, dress, and be there at eight to receive the juniors. And there—there, in the

clear afternoon light on the lawn, stood the professor's wheelbarrow, saying as plainly as a wheelbarrow can, 'You'd better take me along to bring the things home in.' Could I resist that mute appeal? I could not. I saw, I took, I trundled! The thing went of its own accord, I believe; certainly I never before made such good time to the grove. Once there, it was a matter of only a few minutes to strip the boughs and fill the friendly barrow. But, oh! I filled it not wisely, but too well. It was all so green and pleasant, and the smell of the trees was so delightful, that I did not know when to stop. Soon the barrow was heaped high with all manner of pleasantness, and I started to return. Well, my dear, then the trouble began. In the first place, full barrows are different from empty ones. It was very heavy, and the boughs kept slipping this way, and sliding that way, and tumbling down every third second. I got cross—oh, so cross! and presently I passed the janitor's son, lounging along homeward, and he grinned, being an oaf, and said, 'Better let me help ye, hadn't ye?' Oh, no! he didn't mean to be rude, he really meant to help; but my blood was up, and my hair was down, and I was very short with him, I fear, and trundled off alone with my dignity. Then a branch fell out and got tangled in the wheel, and while I was getting it out a twig snapped into my eyes; and there was a stone in my shoe, and altogether,—well, it was only a mile to the grove, but it was twenty miles back, I can tell you. Before I reached the campus my arms were so sore, and my foot so lame, and my eye so painful, that my pride ran out at the heels of my boots, like the gunpowder. I was going pretty slowly, so as to keep the boughs from tumbling out more than was absolutely necessary,—and I heard the boy lumbering up behind me again. So, without turning round, I said, 'You SHALL help me now, if you please!' and—and—oh, Hildegarde! a deep voice answered, 'I shall be charmed to do so!' and I looked up and saw Professor Thunder!"

"Oh, Bell! oh, poor thing!" cried Hildegarde. "What did you do?"

"Do?" replied Bell. "I didn't do anything. He took the handles from me,—his own handles, mind you, of his own barrow,—and trundled it solemnly along. I was struggling with hysterics. I am not in the least hysterical by nature, but the combination—the professor taken for a lout and commanded to trundle his own barrow, stolen by a sophomore, the twig in my eye and the stone in my foot—was too much for me. Besides, there seemed nothing in particular to say. I could not begin 'Please, sir, I thought you were the janitor's boy!' nor did 'Please Professor Thunder, this is your wheelbarrow, which I have stolen,' seem exactly a happy opening for a conversation. So we went on in silence, and when the branches tumbled off, I picked them up without a word. How could I be such a dumb idiot? Don't ask me! If it had been any other professor I might have found courage to speak; but Jupiter Tonans was my terror and my hero; I sat at his feet, and the roll of his deep voice was music to my sophomore ears. I had never spoken to him out of class, but only that morning he had praised my translation, he who seldom praised anything,—and now to come to this!

"At last, after about three hours of dreadful silence, he opened his lips and spoke: 'The greens are for decorational purposes, I presume, Miss Merryweather?' Oh, and I had hoped he would not remember who I was.

"Yes, sir,' I said. 'For the sophomore reception this evening.'

"Ah!' he said, 'in that case, it will be well for us to hasten.'

"Silence again, while we quickened our pace, making the branches fall off more than ever. Then—'The wheelbarrow,' said the professor, 'amazes us by its combined simplicity and perfection. The conception of a man of universal genius and vast erudition,—I allude to Leonardo da Vinci, the marvellous Florentine,—it has for upwards of three hundred years served mankind as a humble but valued ally. In every rank of life it finds its place. This barrow, for example—'

"My heart came into my mouth. 'Professor Thunder,' I said, 'this is your wheelbarrow. I came across your lawn, and saw it standing there, and—I took it.'

"Yes, my child,' he said, 'I saw you take it.'"

"Oh, oh!" moaned the two girls. "Poor Bell! oh, poor Bell!"

"Then I broke down and cried, and told him all about it, and how I had taken him for the janitor's boy, and all. Girls, he was perfectly angelic! He made me sit down on the bank to rest, and talked to me, oh, so kindly! and was glad I had taken the barrow, and all. And—it is too dreadful to tell, but—I had dropped my handkerchief, and he gave me his, about three square yards of finest cambric,—I shall never smell orris again without thinking of that moment,—and said—you won't think me vain to repeat this, Hildegarde?—said that he could not have his best pupil spoil her eyes, as it would interfere with her Greek. And then we came to the campus, and the girls standing in the door of the Gym saw Professor Thunder wheeling the wheelbarrow full of greens, and me walking meekly by his side. I shall never forget their faces; one moment, and then they turned and fled. It was base, but I could not blame them; the sight was not one to induce composure, as the Professor himself would say. So I thanked him

as well as I could for the dumbness and heat that were on me; and he took off his hat and made a grand bow, and then he shook hands—oh, so cordially! and begged to present me with the freedom of the wheelbarrow; and then he went away. There, Hildegarde! You wanted a college story, and you have had one."

The girls laughed heartily at Bell's adventures, and Hildegarde declared that she should never fear a college girl again, as it was evident that they were girls of like passions, getting into scrapes like their sisters.

While talking, the girls had been busily plaiting garlands of oak leaves, and now they proceeded to crown each other, and hang long wreaths on neck and arm.

"Hildegarde shall be the fairy queen," said Gertrude "and we her attendant fays. Hail, Queen!"

"Oh yes, that is all very well for you!" said Bell; "you don't weigh one hundred and thirty pounds. A fine sylph I should make! Hilda is perfect for the queen, however."

Certainly Hilda did look very lovely, with the green chaplet crowning her fair locks, and the afternoon sunlight sifting through the leaves, checkering her white dress with light and shade. Roger Merryweather, coming through the wood in his quiet way, with his tin plant-box slung over his shoulder, thought he had never seen a fairer sight, and paused to enjoy it before announcing his presence to the girls. As he stood there, motionless, and screened by the broad leaves of a great chestnut-tree, a frightful scream was heard, a ferocious yell, which made the whole wood vibrate with horrid sound. The girls sprang to their feet in terror; little Kitty ran to Bell and hid in her gown, while the older girls with one accord turned at bay, ready to face they knew not what peril. Even Roger was startled for the moment, and was about to step hastily forward, when a second shriek rang out. He recognized the voice, and stood still, unwilling to spoil sport. And now from the thicket burst two wild forms, blanketed and feathered, uttering hideous yells, and brandishing glittering weapons over their heads. Kitty shrieked, but after one moment Bell burst into laughter.

"You imps!" she cried. "You wicked, wicked little wretches, to frighten us so! Kitty darling, it is the boys. Look up, darling! Don't you see? It is our naughty, naughty boys, playing Indian. After them, Toots! after them, Hilda! We'll give them a lesson they shall not forget."

"Huh! huh!" shouted the Indians. "Big Chief Hop-toad! big Medicine-man Put-Squills-In-His-Tea! gobble up the white squaws for supper! Huh! huh!"

And now the quiet spectator saw a merry sight. The girls flew in pursuit, the boys fled before them. In and out of the trees, laughing, shrieking, they doubled and twisted. Hildegarde ran well, and Bell had not had two years of basket-ball for nothing. As for Gertrude, she was lithe and long-limbed as a young greyhound; but even so, they could not catch their tormentors.

The long gray legs twinkled like lightning over the ground. Phil paused from time to time to shout his warhoop, and Gerald, when he could find breath, chanted wild scraps of song, accompanied by frantic gestures:

"My tom, my tom, my tommy-hawk,
With thee I'll make the pale-face squawk:
With thee I'll make them cry 'Oh, lawk!'
My tom, my tom, my tommy-hawk."

Circling round a great tree, he came full upon Hilda, flying in the other direction, and made a snatch at her green wreath.

"Pale-face squaw shall lose her hat,
Medicine-man will see to that,"

he cried.

"Will he, indeed?" cried Hildegarde. "Catch me if you can, you odious redskin! I defy you in every withering term that a Cooper maiden ever invented!"

"Ho! if you are a Cooper maiden, you are nothing but a female!" said Gerald. "Aha! she turns, she flies! she feels the scalp a-wr-r-r-r-iggling on her head! she fears she'll soon be a female dead! Ho, ho! Medicine-man! Big Injin! Ho!"

Flying breathless now, Hildegarde darted hither and thither, hiding under the leaves, dodging behind

the tree trunks. Finally, seeing her foe pausing for an instant behind the bole of a huge nut-tree, she rushed upon him, and seizing him, shook him violently. Then she let go her hold and screamed, for it was not Gerald that she was shaking.

Roger Merryweather stepped forward, unable to keep from smiling at her face of horror. He felt a little "out of it," perhaps, and twenty-four seemed a long way from seventeen; but he should not have watched the girls, he told himself with some severity, without letting them know he was there. Now this pretty child regarded him as a double eavesdropper and spy. But his apology was drowned in the shouts of the boys.

"Hi! here's Roger! hurrah! Roger, Roger! my scientific codger, come and play Big Injin! The pale-faces are uncommonly game, but we shall have them all the same. Hi! there goes Dropsy!"

Indeed, at this moment Gertrude tripped over a tree root and fell headlong; as she fell she caught at Phil's ankle, just as he was in the act of grasping Bell by the flying tail of her gown; another moment, and all three were on the ground together in a confused heap.

"Anybody hurt?" asked Roger, going to pick them up.

"Oh no!" said Bell, sitting up and shaking the pine needles from her hair. "Toots was underneath, and she makes a noble cushion. All right, Toots? and how do you come here, Professor?" The three fallen ones righted themselves, and sat up and panted; seeing which, the others came and sat down, too, and for a space no one spoke, for no one had any breath save Roger, and he was laughing.

"I have been botanizing," he said at last. "I was coming quietly along, when suddenly Bedlam broke loose, and I have been standing by to go about ever since. No extra lunatics seemed to be needed, or I should have been charmed to assist."

By this time Hildegarde had recovered her composure. It was her fate, she reflected, to run into people, and be found in trees, and be caught playing "Sally Waters;" she could not help her fate. But her hair was all down her back, and she could help that. She began to knot it up quietly, but Gerald raised a cry of protest.

"What, oh what is she doing that for? Don't, Miss Hildegarde, please! I was just thinking how jolly it looked, let alone the chances for scalping."

"Thank you!" said Hildegarde, as she wound up the long locks and fastened them securely. "I have no fancy for playing Absalom all the way home. Have you hurt your foot, Phil?" for Phil was rubbing his ankle vigorously, and looking rather uncomfortable.

"I stumbled over Dropsy's nose," he said, ruefully. "When she fell down, her nose reached all the way round the tree, and tripped me up. I wish you would keep your nose in curl-papers, Dropsy."

Dropsy beat him affectionately, and helped rub his ankle. They were silent for a moment, being too comfortable to speak, each one thought to himself. The sunbeams flickered through the leaves; the pine needles, tossed into heaps by the hurrying feet, gave out their delicious fragrance; overhead the wind murmured low in the branches. It was a perfect time, and even Gerald felt the charm and was silent, throwing acorns at his sisters.

"Sing, Roger," said Bell, at length, softly. "Sing 'Robin Hood!'"

So Roger sang, in a noble baritone voice, that joyous song of the forest, and the woods rang to the chorus:

"So, though bold Robin's gone,
Yet his heart lives on,
And we drink to him with three times three."

CHAPTER VIII.

"HANDS ACROSS THE SEA."

"Oh, how jolly you all look!" cried Hildegarde, peeping through the hedge. "Where are you going?"

The Merryweathers were going to ride; so much was evident. Five bicycles stood at the door, glittering in the sunlight; five riders were in the act of mounting, plainly bound on a pleasure-trip.

"Only for the mail, and a little spin after it," cried Mr. Merryweather. "Wish you could come too, Miss Grahame. You will certainly have to get a wheel and join us. Nothing like it, I assure you."

Bell and Gertrude, in trim short skirts and gaiters, sat already perched, ready for the start; and Phil and Gerald were putting a last touch to their shining metal-work.

Mrs. Merryweather came out on the steps, with Kitty by her side.

"Here are my letters, dear people," she said. "And don't forget the boots, please; they are very important."

"May one inquire what boots?" asked Mr. Merryweather.

"I really have no idea!" replied his wife. "Somebody said at breakfast that you must be sure to remember the boots, and dwelt on their importance; therefore I mention them."

"Ou avez-vous procure ce chapeau?" inquired Gerald, politely.

"My dear Gerald, you know that I will not endure slang that is less than fifty years old."

"It isn't slang, Mother! At least it may be; but I want to know, because, really, you know, ma'am, when it comes to baskets—"

Mrs. Merryweather put up her hand, and removed her head-gear. "Dear me!" she said, "it is a basket, sure enough. That is very curious! Why—why then, I must have picked the raspberries into my hat."

A shout of laughter, in which Mrs. Merryweather joined placidly, greeted this announcement. "I put plenty of green leaves in it," she said; "it will be all right. But I sent it to the minister's wife, and I fear she will be surprised. My dear Gertrude, have you learned your Latin lesson, that I see you starting off so freely?"

"Yes, mother," said Gertrude, sadly. "I learned it, and it was a detestable lesson. I am SO tired of hearing that Titus Labienus was stationed on a hill!"

"I know!" chimed in Phil. "I remember when I was in Caesar, about forty years ago, and Titus Labby was on the hill then. It's my belief he got stuck there, and was afraid to come down."

"That is curious!" said Mrs. Merryweather, meditatively. "Always on a hill; why, so he is! That is rather interesting, don't you think so?"

"With all respect, I do not!" said Mr. Merryweather. "I desire to depart. If Caesar had had a wheel, he would not have been so tedious."

"Oh, jolly!" cried Gerald. "Caesar commanded to let scoot the legions through the morasses and bogges the bogs. Then came Vercingetorix on a '91 Columbia, weighing seventy-three pounds, and said, 'How in time am I to get up this hill?' Then spake to him Caesar, and said these words,—Get out, you Ferguson!"

For Ferguson, swiftly departing, had launched a kick at his brother in passing, nearly sending him from his seat. Gerald whirled off in pursuit; the others followed more soberly, and the whole party disappeared round the curve of the road.

Hildegarde looked after them rather dolefully. A year ago a girl on a bicycle was a shocking thing to our heroine; she shook her little head severely, and said that nothing would induce her to mount one. Somehow her views had changed since she had seen the Merryweathers on theirs. She began to think that it would be uncommonly pleasant to go skimming along like a swallow, swooping down the hills and whirling along the levels. "The nearest approach to flying that this generation will see," Mr. Merryweather called it, and Hilda inclined to think he was right. However—

"Remember that you are both coming over this morning," called Mrs. Merryweather, cheerfully. "I mean this evening, of course, to tea. We will have some music. Kitty, my dear, we must go to our French."

"Shall we bring our sewing out on the verandah, mammy?" asked Hilda, rousing herself from a little reverie. "Ah, you have the letters, sly one, and never told me!"

"I doubted if there was anything that would interest you, my love," said Mrs. Grahame. "Yes; let us have our work, by all means. There are one or two business letters that I should like you to look over."

Hilda smiled and departed, revolving the thought that she was a selfish and empty-headed wretch. She did not want to read business letters; she wanted to be on a wheel, flying over the smooth road, with the wind lifting her hair and breathing cool against her cheek. And here was her mother sitting alone, and the new tablecloths to hem, and—and altogether—"If you COULD tell me why they thought it worth while to keep you," she said to herself, "I should be glad to know it. Perhaps you can tell me what P-I-G spells."

Returning with the wide sewing basket, she found her mother looking over a pile of letters. "It is high time," said Mrs. Grahame, "that you began to take some interest in business matters." Hildegarde wondered what was coming; her mother looked very grave; she held in her hand a square grey envelope. "I shall be greatly obliged, therefore, my dear," her mother continued, with the same portentous gravity, "if—you would—read that"; and she gave the letter to Hildegarde.

"Oh, mamma! you wicked, wicked deceiver! You frightened me almost to death; and it is from Jack, dear old Jack. Oh, how delightful! You pleasant person, Mrs. Grahame; I forgive you, though my heart still throbs with terror. Are you all comfortable, my own? Your little feet all tucked up beneath your petticoat, so that they cannot steal in and out? Don't you want a glass of milk, or a cracker, or a saddle of mutton, or anything else? Then be silent! and oh, how happy we shall be!" Hildegarde settled herself in her chair, sighed with pleasure, and broke the seal of the fat letter.

"DEAR HILDA: It seems an age since I last wrote, but there is so much going on I have hardly time to breathe. There have been some awfully jolly concerts this spring, and I have been going to them, and practising four hours a day, and having lessons and all that. Herr J. played at the last two concerts, and I know what heaven is like—my heaven, at least—since I heard him. He played—"

Here followed an accurate list of the great violinist's performances, covering three sheets of note-paper.

"It isn't the technique and all that, though of course he is the first in the world for that and everything else; it's the sense, the heart that he puts into it. In that adagio—well, I played it to you once, like the cheeky little duffer I was, and felt pleased as Punch with myself, and no end cocked up because you liked it. Hilda, I ought to have been taken out and shot for daring to touch it! When the maestro (they call him maestro here, so you mustn't think me Frenchified), when he played it, the world seemed just to melt away, and nothing left but a voice, that sang, and sang, and told you more than you ever dreamed of in all your life before. I wish I could describe things, but you know I can't, so you won't expect it. But one thing I will tell you, if you'll promise not to tell any living soul—"

"Stop, my dear!" said Mrs. Grahame, quickly. "We must not touch upon the boy's confidences. Head that part to yourself."

"Thank you, ma'am!" said Hilda. "This mark of trust is most gratifying, I assure you. 'Not tell any living soul except your mother, dear.' Now how do you feel, madam?"

"Dear Jack!" said Mrs. Grahame, softly. "Dear lad! of course I shall like to hear it. Go on, Hilda, and I promise not to interrupt again."

"The day after the last concert—it was only day before yesterday, but it seems an age—I went to take my lesson, and my master was not there. He is often late, so I just took out some music and began to play over the things I had studied. There was a sonata of Rubinstein's, very splendid, that has quite possessed me lately. I played that, and I suppose I forgot where I was and all about it, for I went on and on, never hearing a sound except just the music. You must hear it when I come back, Hilda. It begins in the minor, and then there is the most superb sweep up into the major; your heart seems to sweep up with it, and you find yourself in another world, where everything is divine harmony. I'm talking nonsense, I know, but that piece just sends me off my head altogether. Well, at last I finished it and came down from the clouds, and when I turned around, Hilda, there was the maestro himself, standing and listening. Well! you can't go through the floor and all that sort of thing, as they do in the fairy-books, but I did wish I was a mouse, or a flea, or anything smaller than there is. He stood still a minute. Perhaps he was afraid I would behave like some asses the other day—they weren't Americans, I am happy to say—who met him, and went down on their knees in the hotel entry, and took bits of mud from his shoes for a keepsake; they truly did, the horrid pigs! And he just said 'Dummkopfer!' and went off and left them kneeling there. Wasn't that jolly? Well, I say, he might have thought I would act like that, and yet I don't believe he did, for he had the kindest, friendliest look on his face. He came forward and held out his hand, and said, 'So you play the great sonata, my son; and love it, too, I perceive.'

"I don't know exactly what I said,—some rubbish about how much I cared for it; but I stammered mostly, and got all kinds of colours. I guess you can tell pretty much how I behaved, though I really am getting to be not quite so much of a muff. Anyhow, he seemed to understand, and nodded, and said, 'Give me now the violin, for there are things you understand not yet in the piece.'

"Oh, Hilda! he took my violin in his own hands, and played for me. Think of it! the greatest master in the world, all alone with me there, and playing like—like—well, I don't know how to say what I mean, so you'll have to imagine it for yourself. He went all through it, stopping once in a while to explain to me, and to describe this or that shade of expression or turn of the wrist. It was the most splendid lesson any one ever had, I believe. But that is not the best, and I hardly like to tell even you the rest. You may think I am just bluffing, and anyhow,—but it is the truth, so—well, after about half an hour my master came in, and of course he was delighted, and highly honoured, and bowing and scraping and all. But the maestro came and put his hand on my shoulder, and said, 'Friend, will you give me up this pupil, hein?'

"I don't mind if you don't believe it; I didn't myself, but thought I was asleep and dreaming it all. 'I will give you in exchange two others,' he said. 'The fat English lady has shortness of breath, and cannot keep my hours of work, and the young Russian makes eyes at me, which is not to be endured. Will you take them, both very rich, and give me in exchange this child?'

"Of course there is only one answer, you know; it is like when a king asks for anything. And besides, Herr Geiger is so good and kind, he was really perfectly delighted at my having the great chance,—the chance of a lifetime. So I am going this afternoon to take my first regular lesson from the great master of the world, and I don't deserve it, Hilda, and I wonder why everything is done so for me, and such happiness given to a fellow like me, when there are hundreds of other fellows who deserve it a great deal more. I know what you and your mother would say, and I do feel it, and I am thankful, I truly think, with all my heart, and I hope I shall be a better fellow in every way, and try to make some return. I couldn't go without telling you. Of course I wrote a line to the governor first. He will be so happy! And of course if it hadn't been for him, I never should have had any music, or any violin, or anything; and without you and your mother, Hilda, I never should have come here, that is certain. So I don't see very clear, sometimes, when I think about you and him.

"Time for the lesson now. Good-bye! I am the happiest fellow in the world! Best love to your mother, and uncle—no! shall write to him by this mail.

"Always your affectionate

"JACK.

"P.S. Lesson glorious! he is really the greatest man in the world, I don't care who the next is. I didn't thank you for your last letter. Of course I felt for a minute as if my gas-balloon had bust, when you told me that the lovely Rose was going to marry Dr. Flower; but I guess it is all right. You see, she must be very sweet and all that; but after all, I never saw her, and you say she has no ear for music, and I am afraid that would have been a pretty bad thing, don't you think so yourself? So I guess it is all right, and I am as jolly as a coot. Awfully jolly about the new neighbours turning out such bricks. Do any of them play or sing? JACK.

"P.P.S. I fought my first duel yesterday, with a chap who slanged the U. S. I got a cut on my left arm, but then, I cut a little slice off his ear, so I was all right. J."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mrs. Grahame; "a duel! The naughty, naughty boy! Those student duels are not apt to be serious affairs nowadays, I believe, but still it seems a dreadful thing. What will the Colonel say when he hears it?"

"He will very likely be pleased as Punch, as Jack says," rejoined Hildegarde. "To have his milksop fight a duel would probably seem to him a very encouraging thing. And of course, mamma, it isn't like a real, dreadful duel, is it? I mean, it is more a kind of horrid bear-play? But oh, to think of our Jack cutting off a piece of a man's ear! It almost spoils the beautiful other part of it. No, nothing can spoil that. Dear, delightful, stupid, glorious old Jack! I always knew he had genius. When shall we see the Colonel?"

"Possibly to-night, at the Merryweathers'," said her mother. "These pleasant little tea-parties seem to take in all our little circle. See! there come the riders back again, Gerald and Phil racing, as usual. Hear them shout! Certainly, never a family was better named."

Hildegarde came up behind her mother, and put her arms lightly round her neck.

"I prefer my pea!" she said. And the two women laughed and kissed each other and went on with

their work.

CHAPTER IX.

MERRY WEATHER INDOORS.

It rained that evening, so the plans for tennis were brought to naught; but the evening was cheerful enough, in spite of the pouring rain outside. The wide, book-strewn parlour of Pumpkin House was bright with many lamps, and twinkling with laughing faces of boys and girls. Mr. Merryweather, cheerfully resigned to "company," possessed his soul and his pipe (being duly assured that Mrs. Grahame liked the smell of tobacco), and the Colonel puffed his cigar beside him. A little fire crackled on the hearth, "just for society," Mrs. Merryweather said, and most of the windows were wide open, making the air fresh and sweet with the fragrance of wet vines and flowers. The two ladies were deep in household matters, each finding it very pleasant to have a companion of her own age, though each reflecting that the children were much better company in the long run. The children themselves were playing games, with gusts of laughter and little shrieks and shouts of glee. They had had "Horned Lady," and Willy's head was a forest of paper horns, skilfully twisted. Hugh had just gone triumphantly through the whole list, "a sneezing elephant, a punch in the head, a rag, a tatter, a good report, a bad report, a cracked saucepan, a fuzzy tree-toad, a rat-catcher, a well-greaved Greek, etc., etc., etc."

"There are no thoughts in this game, beloved," said the child when he had finished, turning to Hildegarde. "My head turns round, but it is empty inside."

"Good for Hugh!" cried Phil. "Just the same with me, Hugh. It makes me feel all fuzzy inside my head, like the tree-toad."

"You ARE like a tree-toad!" said Gerald. "That is the resemblance that has haunted me, and I could not make it out, because as a rule tree-toads are not fuzzy. I thank thee, Jew—I mean Hugh—for teaching me that word. My brother, the tree-toad! Every one will know whom I mean."

"Just as they know you as the 'one as is a little wantin'," retorted Phil. "Just think, Miss Hilda, Jerry and I spent a week together at a house at Pemaquid, and Jerry left his sponge behind him when he came away. Well, and when the captain of the tug brought it over to the island where the rest of us were, he said one of the boys had left it, the one as was a little wantin'. And he said it was a pity about him, and asked if there warn't nothin' they could do for his wits."

"That was because he heard me reciting my Greek cram to the cow," said Gerald. "Most responsive animal I ever saw, that cow, and mooed in purest Attic every time I twisted her tail. And how about the pitch-kettle, my gentle shepherd? Was I ever seen, I ask the assembled family,—WAS I ever seen with a pitch-kettle on my head instead of a hat?"

"Oh, Hilda!" exclaimed Bell; "you ought to have seen Phil. He had been pitching the canoe,—this was ever so long ago, of course,—and he thought it would be great fun to put the pitch-kettle on his head. He thought it was quite dry, you see. So he did, and went round with it for a little, so pleased and amused; and then he saw some ladies coming, and tried to take it off, and it wouldn't come. Oh dear! how we did laugh!"

"Yes, Miss Hilda, I should think they did!" cried Phil, indignantly. "Sat there and chuckled like great apes, instead of helping a fellow. And I had to crawl under barrels for about half a mile, so that those people wouldn't see me."

"Poor Phil!" cried compassionate Hildegarde. "And did you get it off at last?"

"First we tried butter," he said, "but that wouldn't stir it. Then they gave me a bath of sweet oil, and put flour in my hair, and hot water, and turtle soup, and I don't know what not; and the more things they did, the faster the old thing stuck. So at last we had to call the Mater, and she took the scissors and cut it off."

"Oh, meus oculus!" cried Gerald. "Do you remember how that kettle looked, with a fringe of hair all around it? Half his hyacinth bed on one fell kettle! He ought to have sung a 'Lock-aber no more!'"

"And we ought to have sung 'Philly, put the kettle on!'" cried

Gertrude.

"Toots, don't exhaust your brain!" said Gerald, gravely. "You may need it some time; there is no knowing. No knowing, but much nosing!" he added. "Could you move the principal part of your person, my child? It casts such a deep shadow that I cannot see myself think."

"Will some one please tell me what is the matter with Gertrude's nose?" asked Hildegard, innocently. "You are always talking about it; it seems to me a very good nose indeed."

"Dear Hilda!" exclaimed Gertrude; "what a nice girl you are!"

"That is just the point, Miss Hilda," said Gerald. "It is an excellent nose. Take it as a nose, it has no equal in the country, we have been assured. If there is one thing this family is proud of, it is Gertrude's nose. We may not be clever, or rich, or beautiful, but we can always fall back on the nose; there's plenty of room on it for the whole family."

"Why," put in Phil, "the Pater has been offered a dollar a pound for that nose, and he wouldn't look at it."

"He couldn't see it," said Bell; "the nose was in the way."

"Why, one day we had been in bathing," said Phil, "and when we came back, Toots hung her nose out of the window to dry, and went to sleep and forgot it; and will you believe it? a fellow came along and climbed right up it, just like 'Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair,' you know. Ah! Oh, I say!"

At this outrage, Gertrude rose, and fell upon her brother's tooth and nail. She was a powerful child, and at the shock of her onset, the seat of Phil's chair gave way, and he "sat through" like little Silver-hair, and came suddenly to the floor, his head and legs sticking up helplessly through the empty frame. The young people were so overcome with laughter that no one could help him; but Roger, who had been hidden in a convenient corner with an absorbing monograph on trilobites that had just arrived by mail, came forward and pulled his brother out.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mrs. Merryweather, looking up. "Philip, my dear, it is strange that none of you can remember not to sit in that chair."

"What is the matter with the chair?" inquired Mr. Merryweather.

"The seat has been loose for a long time," said his wife. "It always comes down when any one sits in it."

"And could it not be mended?"

"Why, yes," said Mrs. Merryweather, evidently receiving a new idea. "I suppose it might be mended, Miles. Do you know, I never thought of that! Certainly; it shall be mended. Bell, remind me to-morrow to get some glue. That is one of the set of chairs that came from my father's house, you remember, Miles, and the seats were always loose. One night my mother had a party, and your Uncle Frederick went round before the people came, and set the seats forward in the frames, so that whoever sat down would go through at once. The governor of the State was the first to take his seat, and he went directly through to the floor, just as Phil did now. My father was excessively angry, and Frederick and I spent the next day in bed, but we thought it was worth the punishment."

"These are improving reminiscences, my dear Miranda!" said Mr. Merryweather.

"Oh! but what do you think mamma did this morning?" cried Gertrude. "May I tell them, mamma? Do you mind?"

"Tell them, by all means, my dear," said Mrs. Merryweather, cheerfully. "Did I do anything more foolish than usual? Oh, yes, I remember! I was measuring the whale-oil soap. Tell them, Gerty, if you think it would amuse them. I am not very useful," she added, turning to Mrs. Grahame, "but I do seem to give a good deal of amusement, and that is a good thing."

"Well," said Gertrude, "you see, we had to squirt the roses, and mamma said she would make the whale-oil mixture for us, because it is such horrid stuff, and we had some errands to do first. So I came back after the errands, and she was measuring it out. Dear mamma! am I a wretch?"

"Not at all, my child," said her mother. "I richly deserve to be exposed; besides, one can always serve to point a moral. You see, Mrs. Grahame, the receipt said, 'half a pint of soap to a gallon of water! Now I had ten gallons of water, so I—tell what I was doing, cruel child.'"

"She had the pint measure," said Gerty, "and she was filling it half full and then pouring it into the water. She was going to do that ten times, you see; and I said, 'Why don't you fill it full, five times?' Darling mamma, I AM a wretch!"

"Yes, you are," cried Bell. "Poor mamma! dear mamma!"

The children all clustered round their mother, caressing her, and murmuring affectionate words. Mrs. Merryweather smiled in a happy, helpless way.

"I am a sad goose, good neighbours," she said; "but they always bring me out right, somehow. There now, darlings, sit down, and be good. And, by the way, Gertrude, I am minded to heap a coal of fire on your head. Didn't you tell me this morning that Titus Labienus was always on a hill, or something like that?"

"Yes," said Gertrude. "So he is, and ever will remain so. Have you taken him down, dear mamma?"

"Not exactly!" said her mother. "But I have made a ballad about him, and I thought it might possibly amuse you all."

An eager shout arose, and all the young people gathered in a circle round the good lady's chair, while she read:—

"THE BALLAD OF TITUS LABIENUS."

Now Titus Labienus
Was stationed on a hill;
He sacrificed to Janus,
Then stood up stark and still'
He stood and gazed before him,
The best part of a week;
Then, as if anguish tore him,
Did Labienus speak:

"Oh, hearken, mighty Caesar I
Oh, Caius Julius C.,
It really seems to me, sir,
Things aren't as they should be.
I've looked into the future,
I've gazed beyond the years,
And as I'm not a butcher,
My heart is wrung to tears.

"All Gaul it is divided
In parts one, two and three,
And bravely you and I did,
In Britain o'er the sea.
In savage wilds the Teuton
Has felt your hand of steel,
Proud Rome you've set your boot on,
And ground it 'neath your heel.

"But looking down the ages,
There springs into my ken
A land not in your pages,
A land of coming men.
I would that it were handier
'Tis far across the sea:
'Tis Yankeedoodledandia,
The land that is to be.

"A land of stately cities,
A land of peace and truth:
But oh! the thousand pities!
A land of weeping youth.
A land of school and college,
Where youths and maidens go
A-seeking after knowledge,

But seeking it in woe.

"I hear the young men groaning!
I see the maidens fair,
With sighs and bitter moaning,
Tearing their long, fair hair.
And through the smoke of Janus
Their cry comes sad and shrill,
"Oh, Titus Labienus,
Come down from off that hill

"For centuries you've stood there,
And gazed upon the Swiss;
Yet never have withstood there
An enemy like this.
The misery of seeking,
The agony of doubt
Of who on earth is speaking,
And what 'tis all about."

"Now he had planned an action,
And brought his forces round;
But—well, there rose a faction,
And ran the thing aground.
And—their offence was heinous,
Yet Caesar had his will;
And Titus Labienus
Was stationed on a hill.

"Then the Helvetii rallied,
To save themselves from wrack,
And from the towns they sallied,
And drove the Romans back.
The land was quite mounTAINous,
Yet they were put to flight;
And Titus Labienus
Was stationed on a height.

"Then himself advised them
Upon the rear to fall;
But Dumnorix surprised them,
And sounded a recall.
Quoth he, "The gods sustain us!
These ills we'll still surmount!"
And Titus Labienus
Was stationed on a mount."

"Thus comes the cry to hand here
Across the western sea,
From Yankeedoodledandia,
The land that is to be.
My heart is wrung with sorrow;
Hot springs the pitying tear.
Pray, Julius C., to-morrow
Let me get down from here I

"Oh, send me to the valley!
Oh, send me to the town!
Bid me rebuff the sally,
Or cut the stragglers down;
Send me once more to battle
With Vercingetorix;
I'll drive his Gallic cattle,
And stop his Gallic tricks.

"Oh! sooner shall my legion
Around my standard fall;

In grim Helvetic region,
Or in galumphing Gaul;
Sooner the foe enchain us,
Sooner our life-blood spill,
Than Titus Labienus
Stand longer on the hill!"

CHAPTER X.

A NEW LIFE.

"Bell," said Hildegarde, "I really think I must be a cat in disguise."

"What do you mean, dear?" inquired Bell, looking up from her dishpan.

"Why, I have had so many lives. This is the fifth, at the least computation. It is very extraordinary."

Quiet Bell waited, seeing that more was coming. The two girls were sitting on the end of a wharf, in the sparkling clearness of a September morning. Before them stretched a great lake, a sheet of silver, dotted as far as the eye could see with green islands. Behind lay a pebbly beach, and farther up, nestled among a fringe of forest trees, stood a bark hut, with broad verandahs and overhanging eaves. Hildegarde looked up and around, her face shining with pleasure.

"They have all been so happy—the lives," she said. "But this surely is the most beautiful to look at. You see," here she turned again to her companion, "first I was a little girl, and then a big one, at home in New York; and a very singularly odious specimen of both I was."

"Am I expected to believe this?" asked Bell, quietly.

"Oh yes! because I know, you see, and I remember just how detestable I was. Children are so sometimes, you know, even with the very best parents, and I certainly had those. Well, at last I grew so unbearable that I had to be sent away. Oh, you need not raise your eyebrows, my dear! It's very nice of you, but you never saw me then. I don't mean that I was sent to the Reform School; but my father and mother had to go to California, and I was not strong, so the journey was not thought best for me; and besides, dear mamma saw that if I was ever going to amount to anything I must be taken away from the fashionable school and the set of girls I was getting intimate with. I wasn't intimate with mamma then; I didn't want to be. The other girls were not, and I thought it would be silly; think of it, Bell! Well, I was sent, a forlorn and furious child (fifteen years old though, the same age as dear, sweet Gertrude), to my mother's old nurse in the country,—a farmer's wife, living on a small farm, twenty miles from a city. There, my dear, I first learned that there was a world outside the city of New York. I must tell you all about it some day,—the happy, blessed time I had with those dear people, and how I learned to know my own dearest ones while I was away from them. I buried that first Hildegarde, very dead, oh, very dead indeed! Then the next summer I went to a new world, and my Rose went with me. I have told you about her, and how sweet she is, and how ill she was, and now how she is going to marry the good doctor who cured her of her lameness. We spent the summer with Cousin Wealthy Bond, a cousin of my mother's,—the loveliest old lady, living down in Maine. That was a very new world, Bell; and oh! I have a child there, a little boy, my Benny. At least, he is Cousin Wealthy's Benny now, for she is bringing him up as her own, and loves him really as if he were; but I always think of him as partly mine, because Rose and I found him in the hospital where we used to go to carry flowers. He had been very ill, and we got Cousin Wealthy to let him come to her house to get well. And through, that, somehow, there came to be a little convalescent home for the children from the hospital,—oh, I must tell you that story too, some day, and it is called Joyous Gard. Yes, of course I named it, and I was there for a month this spring, before you came, and had the most enchanting time. I took Hugh with me, and the only trouble was that Benny was madly jealous of him, and gave him no peace. Poor Benny! he is a dear, nice little boy, but not like Hugh, of course, and that exasperated him past belief. It was just like Lord Lardy and the waiter in the Bab Ballad, for Hugh was entirely unconscious, and would smile peacefully at Benny's demonstrations of wrath, thinking it all a joke.

"Oh, I could talk all day about Benny and Cousin Wealthy, and nice, funny Mrs. Brett, and all of them. Well, then, two years ago came our trouble, you know. Dear papa died, and we came out here, feeling very strange and lost. It was sad at first, of course; but oh, we have had such peace and happiness

together, my mother dear and I! The last year, when we had grown used to doing without the dear one, and knew—but mamma always knew it—that we must make happiness for each other,—the last year has been a most lovely time. But sweet and happy as it has all been, Bell, still I have always had a small circle to love and to be with. Mamma, bless her, and at one time one set of dear friends, and at another time another; never many people at once, and life peaceful and lovely, but one day pretty much like another, you see. But since you all came, I have been in a new world altogether,—a great, merry, laughing world, with such lots of children and fun—"

"And noise!" put in Bell. "We are a dreadfully noisy set, I fear."

"Oh, noise is good," cried Hildegarde, "such happy, healthy noise as this. I love it, though it did startle me at first. It seemed pleasant enough to have you all next door; but then came this last development,—Cousin Wealthy's illness, and her sending for mamma, and your mother's kindness in bringing me out to this delightful place. It is all like a fairy tale. I used to hear of people's camping out, but I always thought I should hate it. Hate this!"

She looked up at the brilliant sky above her, and around at the shining lake, the dark trees drooping to the water's edge, the green islands sleeping in the sunshine. "Oh, pleasant place!" she sighed.

They were silent for a few moments; Bell was scouring dishpans till they shone like silver, while Hildegarde thoughtfully wrung out the dishcloths that she had been washing as she talked.

"I suppose," said Bell, slowly, "life is always good, when we want to make it so. There are so many different kinds of life,—I have known so many in the short time I have been alive, and it didn't seem to make much difference about the outside of them. Some of the poorest and most suffering lives have been the happiest and blessedest, and again some that have money and health and everything that so many people sigh for, are miserable, for one reason or another. I can't bear to hear girls say, 'Oh, if I only had money! I would do so much, and be so good, and all that sort of thing.' I always want to say, 'Why don't you begin with what you have?' I did say it once to a girl, and she has hardly spoken to me since. She had been wishing that she had a hundred dollars to give to the Mission Society, and when I asked her for ten cents (I was the collector) she said she had only one dime, and she must get some soda water, or she should die."

"The creature! what did you say to her?"

"I said, 'Possibly the world would continue to revolve if you did!' and stalked away. Oh, I cannot stand that sort of thing, you know! And if you are a girl, you can't knock people down when they are cads."

Bell spoke regretfully, and Hildegarde could not help laughing at her friend's angry eyes and kindling cheek. The strong white bare arms, the deep chest and square shoulders, looked as if Bell would be no mean antagonist.

"I should not like to have you knock me down, my dear!" said Hilda.

"You never would need it," said Bell. "But I can tell you, Hilda, there are times when I feel as if a blow from the shoulder would be the best argument in the world. I love fighting! and I think I am rather a bonny fighter, as Alan Breck says. Roger taught me to box."

Hildegarde opened her eyes a little at this, boxing never having come within her horizon of feminine accomplishments.

"Does Professor Merryweather know how to do everything?" she asked. "He seems to be the Admirable Crichton come to life again."

"Nearly everything," said Bell, with judicious candour. "He cannot write verses, and he does not like dancing; those are the only things I can think of just now."

A birch canoe glided silently round the point; Roger was kneeling in the stern, paddling, Indian fashion, while Will and Kitty were curled up like two kittens in the bow. Hildegarde thought to herself that he was the handsomest man she had ever seen, so strong, so gentle, so perfectly graceful; but she did not say so.

"What luck?" cried Bell, as the Cheemaun came alongside the wharf. Roger held up a string of gleaming fish, two of them long, deep-bodied fellows, striped with pink and silver. Willy was happy with three hideous horned pouts, which he declared were the best fish that swam.

"Oh, pickerel! how delightful!" cried Bell, as she took the beauties from her brother's hands. "We will bake them for supper, Hilda; it is our turn, isn't it?"

"Oh!" said Willy, "I thought it was Toots' and Roger's turn. Toots makes the best griddle-cakes, and she ought always to get supper."

"Willy, you ungrateful little monster!" cried Bell. "And you said only last night that my biscuits were a dream of joy. You won't find me baking an extra pan for you, if you are going to turn upon me in this way."

"Oh yes! so you did, sister," said Willy, penitently. "But you see, I am griddle-cake hungry to-day, and yesterday I wasn't."

"Come, Hilda! we'll make our little gentleman pickerel-hungry before he is an hour older!" and the two girls hurried into the house.

Inside the camp was a large, low room, with a huge open fireplace filling nearly one side. A plain table stood in the middle; two hammocks were slung against the walls, which were hung with guns and fishing-rods. A bookcase in one corner, and Mrs. Merryweather's workstand in another, completed the furniture of the primitive parlour. On one side a door opened into the tiny kitchen, and hither the girls now betook themselves, after reminding Will and Kitty that it was their turn to set the supper table. The fire was soon burning brightly in the stove, the kettle put on to boil, and Hildegarde, rolling up her sleeves, set to work mixing and moulding biscuits, while Bell devoted herself to the stuffing and dressing of the big fish.

"I wish I had Izaak Walton here!" she said, as she mixed the bread stuffing.

"Father Izaak pleasant company would be at any moment," Hilda assented; "but what do you want him for just now? To cook the fish for you?"

"Not exactly; I doubt if he was as good in the kitchen as by the brookside; but to give me his famous receipt for cooking pickerel. I should like to astonish the family with it. I remember that it has thyme in it, and sweet marjoram and summer savory, not to mention oysters and anchovies, a pound of butter, a bottle of claret and three or four oranges; he gives you your choice about two cloves of garlic, and says you need not have them unless you like. Perhaps on the whole it is just as well not to try the dish at present; the anchovies were left behind, and the orange trees are not bearing very well this year."

"Dear me!" said Hildegarde. "That is as bad as my Southern receipt for wedding cake. Two hundred and one pounds of flour and fruit, and ten eggs to the pound; and if it isn't rich enough then, you can add two pounds of currants and one of raisins for each pound of flour. That would make,—let me see! I worked it all out once: two hundred and seventy pounds of things, and two thousand seven hundred eggs. What do you suppose they baked it in?"

"In the well!" said Bell. "That would hold it. Or else they built a pavilion round it, and had the bride and groom dance a minuet on the top after the ceremony. What fun cook-books are! Any more pleasantnesses in your Southern friend?"

"Oh, all kinds of good things! I remember the receipt for Seminole soup; we ought to try that out here, if we could find the ingredients. 'Take a squirrel, cut it up and put it on to boil. When the soup is nearly done add to it one pint of picked hickory-nuts and a spoonful of parched and powdered sassafras leaves, or the tender top of a young pine tree, which gives a very aromatic flavour to the soup.'"

"Oh, do somebody get us a pine tree!" cried Bell. "That is truly delightful! We must try it some day. Now it is my turn. I quote from Mrs. Rundell the glorious. This is what she gives to the poor; I don't want to be poor in Mrs. Rundell's parish."

"Cut a very thick upper crust of bread, and put it into the pot where salt beef is boiling and near ready; it will attract some of the fat, and, when swelled out, will be no unpalatable dish to those who rarely taste meat.' That is called a brewis, my dear; suppose we give it to our pampered family here some day, and see what they say. How nearly are your biscuits done? I hear the people growling inside, like hungry bears. Uncle Pickerel is beginning to smell very good."

"Another five minutes will give them the requisite 'beautiful light brown'" said Hildegarde, peeping into the oven. "And the tea is made, and the potatoes are tearing off their jackets in impatience to be eaten."

"Are we going to have any supper?" asked Phil, looking in from the dining-room. "Roger has fainted with hunger, and lies a pallid heap on the floor, and Obadiah is gnawing his boots in his agony."

"As long as he does not swallow the nails," said Bell, calmly, "it will do him no harm. Have the babes got the table ready?"

"All ready, sister!" cried Kitty. "Cups and saucers and plates, and—oh, Willy, we have forgotten the butter! Why do we always forget the butter?"

In five minutes the whole family were seated round the table, with the lamp burning brightly above their heads. Bell came in triumphantly, bearing the mighty pickerel in their glory, on a huge platter decorated with green leaves and golden-rod. Hildegarde followed, flushed and sparkling, with her biscuits and coffee; and every one fell to with right good will.

"Why is it that everything tastes so good here?" demanded Will. "At home I can't always eat as much as I want to, and here I can always eat more than there is; and yet there is lots!" he added, surveying the broad table, heaped with substantial victuals of every sort.

"Ah! that's the beauty of it!" cried Gerald, spearing a potato. "The human capacity enlarges, my son, with every mile one retires from civilisation. When I was a Kickapoo Indian, Willy, I ate for three weeks without stopping, and I had three buffaloes at a—"

"Gerald, my dear!" said Mrs. Merryweather.

"Yes, Mater, my dear!" said the unblushing Gerald. "I was only trying to expand his mind, like the Ninkum. Excellent biscuits, Miss Hilda! three more, if you please."

CHAPTER XI.

A NIGHT-PIECE.

It was clear moonlight when the girls went to bed; clear, that is, to Hildegarde's unpractised eyes. She saw only the brilliant stars overhead, and took no note of the low bank of cloud in the south. Captain Roger (for Roger was in command at camp, Mr. Merryweather only coming out at night on his bicycle, and going in again to his business in the morning), after a critical survey of the sky, went the rounds in his quiet way before bedtime, making all secure, but said nothing to anybody. Going to bed was a matter of some labour at the camp. During the day the beds were piled one on top of another in the one bedroom, the blankets, after hanging in the air for two or three hours, being folded and laid over them. Only in the tent where Mr. and Mrs. Merryweather slept the beds remained stationary all day, the sides of the tent being rolled high, to let the air circulate in every direction.

When nine o'clock came, or ten, as the case might be, the order was given, "Bring out the beds!" Straightway the boys made broad their backs, and walked about like long-legged tortoises, distributing mattresses here and there. The three girls slept in the bedroom which opened off the living-room; the boys and Roger carried their beds into the second tent, or under the trees, or into the boat-house, as fancy suggested, and the wind favoured. Then blankets were unrolled, and the business of bed-making went on merrily.

As I said, it was clear moonlight when the girls went to bed; but somewhere in the middle of the night Hildegarde was waked by a rustle and a roar. Visions of lions ramped before her still-dreaming eyes; she shuddered awake, to find a gale raging round the camp. Outside was one continuous roar of waves on the shore, while overhead the wind clutched and tore at the branches, and shook the frail hut to its foundations. Hildegarde lay still and listened, with a luxurious sense of safety amid the wild tumult.

"But I am safe, and live at home!" she said softly. Then suddenly a thought came, like a cold hand laid on her heart, and she sat up in bed, her breath coming quickly.

"Bell!" she said, under breath, that she might not wake little Kitty, "Bell, wake up!"

"What is it?" asked Bell, turning drowsily on her side. "Not our turn to get breakfast, you know."

"There is a storm! Hear it raging outside. Oh, Bell! the birch canoe! Can you remember whether we put her in the boat-house when we came in from paddling?"

Bell was wide awake now, and on her feet in an instant.

"We did not!" she said, searching frantically for her clothes. "My dear, we left her; don't you remember? The boys were just cutting wood, and we thought we would wait till they finished, and then,

—what a wretch I am! What IS happening to this skirt?"

"I am putting it on too," said Hildegarde. "It is mine. Here is yours. Now a jacket; there, we are all right. Is any one sleeping on the piazza?"

"No, they all went up to the pine grove to-night, or last night, or whenever it was. Have you any idea what time it is? Carefully now, Hilda. I will open the door, and you must be ready to help me shut it."

The two girls stepped out into the black night, and the wind clutched them. They were thrown violently against the wall of the hut, but contrived to shut the door and make it fast; then, bending low and holding by each other, they crept along toward the boat-house. The waves were dashing against the rocks, the spray flew in their faces, half blinding them; but it was not very dark, as there was a moon behind the clouds, and they could see their way dimly.

"Do you think we shall find her?" asked Hildegarde under her breath.

"I can't hear!" shouted Bell.

"Do you think we shall find her?"

Hildegarde thought she was shrieking, but her friend only shook her head.

"That comes of asking stupid questions," said Hildegarde to herself; and she lowered her head and fought her way on in silence.

Now, groping with their hands, they found the wall of the boathouse, and crept along in its lee, sheltered somewhat from the blast; but when they stepped out on the wharf, the wind seized them with such fury that Hildegarde tottered, staggered back a step, and felt the ground slip from under her. Another moment, and she would have been in the wild water; but Bell held her with a grasp of steel, and with one strong heave lifted her bodily to the wharf again. Then she shook her gently, "to bring back your nerve!" she shouted in explanation; and the next moment recoiled herself with a shriek that rang above the roar of wind and wave. Up from the wharf rose two forms, blacker than the blackness of night and storm, and confronted them. The two girls clung close together.

"What is it?" cried Bell, faintly.

Now Hildegarde was in mortal terror of the storm, but she did not fear anything that had human shape. "Who are you?" she asked, sternly. "What are you doing on this wharf?"

"We are playing on the jewsharp!" replied a familiar voice. "What are YOU doing, if it comes to that?"

"Oh, Jerry! oh, Phil! how could you frighten us so? We thought,—I don't know what we didn't think. We came to see if the canoe was safe. We forgot to see that you put her up after tea."

"Just what we came for," said Phil. "She isn't here; I'm afraid she's gone."

The girls uttered a cry of dismay.

"Oh, it can't be! Look in the boathouse, boys; it is possible—"

"It is highly possible," said Jerry, "that she got up on end and walked in, as soon as she saw that the weather looked squally. She's a very sensible boat, but weak in the legs, if you follow me. I think she's gone; and a very pretty kettle of fish she makes to seethe two tender bodies in. I wouldn't be us, Fergs, my boy, when the Cap'n finds it out to-morrow."

"Wait," said Hildegarde, "oh, wait! Don't let us give up hope. It will do no harm to look, Jerry."

"No harm in life," said Jerry. "Just hold on to this wind, will you, while I get in."

With some difficulty he opened the boat-house door; then, sheltered behind it, he struck a match, while all pressed eagerly forward. There in her place, high and dry, lay the birch canoe. Nobody said anything for a moment; the relief was too great. Hildegarde felt the tears come to her eyes, she could not tell why; but she found herself saying under her breath, "We might have known he would do it; he always takes care of everything."

"Roger is a tedious person," said Gerald, turning off his satisfaction with a laugh. "The amount of virtue that he staggers under is enough to swamp anybody. He will come to the gallows yet, you'll see! Human nature must assert itself some time. Whew! there goes my head! Catch it, Bell, will you?"

"I am very, VERY hungry!" Phil announced with mournful emphasis.

"It makes me starved to play this kind of game in the middle of the night. Can't we have some food, to celebrate the safety of the Cheemaun?"

"Me, too!" cried Gerald. "I am dying, Egypt, dying! a corpse among the alders dank—"

"Oh, do stop, boys!" cried Bell. "I'll push you off the wharf if you go on so."

"Oh, wouldn't us lovf, if she pushed us off the wharf!" cried Gerald.

"I am cross!" said Bell. "My hair is wound all round my neck, and I am half strangled. You boys think of nothing but eating from morning till night. But I am hungry myself, so come along!"

The four buffeted their way back to the house, and Phil climbed in at the pantry window and opened the kitchen door for the dripping party. They lighted a lantern, and judicious rummaging produced crackers and cheese, gingerbread, and some bottles of root beer. Merrily the four adventurers gathered round the table, dripping, rosy and breathless; the girls' long locks hung down over their shoulders, the boys' short curls were plastered close to their heads.

"We must be a lovely sight!" said Bell. "What a pity there is no one to see us! What do you want, Jerry?"

"I want raspberry jam, chiefly," said Gerald, "but first I want to make a speech. I propose a sentiment. Pledging the assembled company in this beaker of rich wine—. Let go that bottle, Ferguson, or I'll have your life! that's my beaker, I tell you! There! now you've upset it. Attendez seulement bis ich dein tete abhaue!"

"Take the butter-dish," said Bell. "That will do just as well."

"I pledge the assembled company in this rich butter," Gerald continued with dignity, "though it is not so comfortable to drink, and I propose, first, the confusion of Ferguson, who is a pettifogger and an armadillo, and, secondly, the health of our captain, Roger, the Codger, who saved the Cheemaun. Three cheers for the well-bred captain of the—"

"Thank you so much!" said Roger, looking in through the window. "Empty compliments are all very well, but I think I might have been asked to supper."

He was hailed with a chorus of shouts, and stepping in through the window, drew up a stool and sat down by Hildegarde.

"What HAVE you been doing, children?" he asked, looking round at the four, who had now arrived at the smoking stage of dampness, each sending up his little pillar of cloud.

Four eager voices told him of the search and the finding, and he smiled quietly as he helped himself to jam.

"I wonder what you took me for!" he said, "I truly wonder. The boat went to bed at nine o'clock, with the rest of the children. I beg your pardon, Miss Grahame," he added, turning to Hildegarde with his kind, grave smile, "for naming you in company with this lawless crew of mine."

"Oh, please," cried Hildegarde, "I like to—I wish I were—" She stammered, and felt herself blushing in the furious way that makes a girl the most helpless creature in the world. She would have given her hand, she thought, to keep back the tide that surged up over throat and cheek and brow. "When there is nothing earthly to blush about, ninny!" she almost cried aloud.

But Bell came to the rescue. "She wishes she were much wiser than the rest of us, Roger, but she doesn't think she is, and I am really not so sure about it myself. That is the best part of her: she's just a girl."

"Just a girl!" said Roger, looking at Hildegarde; and he looked so kindly that poor Hildegarde blushed again.

CHAPTER XII.

A-SAILING WE WILL GO.

"Friends," said Mrs. Merryweather, "the day is before us. What is the plan of action?"

"I go a-fishing," said Roger; "and with me Willy, to take his first lesson in bass-fishing."

"I tinker the wharf," said Phil; "and with me Obadiah, to take his first lesson in useful occupation."

"Verily and in good sooth," put in Gerald, "the most useful occupation I can think of, my peripatetic food-absorber, would be to heave thee into the glassy deep."

"Like to see you try it!" said Ferguson.

"Anything to oblige!" replied Obadiah, rising with, alacrity.

"Don't booby, boys!" said Roger, with quiet authority. "Let other people have a chance to speak."

"Hilda and I will make a pie!" said Bell; "'which is werse,' said Mr. Peggotty, 'though sich were not my intentions.'"

"And I have gingerbread to make, and raspberries to pick," said Gertrude, "so Kitty must help me."

"But what do I see?" cried Gerald, in tragic tones. "A vessel in the offing, headed in this direction. Now who do you suppose has the cheek to come here?"

"Probably some lunatic is thirsty," said Phil, "and wants a glass of water. You know, Miss Hilda, they come here by the boatload, asking for water, and we show them the lake and tell 'em to help themselves. It makes them hop with rage. They say, 'What! do you drink THIS?' Then, when we tell them that all their water supply comes from this lake, they grin like a dog and go about the city,—I mean depart on their imbecile way. But these people are all dressed up. Oh, Momus and Comus! There are girls on board! Come on, Obadiah!"

The twins vanished, and the others looked curiously at the approaching craft. It was a small steam launch, gayly adorned with paint and streamers; in the bow stood a light, girlish figure, waving a handkerchief and gesticulating with fervour.

"Who can it be?" asked Mrs. Merryweather. "The boat is from Pollock's Cove, isn't it, Roger?"

"Yes; but I see no one on board that I know. That young lady evidently thinks she is coming among friends, however. Look! they are putting out a boat. I will go and see what is wanted."

He went to the wharf, and the rest waited in some amusement, thinking that a mistake had been made. To their amazement they saw Roger, after a moment's parley, help the young lady out of the boat, which straight-way returned to the launch; before they had time to exchange wonderments, she was advancing toward them with outstretched arms.

"My dearest, dearest Hildegarde! Do I see you again, after so many years? Quel plaisir! what joy!"

The young lady was dressed in the extreme of fashion, with little boots, and little gloves, and a dotted veil, and a chiffon parasol, and Hildegarde was folded in a perfumed embrace before she had fairly recognised her visitor.

"Madge!" she cried, "is it really you?"

"Myself, cherie! your own Madge. I heard that you were in the wilderness and flew to you. What a change, my dearest, from—"

"Mrs. Merryweather," said Hildegarde, her cheeks burning, but her voice quiet and courteous, "this is Margaret Everton, an old school-mate of mine. Mrs. Merryweather, Madge, with whom I am staying. Miss Merryweather, Professor Merryweather, Miss Everton."

"Oh, hum—mum-m-m-m-m-m!" said Madge, or something that sounded like it. The Merryweathers welcomed her courteously, and Mrs. Merryweather asked if she had come over from Pollock's Cove.

"Oh, yes! I am staying there for a day or two. Some friends of mine are there, charming people, and I heard that Hildegarde was here, and of course I flew to see her. She is my oldest and dearest friend, Mrs. Merryweather."

"Indeed!" said Mrs. Merryweather, with friendly interest.

"Yes, indeed. We were at school together, and like twins, except for the difference in colouring. Ah, les beaux jours d'enfance, Hilda, my love! And you are quite, quite unchanged since the happy days at Madame Haut Ton's. 'Queen Hildegarde' we used to call her then, Miss Merryweather. Yes, indeed! she was the proudest, the most exclusive girl on Murray Hill. The little aristocratic turn of her head when she saw anything vulgar or common was quite too killing. Turn your head, Hilda, my love!"

Hildegarde coloured hotly. "Please don't be absurd, Madge!" she said.

"Pray turn your head, Miss Grahame!" said Roger Merryweather, gravely. "I am sure it would interest us."

Hildegarde shot an imploring glance at him, and turned in desperation to her visitor.

"It is a long time since I have heard from you, Madge," she said.

"I am sure you must have a great deal to tell me. If Mrs. Merryweather will excuse us, suppose we go for a little walk together."

"Surely, my dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Merryweather, with perhaps unnecessary cordiality.

But Madge had made herself very comfortable on the verandah, and had no intention of stirring just yet. Go scrambling about over rocks, and tearing herself to pieces among bushes? Hardly. Besides, one glance had shown her that Professor Merryweather was uncommonly good-looking. She settled herself gracefully in her chair, and gave a pretty little sigh.

"Dear child, I am a wretched walker, alas! You know I never was strong, and this winter's gaiety quite finished me. I am ordered to rest, positively, this summer, under the severest penalties. It was really a terrible winter in New York. Every one said it was a wonder the girls were not killed, they went such a pace. Do you never come over to Pollock's Cove, Professor Merryweather? we had such a charming hop there last night; danced till two o'clock, with SUCH music! You must positively come over for the next one; we are to have them every week."

Roger thanked her, but was not a dancing man, and hops were hardly in their line out here.

"Not a dancing man! What a confession, Professor Merryweather! But I am sure you really dance beautifully; doesn't he, Hilda?"

"I don't know!" said Hilda, laughing. "He has never asked me to dance, Madge."

"Ah! you are quizzing me. I will never believe he could be so ungallant. But Hilda, I hear that really you live in positive seclusion, like a nun without a convent. My dear, how tragic, to pass your best years in this way! I told mamma that I should positively implore you to come to me this winter, and she said it was my DUTY. To think of YOU, Hilda, forswearing the world! It is too BIZARRE! But we have not forgotten our little queen on Murray Hill; no, no, dear!"

"You are mistaken, Madge," said Hilda. "I was in New York for several weeks last winter, staying with Aunt Anna; but you were in Washington at the time."

"Oh, but I heard of you!" cried Madge, archly. "I heard how the whole Hill was at Miss Grahame's feet, and how Bobby Van Sittart nearly went into a decline because she would not smile on his suit. I heard—"

"I think you heard a great deal of nonsense, Madge!" said Hilda with some asperity. "Come! you would like to see something of the island before the steamer comes to take you back. I will get the canoe and take you for a paddle."

Madge recoiled with a pretty shriek.

"Oh, horrors! Trust myself in a horrid tippy canoe, with a girl? Never, my dear! I value my life too highly, I assure you. But there is a sailboat! I dote on sailing, and I am sure Professor Merryweather is a superb sailor."

Professor Merryweather rose with a smile, and would be charmed to take the young ladies out in the Keewaydin.

"Oh, but, Captain Roger, you were going out fishing!" cried Hildegarde, her cheeks crimson with mortification.

Roger looked at her with a twinkle. "The fishes are not expected to migrate just yet, and there is a good wind for sailing. Pray come, Miss Grahame!"

Madge was already on her feet, fluttering with coquetry; and Hildegarde, after a despairing glance at Mrs. Merryweather, saw that she could do nothing but lead the way to the wharf.

"Won't you come, Bell?" she asked wistfully; but Bell was cruel, and said she must attend to her cooking; adding for the special edification of the stranger that she had the floor to scrub and the fish to clean. In silence Hildegarde walked down the wharf; she was thoroughly upset, and turning to look back to the house, it did not restore her composure to see Obadiah and Ferguson standing on their hands on the piazza, waving their feet in the air with every demonstration of frantic joy.

The little rowboat was unmoored, and a few quick strokes brought them alongside the Keewaydin. Hildegarde had never thought it could be anything but pleasure to her to board this beloved vessel, but she found herself now wishing that sailing had never been invented. She glanced timidly at Roger, but there was no expression in his face as he handed Madge on board, and replied gravely to her lively questions. Madge was treading on air. They had told her at Pollock's Cove that she would not be able to get a word out of the handsome young professor; and here he was at her side, perhaps—who knew?—soon to be at her feet. A little absent-minded, to be sure, but they were often that way when a strong impression had been made. As for poor Hilda, it was really lamentable to see how utterly she had lost her savoir-faire, living in the wilderness. Here was this charming man, really with the bel air, and distinguished in some way or other, and she was as mute as a fish. Really, it was a charity to come and see her.

"Would you like to take the helm, Miss Hilda?" asked Roger.

Hilda thanked him with a glance, and took her place at the tiller in silence.

"Oh, Professor Merryweather! are you really going to trust us to Hilda's steering? I am sure, now, you think girls are too ignorant to know anything about that sort of thing. I wonder at you! OUR lives may not be of much consequence, because, of course, we are only silly little girls, but to risk your own life so, really, I am surprised."

She paused for the compliment that should follow, but Roger only said, "Bear away, please!" and loosened the sheet a little.

"Did your ears burn yesterday, Professor Merryweather? I am sure they must have. Everybody was talking about you at the hotel, and they said you had done something so remarkable,—something about a prism, wasn't it? You remember, Hilda, all the prisms on the chandeliers at Madame Haut Ton's! Do yours go on a chandelier, Professor Merryweather?"

"Not exactly!" said Roger. "You have a large party at Pollock's, I believe, Miss Everton? I think I heard the Sinclairs say they were to be there this month."

"Oh, aren't the Sinclairs enchanting?" cried Madge, with effusion. "And isn't Jack simply delicious? I danced with him ten times last night, and each dance was better than the last. Professor Merryweather, I shall give you no peace till you promise to come over for the next hop."

"We are not to expect peace in this world, are we?" said Roger, smiling. "Steady, Miss Grahame! as you are!"

"I think nautical terms are too delicious!" cried Madge. "And that reminds me, Hilda, Grace Atherleigh has just come back from Europe. She has been away three years, you know; in Paris most of the time,—dear Paris! Don't you adore it, Professor Merryweather? And she has brought back forty-three dresses. Yes, my dear, it is true, for I had it from her aunt, Mrs. Gusham. Forty-three dresses, all made this spring. And she had the most horrible time at the custom-house—"

"Madge," said Hildegarde, as patiently as she could, "will you please wait for the stories till we get back to the wharf? I must attend to the steering, and I cannot listen at the same time."

"My dear, I am dumb! I only just want to tell you before I forget it—you know what a wretched memory I have—what happened—"

"Luff!" said Roger, suddenly. "Luff, child, LUFF!"

Startled and confused, Hildegarde tried to do as she was told, but, in her distress, did exactly the opposite, and bore away; a grating sound was heard: the boat slid forward a few feet and stopped short.

"Oh, what have I done?" cried poor Hilda.

"Nothing of consequence! We have run on a shoal, that is all. Sit steady, please, ladies!"

Roger was overboard in an instant, up to his waist in water, pushing at the boat. Hilda sat dumb and scarlet, and even Madge was subdued for the time, and murmured exclamations under her breath. It was only a moment; a few vigorous shoves set the Keewaydin afloat again, and Roger leaped lightly in.

"Perhaps I would better take the tiller this time!" he said. "The bottom seems to be shoal all about here. And if you and Miss Everton will sit a little forward, Hilda, you will be more comfortable; I fear I cannot help dripping like hoary Nereus all over the stern here."

He had never called her by her name before. Hildegard reflected that for once she could not blush, being already a Tyrian purple. Of course it slipped out without his knowing it; but she was conscious of Madge's gaze, and for once was thankful for her crimson cheeks.

This incident, or something else, had a quieting effect upon Miss Everton, and the sail home was a silent one. Roger was not inclined to talk, and he had a power of silence which was apt to extend to his companions; so they were all relieved when the Keewaydin glided gracefully to her moorings, and Ferguson appeared in the small boat to take them ashore.

"This is my brother Philip, Miss Everton!" said Roger. "Now if you will step into the boat, he will take you and Miss Grahame ashore, while I make all fast here. If you will take his hand, and be careful to step in the middle of the boat. In the MIDDLE of the boat, Miss Everton! Ah!" For Madge, with an airy leap, had alighted full on the gunwale. Down went the boat; the girl tried to regain her balance, but in vain, and after a few moments' frantic struggle, fell headlong into the water.

Phil had thrown himself to starboard the moment he felt the shock of her alighting, hoping to counterbalance her weight; but he was too light. Now, however, he leaned swiftly forward, and caught the little French boots as they disappeared under the clear water. There was nothing else to be done. In this ignominious way, feet foremost, poor Madge had to be dragged in over the gunwale, dripping and shrieking.

"You odious boy!" she cried, as soon as she could find breath.

"You did it on purpose! You tried to drown me, I know you did!"

Hildegard hastened to her assistance. Roger, his face set like a rock, but his eyes dancing wickedly, proffered his aid, but was peevishly repulsed. As for Phil, he could only try to control himself, and murmured broken excuses between the gusts of laughter which shook him like a reed. Madge was a sorry sight, all her gay plumes broken and dripping, her spotted veil in a little wet mop over one eye, her floating curls reduced to forlorn strings of wet hair, her light dress clinging about her. How different from the bright bird of paradise that had so lately fluttered down on the camp, bent on conquest! Now her only thought was to escape. Mrs. Merryweather met her on the wharf with open arms and a warm blanket, and she was brought to the camp, and dried and warmed as quickly as possible. But Madge's temper, none of the sweetest by nature, was completely spoiled; she had only peevish or sullen answers for all the expressions of sympathy and condolence that were poured out by the kindly campers. It was all the boy's fault, and there was no excuse for him. She ought to have known better than to come among such. But here Hilda pressed her hand, and said "Be still!" in a low tone, but with a flash of the eye that so forcibly recalled the "Queen Hildegard" of old days that Madge subsided, and whimpered to herself till the steamer came to take her back to Pollock's Cove.

When she was gone Hildegard slipped away, saying that she would pick some apples for tea; and on reaching the apple tree, she sat down under its hanging branches and indulged in a good cry, a rare luxury for her. It was a comfort to let the tears come, and to tell the friendly tree over and over again that he would never forgive her; that she was the most imbecile creature that ever lived, and that Madge was the only person she deserved to have for a friend, and that, now the others had found her out, the sooner she went home to her mother the better. Her mother would not expect her to be sensible; her mother knew better than to expect things of her. She was not fit to be with these people, who were so terribly clever, and knew so many things: and so on and so on, in the most astonishing way, our quiet, self-possessed girl sobbing and crying as if her heart would break, utterly amazed at herself, and wondering all the time what was the matter with her, and whether she would ever be able to stop.

She stopped suddenly enough; for Roger, coming through the fields with the milk, heard this piteous sobbing, and setting down his cans, parted the branches of the apple tree, saying in his kindest voice: "Why, my Kitty, my Pretty, what is the matter with you? who hurt my little—I—I beg your pardon, Miss Grahame!"

Hildegarde felt the hand of fate very heavy on her, but was quite helpless, and sobbed harder than ever.

What was a poor professor to do? Fortunately, Roger had plenty of sisters, and knew that a girl did not kill herself when she cried. After a moment's thought, in which he reminded himself severely that he was getting to be an old fellow, and might be this child's uncle, he came under the tree and sat down on the grass.

"Can you tell me what troubles you?" he asked, still in the gentle voice that was rather specially Kitty's privilege. "You have had no bad news?"

Hilda shook her head.

"Perhaps if you were to tell me what the trouble is, I could help you; or would you rather I would go away and not bother you?"

No! Hildegarde, to her own amazement, would rather he stayed. Whereupon, Roger, drawing from his experience of girls, perceived that there was nothing to do but sit and wait till the storm had spent itself. So he picked the apples within his reach, and reflected on the feminine character.

Presently a small and shaken voice said from under the handkerchief, "I—am so sorry—you got wet, Captain Roger!"

"Got wet?" said Roger, vaguely. He was generally more or less wet, being an amphibious creature, and did not for the moment grasp Hildegarde's meaning.

"I ran—the—boat aground, and you jumped overboard, and got—all wet!" and Hildegarde sobbed afresh.

"You don't mean—" said Roger. "You are not troubled about THAT?"

But it appeared that Hildegarde was troubled about that.

"My dear child, do you think I did not see that it was not your fault? You were doing beautifully, if that—if Miss Everton had let you alone for an instant. And do you think I mind a wetting, or twenty wettings? Miss Hilda, I thought you knew better than that."

"I was so stupid!" said Hildegarde, wiping her eyes, and trying to speak evenly. "I thought you were very angry, because you were so silent. I thought you would never—"

"Silent, was I? Well, you know I am in a brown study half the time. Isn't that why they call me Roger the Codger? But this time,—oh, I remember! I was trying to make out how that shoal came to be there, when it is not buoyed out on the map. Come, Miss Hilda, you must laugh now!"

And Hilda laughed, and dried her eyes, and looked up,

"All kinder smily round the lips,
And teary round the lashes."

"That's right!" said Roger, heartily. "Now you shall be Kitty, and we will—we will shake hands and be friends, and eat an apple together. Kitty and I always do that when we have had a tiff."

So they did; and the apples on that tree were the best apples in the world.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN PERIL BY WATER.

"All aboard!" said Roger.

"Ay! ay! Captain!" said Hildegarde, cheerily. She handed in the groceries which they had bought at the little store, half a mile away, stepped lightly into the exact middle of the canoe, and sank with one motion to her seat.

Roger nodded approvingly. "You are perfect in your entrances!" he said. "Some day I shall have to drill you in your exits, as I did the girls."

"What do you mean?" asked Hilda. "Don't I get out properly?"

"Quite well enough for ordinary occasions. But I made the girls put on their bathing-dresses, and then took them out and tipped them over, so that they would know just what to do."

"Thank you kindly. As I have not my bathing-dress on to-day, please don't give me a lesson just now."

They paddled on in silence; the two had become fast friends since the day of Madge's visit, and had had many pleasant paddles together. Hildegarde looked about her, at peace with all the world. Pollock's Cove was a thousand miles away, and there was nothing to break the spirit of peace that brooded over the water.

Are you so sure, Hilda?

The girl's face was set toward the land; she saw the wooded island with its fringe of silver birches standing like sentinels to guard the water's edge; she saw the lovely tangle of asters and golden-rod that gave it its name of Royal Island, and the strip of sand on which the waves were lapping gently; but she saw nothing of the west behind her.

"What are you watching so earnestly, Captain?" she said presently.
"No boats, I hope?"

"No, no boats! we may have a shower by-and-bye; but I hope we shall get home in time."

It was a curious sky that Roger was watching. The day had been smoky throughout, with ragged brown clouds hanging about the horizon, and thunder muttering low in the distance. The smoky fringe might well come from the forest fires which were raging in a neighbouring district, Roger thought, and the thunder was an every-day matter of hot weather; but now the clouds were beginning to thicken at one point, and their ragged edges turned to firmer roundings, and their hue was fast deepening to black. Roger paddled with strong, even strokes, and the canoe flew over the water. The distant thunder-growl took on a more insistent voice, and every now and then came a long rolling note, which seemed to pass on and over their heads.

"Hear now how dey roll de great balls about," quoted Hildegarde. "If we were in the Catskills, we might look out for Hendrik Hudson and his men, after such a peal as that."

"I am afraid we may have to look out for ourselves!" said Roger, laughing. "I begin to feel rather doubtful about getting home before the storm, Miss Hilda."

"It is growing dark, isn't it?" said Hilda, innocently. "Will it be much of a shower, do you think, Captain?"

"Well,—I think we may observe slight alterations in the atmospheric conditions. You are not afraid of a squall?"

"No, indeed! only tell me what I must do."

"Nothing but sit still—the hardest thing for some people to do; but I have noticed that you are not fidgety. Is your hat securely fastened?"

"As securely as my head!"

"That is well. Stand by, then, and be ready, for it is coming pretty near."

Roger was used to every variety of weather, but he had been wholly unprepared for the velocity of the storm which was moving down the lake. The clouds, which, a moment before, it seemed, had been merely a thickening of the general smoky condition, were now gathered into a heavy mass, dense blackness fringed with a misty gleam. It came sweeping over the water toward them, devouring the sunlight. A rushing sound was heard, that rose into a roar. "Steady, now!" said Roger. "Steady, child! and don't be frightened. Here it comes!"

Next moment they were struck, beaten, blinded. For a moment Hildegarde struggled for breath, so furious was the onset of the storm; she crouched low in the canoe, but remained perfectly still. The wind tore at them as if with frantic hands that sought their life; the water hissed under them, raced past them madly. No waves could rise under the raging gale, but black flaw after flaw flew along the surface of the lake. The rain fell in torrents; the falling streams were caught by the wind, tossed hither and thither, twisted into fantastic shapes of spray, sent flying forward, forward with the storm.

No glimpse of land could be seen now; the night was around them,—night gone mad, and they helpless toys in its grasp. Helpless? No! for Roger's strong arm kept the tiny boat steady, as she drove before the wind. His face was streaming with rain, his fair hair tossed wildly over his brow, but his look was steadfast as ever, and now and then he glanced at Hildegard and smiled encouragement. Bewildered at first, Hildegard felt no fear, and presently, seeing the quiet confidence of her companion, a wild exhilaration possessed her. She had read of this kind of thing; it had been a dream, a picture in her mind always; now she was wrapped in the great storm, almost a part of it, borne along on its wings like the birds that beat their wings past her upon the gale. The lightning, which till now had shaken quivering lances of flame across the black water, a flash, then darkness, then again a flash, now became continuous, playing in lambent flames amid the blackness, lighting up the wild turmoil of wind and wave and cloud. The thunder rolled without pause,—overhead, around, beneath them. Crash! boom! crash! And all the while the water hissed past them; all the while the wind buffeted and shook them, and the rain lashed their faces with stinging whips. The frail canoe quivered like a living thing in mortal terror. What would be the end?

The end came soon enough. Hildegard was suddenly brought down from her airy castle of storm-wrapped bliss by hearing Roger's voice, high-pitched to carry across the uproar, saying with calm emphasis, "Take off your shoes! We shall very likely go over when we round this point. If we do, strike out at once, and swim till I get hold of you."

Hildegard nodded, and pulled off her low shoes; then she tried to think how it would feel to be flung into this mad water. The next moment the wind, which had lulled for an instant,—or had it only recoiled to take a fresh spring?—the wind rushed out of the darkness, and caught the canoe. It was a breathless struggle, man against the powers of air and of water. Hilda saw the powerful arms braced like steel to meet the onset, saw the quiet face set like marble, clenched teeth and frowning brow,—and saw no more, for here the canoe, having borne all that birch-bark could bear, capsized, and the girl found herself in the black water.

Down, down, down! Was she going to the bottom? She struck out blindly, as she had been told, trying to keep her thoughts together. They said that drowning was pleasant; but she did not want to drown. Should she ever be able to breathe again? Her dress clung about her ankles, the water hummed and buzzed in her ears, in her nostrils; but still she swam bravely. Suddenly she felt a strong arm thrown round her, and in another moment her head was out of water. Oh, the blessed air of heaven! how she drank it in, in deep, gasping breaths! Just to be alive, to breathe, was happiness enough. Roger was swimming strongly and steadily with one arm, holding her with the other. He caught the paddle in his teeth as it floated by, and at first Hildegard could think of nothing but how funny he looked, like a great fair-haired dog swimming about. He had righted the canoe, and now flung the paddle into it, and turned to Hildegard. "All right? Thank Heaven! Take hold by the bow, and I will tow you ashore."

"I can swim," said Hildegard. "I am all right, truly. Can't I swim on the other side and help her along, instead of hindering?"

"To be sure. Hurrah for you!"

Hilda grasped the canoe with her left hand and tried to swim with her right. She could do little, however, against the furious battling of wind and wave; and Captain Roger set his teeth, and wondered whether he was going to be beaten this time. "I won't!" he said aloud to the storm; and shook his head, lion-like, and braced his strong shoulders, and swam on grimly. A few moments of silent, breathless fighting, the wind screeching, like Bedlam loose, the foam driving and hissing, the lightning blazing, incessant, maddening.

Could they reach the shore? Hildegard asked herself. Was this only prolonging the agony, dragging this brave man to death with her, on her account? If he were not hampered with her, he would have been safe on shore before this. If she were a girl in a story-book, she would lose her hold now, and sink silently; but she was not a girl in a story-book. She was a very real Hilda Grahame, and she did not want to sink. And how could our poor Hilda know that the Merryweather obstinacy was roused, and that Roger meant to save her and himself, and the canoe, too, if he had to swim across the lake to do it? But now she heard him cry out, in a joyful tone: "Courage, little girl! here we are, all right!"

Next moment,—oh, joy! oh, wonder past belief! she felt the ground beneath her feet. She was walking, standing upright on the good, solid, blessed earth. The canoe touched bottom, grazed, floated again, then grounded gently and was still.

"Shake yourself as well as you can," said Roger, "while I haul her up. So, now then! under this, and here we are!"

In the turn of a hand he hauled the canoe up on the sand, turned it over, and drew Hildegard beneath the shelter. A clump of bushes broke the force of the wind, so they could breathe in peace, without having to fight for every breath.

For a few minutes they sat in silence, panting, dripping, gazing at each other with dilated eyes. Their thoughts were utterly irrelevant, as thoughts are apt to be after a great crisis. Roger was thinking that a pretty face looked much prettier wet than dry, and compared apples and flowers; Hildegard wondered if Saint Bernard dogs could swim. "Because Newfoundlands are black, you know," she found herself saying aloud in an explanatory tone.

"I beg your pardon!" said Roger, remorsefully. "I—I am afraid you are very wet."

Hildegard felt that she must either cry or laugh, so she laughed. "If it were not for you, Captain, I should not be alive now. I should have gone down, down,—and the water was so black. Was it ever anything but black in that place?" Her voice shook, but she pulled herself together instantly. "Why do you look troubled, Captain?" she asked. "The island is solid, isn't it?"

"You are so wet!" said Roger again, more ruefully than before.

"No wetter than you!" said Hilda, with a little laugh. Indeed, they were both streaming with water, and looked like a merman and mermaid very much out of their element.

"I? Oh, I never know whether I am wet or dry. But it is different for you; you will take cold, or—something, won't you?"

"You are afraid I shall melt?" asked Hildegard. She stooped down and gathered her skirt together, wringing little floods of water from it. "No, I don't think I shall melt, really, Captain. Do I look as if I were melting?"

"You look—" began Roger, and stopped suddenly, and then wondered why he stopped, and told himself he was an ass.

"Speaking of melting, reminds me," he said, laughing. He felt in his pockets, and produced a small parcel. "I hope this is not melted. No, it is all right. Have some chocolate, and let us make merry on our desert island! See! the worst of the squall is over. It is lightening already; I can see the nearest island."

"Yes, and the water begins to show grey, instead of all black and white. But has this really been nothing more than a squall, Captain Roger?"

"Oh, if you like the dignities of meteorology, I think we might very properly call this a tornado."

"A tornado! I have been out in a tornado! And how splendid it all is!"

Roger laughed again. "Splendid, eh? So it is! Rather good fun, too, now we are on dry land."

"Glorious fun!" cried Hildegard.

The water still raced past at their feet; the rain still poured down, the thunder cracked and roared and bellowed, and the lightning blazed. But under the canoe it was really quite dry, considering; and the chocolate was excellent, and, on the whole, both Hildegard and Roger thought well of tornadoes.

Meanwhile, there were some anxious faces at the camp. The storm had broken there as suddenly as out on the lake. Bell and Gertrude were out fishing, but fortunately near the shore, and they reached home just as the fury broke loose. Obadiah and Ferguson were blown in on the gale, turning handsprings as they came, and singing

"Oh, I'd give a sight
For to be a kite
When the wind is howly-wowling!"

Willy and Kitty were discovered, after a few minutes' anxious search, under the great apple-tree, in high glee because it was raining apples, and the wind would mash them, and the lightning would cook them, and there was no need of coming home to tea, with apple-sauce growing on every tree. Being hoisted on the shoulders of the twins, they changed their point of view, and turning into Arabs mounted on camels, capered joyously into the house, to escape the sand-storm of the desert. Mr. Merryweather, who was spending a day or two in camp, came in from the boathouse, where he was tinkering boats as usual. The whole party sat down, wet and dishevelled, and drew breath as they looked at each other.

"Well, this is a visitation!" said Mr. Merryweather. "Why didn't some of you tell me what was going on?"

"None of us knew till we found our faces slapped and our hair pulled out," said Bell. "This is a surprise-party, I think, got up for our special benefit."

"Are we all here?" asked Mrs. Merryweather. "Let me count! One, two, three, four, five, six, and you and I, Miles, make eight. But where are Roger and Hilda?"

"Out in the Cheemaun!" was the reply in chorus. There was a general exclamation of dismay, then each one commented in his fashion.

"Cricky!" said Phil. "The Professor will have a great chance for meteoro-lolli-lolli-logical observations, won't he?"

"I fear, my gentle Roger,
You'll be as wet as Bodger!"

said Gerald.

"Who is Bodger?" asked little Kitty.

"Bodger, my blessed child, was a stodger, and a codger, and a very artful dodger; he carried his bones to David Jones, and asked to be took as a lodger."

"Do be quiet, Jerry!" said Bell. "Father, can the canoe stand such a gale as this?"

"And Hilda had on her BEST DRESS!" said Kitty, with tragic emphasis.

"Ho! Hilda doesn't care for dresses!" said Willy, scornfully. "I got wheel-grease all over her skirt, the other day, and she didn't say a word."

"I do feel anxious, Miles," said Mrs. Merryweather. "This is an awful gale."

"Pooh! pooh!" said her husband. "Roger knows how to take care of himself, and Hilda too. Boys, is the skiff well moored?"

The boys knew it was, but thought it would be well to see, and disappeared by handsprings into the darkness. A double splash, followed by joyous shouts, announced their arrival on and departure from the wharf; and they shortly reappeared, dripping and gleeful.

"Boys, how can you!" exclaimed their mother. "This is the fifth time you have been in to-day; besides, I have just tidied up this room. Go away with you, and drip in the tent."

"He pushed me off, and I pulled him in!" said Phil, in explanation. "Very sorry, shall not occur again."

"I wanted to see how deep the water was," said Gerald. "Very important, you know, to take soundings in a storm."

"Still more important to quicken the circulation after a cold bath," said Mr. Merryweather, taking up a leather strap from the table. The boys shrieked, and vanished through the window in a fine harlequin act.

The lightning blazed incessantly, the wind howled and roared about the camp, and the thunder pounded and smashed the clouds overhead. Bell and her mother drew closer together, and Kitty nestled down between them, and held a hand of each, "to keep herself safe."

"If the lightning strikes the camp, what shall we do?" asked Willy.

"I think we shall be very likely to keep still!" said his father, dryly.

"Miles, how can you?" said Mrs. Merryweather. "I wonder you can joke, with those two children out in the canoe in this horror!"

"My dear, I would gladly weep, if I thought it would be of any assistance to Roger; as it is, I rather fancy he is quite as well off as we are, if not bet—"

Crack! The world turned to blue light, showing a ring of ghastly faces, looking terror at each other; then the sky fell, and all was night.

"All speak who are unhurt!" said Mr. Merryweather's calm voice; and no one would have guessed the anguish of suspense in which he waited for the reply. But it came in a chorus: "Miranda!" "Bell!"

"Gertrude!" "Will!" "Kitty!"

"Thank God!" said Miles Merryweather. "That was a close call. Boys, are you all right?" He stepped to the window as he spoke.

"All right, father!" For once the boys' voices sounded grave; as the pall of darkness lifted, they entered, very pale, and holding each other tightly by the hand. "The big oak is struck!" they said. "Shivered into kindling-wood. We were just going to climb it, to look at the storm."

"We don't like this!" said Gerald. "We feel very much uncomfortable inside us, and we want our mother."

And sure enough, the two tall fellows sat down on the floor by their mother, and put their heads in her lap; and she patted the curly heads, and talked to them soothingly, and forgot that they were not still her little lads, whom she had rocked in her arms together many and many a time.

"Your nerves are upset," said their father. "Always the case when a stroke comes so near as that. If you ever feel inclined to climb a tree in a thunderstorm again, just mention it to me, and I will see to you." He spoke lightly, but he took occasion to pass near the boys, and laid his hand on them, as if to make sure that they were really there and safe, and rubbed their shoulders and gave them a little affectionate slap.

For a while they sat quiet, for all were still quivering from the blow that had passed so near them. Gradually the fury of the storm abated; the lightning ceased to play continuously, and though each separate flash was still terribly vivid, yet the pauses between gave strength and refreshment to the wearied eyes and nerves. The great shocks of thunder rolled heavily, but still farther and farther away. The storm was moving off across the lake, and one thought was in the hearts of all—the birch canoe. How was it with those two, alone in that frail boat in the wild tempest? It seemed hours that they sat there, waiting and listening. At length—"It is lighter now," said Mr. Merryweather. "Come, boys, let us go down to the wharf, and see what we can see. Hark! what was that?"

For a moment every heart stood still. Then Mrs. Merryweather began to cry, and Bell and Gertrude and Kitty all fell into her arms and round her neck, and sobbed in chorus; but the boys started to their feet with a wild "Hurrah!" and dashed out of the house, followed by their father and Willy. For now, clearer every moment and clearer, came ringing across the water the words of the Skye Boat Song, sung by joyous voices of a youth and a maiden.

"Speed, bonny boat, like a bird on the wing,
Onward, the sailors cry.
Carry the lad that's born to be king
Over the sea to Skye."

"But Roger is not a king!" said Gerald, with a queer little break in his voice. "He is only a codger!"

CHAPTER XIV.

ROGER THE CODGER.

"Miranda!" said Roger.

"Yes, my dear brother!"

"Tum te-tiddle-de-tum, tum, tum, tum!"

"Yes, my dear brother."

"I—oh, I beg your pardon; that isn't what I meant to say, of course. A—the moon is in perigee now, you know."

"Roger," said his sister-in-law, looking up from her sewing, "you know there is no earthly use in saying that kind of thing to me. 'Perigee' suggests nothing to me but periwig, and it is painful to think of the moon in so unbecoming a head-gear. Are you quite sure that THAT was what you were going to say?"

Roger laughed, looked a little confused, and threw stones into the water; Mrs. Merryweather sewed on buttons and waited.

"I shall be twenty-five next week," was the professor's next remark. "I—a—I am getting to be quite an old foggy."

"Your teeth and digestion are still good," said his sister-in-law, with provoking composure; "and you are able—generally speaking—to get about without a stick."

"Pshaw!" said Roger. He laughed again, and threw out his powerful arms. He was lying at full length on the verandah, his handsome head propped against one of the pillars, framed in a mass of woodbine and trumpet-vine. Mrs. Merryweather looked at him, and thought that with the exception of her Miles and her boys, she had never seen a finer-looking fellow. Every line of the lithe, elastic figure was instinct with power; the face, from the broad upright brow to the firm chin, was alight with thought and intelligence. But the blue eyes, usually so clear in their grave gaze, held a shadow to-day, a curious look of shyness, one might almost say shamefacedness. Mrs. Merryweather gazed at him, and thought her own thoughts, but she knew her husband's family, and held her peace.

"That is a very lovely girl, Miranda!" was the Professor's next remark.

"Meaning Gertrude—?" said this wicked woman, innocently.

"Oh,—I mean Hilda, of course! She is remarkably intelligent, don't you think so?"

Mrs. Merryweather assented warmly, and added praises of her own. Hildegard's little ears would surely have burned if she could have heard the good lady. As for Roger, he listened with great complacency.

"Yes!" he said. "She is sympathetic, and unselfish,—remarkably so, it seems to me; and—and she takes an interest in things,—I mean real things, such, as girls usually care nothing about."

"Perigees, for example," said his sister-in-law.

"Well," said Roger, laughing, "yes, I suppose I do mean perigees, and that kind of thing. They are not in your line, Miranda, I know."

"Oh, but I respect them!" said Mrs. Merryweather. "There is nothing I respect more highly than a perigee, unless it be an apogee, which always sounds like the beginning of an incantation. So Hilda likes them, does she?"

"Of course," said Roger, slowly, skipping stones over the pond with thoughtful accuracy; "she has never studied any of these things, but she has really an astonishing aptitude for them. And her hand is so steady, and she has such a true eye."

"Was that why you kept her sitting on a rock, waving a towel, for three mortal hours, yesterday morning?" asked his sister-in-law, dryly.

Roger turned scarlet.

"Was it so long?" he said. "I didn't know—I never noticed. I—was taking observations, you know, and she seemed so—did she say she was tired? Was I a brute? Of course I was!"

"Don't go off at a tangent, or whatever you call the thing!" said Mrs. Merryweather. "She said she had had a most delightful morning, and that waving a towel had been her favourite amusement from babyhood."

Roger looked wistfully at his sister-in-law. They were genuinely fond of each other, but they spoke different languages, and he sometimes found it difficult to follow her turns of speech. He was silent for a few minutes, absorbed in calculating the curves of his stones, which really skimmed in an astonishing manner.

"I suppose," he said, presently, watching a particularly adventurous pebble, "I suppose, Miranda, that I must seem—well—quite an old fellow, to such a young creature as that?"

Mrs. Merryweather had a quizzical reply on the tip of her tongue, but glancing at Roger's face, thought better of it, and merely said, "My dear boy, don't be absurd!"

"I don't mean to be absurd," said Roger, sitting upright, and forgetting his pebbles. "But—well, I am a kind of grandfather to all the children, you know, and she would naturally—eh? regard me in the same light. That—a—that seems perfectly reasonable, doesn't it?"

Mrs. Merryweather made no reply. Roger followed the direction of her eyes, and saw Hildegarde and Gerald coming up from the wharf. Hildegarde had been drying her hair after the daily swim, and it hung in long locks over her shoulders; the tall boy was bending over her, pleading earnestly for something.

"Just a little bit!" he said, as they came within hearing. "Oh, I say, Miss Hilda, just a scrap. You have such lots, you never would miss it. Just a little lock of hair!"

Roger Merryweather's face grew very grave. He did not move, but his grasp tightened on the pebble in his hand.

"What do you want of it?" said downright Hilda, laughing and tossing her tawny mane. Mrs. Merryweather listened for the faintest shade of coquetry in the girl's tone, found none, and listened on, well content.

"What do I want of it?" cried Gerald. "What a question!—

"O Hilda, fair beyond compare!
I'll make a garland of thy hair,
Shall twine my heart forevermair,
Until the day I dee!"

"Very proper!" said Hilda. "I am glad to find that you know your ballads. What else will you do with it, for example?"

"Wi' ae lock o' thy yellow hair
I'll theek my nest when it grows bare!"

Gerald went on. "The excelsior is coming out of my mattress, and I thought—"

"I can't spare enough for that," said Hildegarde. "Any other uses for my poor hair?"

"The Mater has a single hair of George Washington's, done up in a gold snuffbox," cried the boy. "If you'll give me two, I will hunt up a snuffbox. There's a fine old stingo in the Chemical Works who takes snuff, and I will get his, and give him a tomato can instead, and keep one hair in that."

"And the other?" Hilda persisted, taking the long tresses in her hand, and running them through her fingers in a tantalizing manner,— "the other hair, Master Obadiah?"

"Oh, dear! what a persistent thing a girl is! I—must you really know? Because you mightn't like it, if I told you the truth." The ingenuous youth here turned a somersault, and coming up on one knee, remained in an attitude of supplication, clasping his hands imploringly. Hilda laughed, but still caressed her locks, unmoved.

"The other hair!" she said.

"Well, if you MUST know, I want to make a new kind of fly for the bass. They aren't biting at all, and your hair is just the colour, to a shade. There! that is the terewth. Do you mind?"

"Mind, you foolish boy? You might have had your fly made by this time. Here, give me your knife!"

She stood still, and severed a long, fair tress, which she laid in Gerald's hand.

"There! that will make a whole swarm of flies; and if there is any left over, you can theek your nest with it."

At this moment she looked up and saw the Professor sitting on the verandah, watching her. Her face lighted up with the brightest smile, Roger thought, that he had ever seen, and she hastened forward.

"Oh, Captain! I was afraid I was too late. Aren't you going to take observations this morning? And mayn't I go too? Here is my towel, all ready."

Gerald clapped his hand to his face, with an exclamation of acute pain.

"My dear boy, what is the matter?" cried his mother and Hildegarde in one breath.

"It is—nothing!" gasped the boy, sitting down on the edge of the verandah. "Where is the glue?"

"The glue!" repeated Hilda.

"Le Page's glue! My nose has become disjointed, and I would fain repair it. I am suffering excruciating torments; but don't mind me. Go on your towelled and triumphant way, and leave the noseless wretch to pine alone!"

"And make his flies!" said Hilda. "You miserable boy, you really took me in. Good-by, dear madam; I will get Bell, and we will surely be home in time for dinner this time. Won't we, Captain?" But the Captain did not commit himself.

"Mater," said Gerald, watching the two as they walked away together, "do you think—"

"Not often!" said his mother. "It is a dangerous occupation."

"True!" said Gerald. "Well, if I mustn't think, where is Phil?"

CHAPTER XV.

A MORNING HOUR.

It is morning in the Lonely Cove. Before and around lies a broad stretch of glimmering water, dotted here and there with great stumps, and lined about the shore with dead trees. Dams built in the river beyond have raised the level of the lake, and hundreds of trees have died.

On every side is a network of gnarled and knotted roots. The black limbs grapple with each other; here one has dragged his neighbour over, and he lies with arms outstretched, writhen into antic twists and curves, as if he had died in torment; there, in singular contrast, are two friends,—oaks, were they once?—who have fallen into one another's arms, and, dead, seem still to embrace and uphold each other tenderly.

Here again are stumps that gleam like gray silver, bare and polished, worn by storms and winds. The shining water is clear, and one sees the bottom covered with particles of wood, chipped from the rotting trees, preserved by the water from further decay.

Through this silent water glides the Cheemaun, Hilda in the bow—where is Hilda so happy as in the birch canoe?—Roger paddling in the stern. As the paddle dips, bubbles rise and burst, large and round. Behind, the dark woods curve in a lovely line; between wood and water, spread like a bed for the dead and dying trees, a swamp, bright with rushes and water-weed.

On the crest of a snow-white birch sits a great fish-hawk, with bent head and closed wings. What is the hunter dreaming of? Hours of sport, most likely; long pauses on balanced wings, the arrowy downward sweep, the swift plunge, and the triumph of the upward plunge, dripping and proud, bearing his prey aloft.

Some real or fancied noise disturbs the vision; he rises, spreads the wide, hollow wings, and flaps slowly away. Roused by his flight, half a dozen crows burst suddenly into talk, and protest violently against some deadly injury, then as suddenly fall silent again.

Whirr! a kingfisher darts down with a quick splash, and back to his bough with a fish in his beak. The canoe moves on, slowly, noiselessly; here the water is only three inches deep, but the soft bottom yields as the strong young arms ply the paddle.

Hilda lifts her hand with a warning gesture, and they are motionless once more. Look! not fifty yards away, a group of pretty birds play and paddle in the shallow water. Sandpipers, are they? They might be enchanted princesses, Hilda thinks, as they go mincing along, turning their heads now to this side, now to that, admiring themselves in the clear water. One of them finds a bit of succulent weed, and the others come running, for all the world like curious girls, ruffling their pretty feathers, cocking their pretty heads; and they peck, and chatter, and peck again, wholly unconscious of the two monsters who are drifting nearer and nearer. Suddenly one of them catches sight of a moving shadow, hears some faint lapping of water against the side of the canoe, inaudible to ears less fine; and the three princesses are up and away, fluttering, hopping, fairly flying at last, to hide themselves in the deeps of the bog-land.

Neither of the two had spoken during all this time. Both felt the magic of the place so strong upon them that speech seemed profanation. The flight of the little birds, however, loosened the spell.

Hildegarde spoke, but softly, almost under her breath. "Captain! Do you see the lizard? Look at him, on the log there! The greenness of him! soul of an emerald!"

"I was looking at the fish," said Roger.

"What for a fish?" Hilda leaned over the side, and looked into the clear shallow water. A bream was hovering over her wide, shallow nest, fanning the water slowly with wide-spread wings. "Why does she do that?"

"To protect the eggs; they are there in the sand, and she is keeping off all the water-people who like eggs for breakfast."

They drifted on again in silence: what was there good enough to say in such a place?

Hildegarde pulled the transparent stems of jewel-weed, with their glowing, pitcher-shaped blossoms, and twined them into a garland, which she hung over the bow of the canoe. "Dear Cheemaun!" she said. "She shall be decorated as Hiawatha's was. She deserves to be hung with real jewels."

"Are there any more real than these?" said Roger. "And—you really like the Cheemaun, do you, Miss Hilda? and the place? I thought you would like the place."

"Oh!" said Hilda, and her voice said enough. "How did you find it? How strange that I have never heard of it before! There is nothing so beautiful in the world, I am sure! Have the others been here?"

"N—no," answered Roger, slowly. "I don't think they have been here. I—I found it one morning, when I was shooting, two or three years ago; and I am afraid I have been greedy, and kept it to myself."

"How good of you to bring me!" cried Hilda. "I like it all the better because no one—that is, because it is so lonely and still. You—you don't shoot now much, do you, Captain Roger?"

"No. I used to be very fond of it when I was a boy; but now, well, I would rather see them alive, don't you know?"

Hildegarde nodded her wise little head, and knew very well indeed, and thought the Captain was very right.

"I do not see how a sportsman can really love creatures," she said. "If you love them, you want them to live, as you say. Oh! oh, Captain Roger, please quickly stop! Look! What wonder is this?"

Hilda's voice sank to a whisper, thrilled with excitement. There, a few yards away from them, ashen grey against the silver-grey of a dead tree, was a great bird. To Hilda's excited fancy, it seemed the spirit of the place, changed by some wizardry into bird form, crouching there amid the ruins of the forest where once it had flitted and frolicked, a gauze-winged sprite.

Roger, less imaginative, and more skilled in wood-lore, saw a great blue heron, sitting huddled together on a stump, its head drawn in, its yellow eyes glaring wild with fright.

"It must be wounded!" he said softly. "Keep very still, and I will see if we can come nearer."

Softly, slowly, the birch canoe stole through the water. It scarcely seemed to move, yet every moment brought them nearer to the wild creature of the woods. It made no attempt to fly, only crouched lower, and tried to flatten itself against the stump.

"Oh, poor, poor thing!" whispered Hilda. "Can you do anything for it, Captain Roger?"

"Only one thing, I fear," said Roger, gently. "Its leg is broken, and we must not leave it in misery."

"You must kill it? Oh, it seems too pitiful! No, I am not going to be silly, only I will turn my head away, please, Captain Roger."

Now she could have put her hand on the wounded bird, as it sat motionless, only the wide eyes of terror telling that it was alive. The bow of the boat passed close against the log, and on beyond. Hilda thought she should never forget the dumb agony of those eyes. They should not be here at all, she thought. It was not decent for human beings to thrust themselves into the sorrows and mysteries of the woods and water. She could not—

Roger leaned forward, paddle in hand; a moment, and all was over. Something slid into the water, and there was a little plashing murmur among the reeds; then stillness again.

The canoe began to move backward, and Hilda opened her eyes, which had been tightly closed.

Neither of the two spoke until they were in open water again, and the swamp left behind.

"I am sorry!" said Roger then, almost apologetically. "I am sorry that happened. The poor creature had been shot, and was badly wounded; it would only have lingered in pain."

"Oh yes, I know; I am so glad you were there, to help it out of the suffering."

"But now you will never want to come here again, I fear."

"Oh, but I shall!" cried Hilda. "I am not so silly as that, truly I am not. I shall always think of this as the loveliest place I know; and—"

"Well, and—what?" asked Roger.

"Oh, nothing! Only—well, it is your own place," said Hilda frankly, "and I shall always think of you here, in the dear Cheemaun, with the enchanted princesses—I mean the sandpipers—and the fish-hawk, and all the rest of it."

"If it is mine, I may do what I like with it, and I give it to you. Will you have it?"

"Oh, we will share it together!" cried Hilda eagerly; and then bethought herself, and blushed in her usual ridiculous way, and wondered if the back of her neck were blushing too. It was, and Roger saw the crimson mounting to the pretty ears and losing itself in the fair hair; and he wondered—and wondered again, and then remembered that people sometimes blushed when they were angry. He was a very, very stupid Roger, in some ways; but in a moment Hilda began to talk as cheerfully as possible, and to ask about all the birds they had seen, so Roger was relieved, and they paddled home to breakfast in a very pleasant way.

CHAPTER XVI.

GOOD-BY.

The golden morning passed all too quickly; the mornings always did, out at camp. There was the merry dish-washing, the sweeping and setting to rights, and then all separated to their different tasks, —fishing, boat-mending, cooking, photographing or surveying, till the hour of noon brought them together again for the swimming. Roger departed on his wheel, having business in the village.

The three girls sat down before a huge basket of mending, "Three against Thebes," as Bell said, and plied their needles diligently. Hildegarde felt as if she were sewing in a dream; her fingers flew, for she could almost sew in her sleep, but her thoughts were away in the Lonely Cove, with the wild creatures and the stillness. She would like to go back there, she thought, with—well, she would like to go back there, and stay, long hours, till the spirit of the place had sunk deep into her heart. She had felt it, the touch of its hand in passing, the brushing of its robe, but that only showed her how little she knew, how infinitely more there was to learn, to see, to love. She shut her eyes and tried to call back the scene, all grey and silver, glimmering in the faint early light.

Was not this really life, the life of nature, of the woods and fields? Would not one grow better, purer, to stay always in this lovely wilderness, where every leaf had a voice, every stone showed forth its steadfast lesson, every morning and evening was full of joy and peace? Why should one ever go back to places where people talked and gossiped and made formal calls?

Such new worlds, too, were opening before her! Not only this great one of nature, but the sister world of science, which till now had been only a name. She had always thought of "scientific people" much as she would of the inhabitants of Mars, never having been thrown with any in this short life, which seemed to her so long, so full. As she said to her friend here, she had had many lives already, all beautiful, joyful beyond measure; but this strange world, where they spoke a language of their own, where all the men wore spectacles and long beards, and all the women short hair and spectacles,—this world she had never thought even to peep into. And now—behold! the magic door had been opened by friendly hands; opened only a little way, it was true, but wide enough for her to see at least beyond the threshold,—and it was fairy-land! As for the long beards and the spectacles,—Hildegarde laughed to herself, a little soft, happy laugh.

Gerald, who was lying at her feet, looked up, and laughed too, for pure good-will.

"Good joke!" he said; "excellent joke! See here, Miss Hilda—"

"Do leave off that tiresome 'Miss,' Jerry! You know I told you to, ages ago."

"I know! but my manners are so superlative. Well, Hilda, then, just listen to this! I have been improving a little on one of your old ballads—"

"Improving? sacrilegious wretch!"

"Oh, but listen! Why should a ballad be too old to be improved?
This goes beautifully.

"Our lads are to the fishing gane,
A-fishing with a line and float,
And they hae grippet Hilda the Grahame,
For stealing o' the Codger's boat."

"I didn't steal it!" cried Hilda, aiming a neatly folded stocking-ball at the boy's head; but Gerald avoided it, and went on.

"And they hae tied her hand and foot,
And brought her to the camp, wuss luck!
The lads and lasses met her there,
Cried 'Hilda Grahame, thou art a duck!'"

"Obadiah, you are a very impudent boy. Wait till Monday week, that's all! But go on; let me hear all this villainy."

"Up then spake the brave Gerald,
As he sat by the Codger's knee,
'Fifteen horned pouts I'll give to you,
If you'll let Hilda the Grahame go free.'

"'Oh haud your tongue,' says Roger the Codger,
'And wie your pleading let me be;
For though—'"

"Hallo!"

"What is the matter?" asked Bell, who had been listening with high approval to the ballad. "Why, here is the Codger himself, back again. I thought he was not coming till night. What's up, Codger?"

Bell and Hildegard rose, with a vague feeling of uneasiness, and as they did so, Roger advanced to meet them. Hilda fancied he looked grave, and her heart leaped into quick alarm. "You have no bad news, Captain Roger?" she cried. "My mother—Cousin Wealthy—!"

"Both well, quite well!" said Roger, hastily. "I called at the house as I came by, and found Mrs. Grahame there, looking extremely well, I thought."

"Mamma there!" cried Hilda. "Why—when did she come? Why did she not write that she was coming? I ought to have been there to meet her. You are sure you have nothing bad to tell me, Captain Roger? You looked so grave as you came up. I would rather know at once, please, if anything is wrong."

Roger smiled, and his honest eyes reassured the startled girl.

"You may believe me," he said, simply. "If I looked grave, it was not on your account, Miss Hilda, but on our own. A letter must have gone astray, your mother thinks. You should have heard from her several days ago; and—and she is expecting visitors to-morrow, and—well, if I must tell the truth, the carriage is here, and I am to drive you home as soon as you are ready."

A cry of dismay broke from the lips of the whole family; a cry so hearty, so full of distress, of affectionate concern, that it brought the quick tears to Hilda's eyes. She smiled through the tears at Bell, who already had her in her arms, and declared she could not let her go; while Will and Kitty pulled at her gown, and cried frantically that Hilda was theirs, and should never go away, never at all. Mrs. Merryweather smoothed her hair, and murmured kind, understanding words in a low tone; and Gertrude sat down on the ground and wept piteously.

"Oh," said Hilda to all these good friends, "you know it is not because I don't want to go to my blessed mother; of course you all know that—"

"Of course we do, dear!" cried Bell and her mother, soothingly. "Of course you want to go, and we ought to want you to go; but we don't; and it has come so quickly, and all."

"And we were going to the Painted Rocks to-morrow!" cried Phil.

Gerald began to mutter something under his breath about

"Little Gerald was my brudder,
Merry Mater was my mudder,
Nebber heard ob any udder."

But his adaptation was checked by a look from his mother, and he relapsed into gloom. "It's a horrid, atrocious shame!" he said. "I can't help it, and Hilda needn't speak to me again if she doesn't want to; but I cannot tell a lie, and I am NOT glad that Mrs. Grahame has come home, and I never shall be."

"Dear Jerry!" said Hilda. "We have had such good times, haven't we? And you will be coming back, you know, to town some day, and I shall hear all about the merrymakings—"

But here her voice broke, and deeply ashamed of herself, she hurried into the house to put her things together. The kind Merryweathers went with her, and vied with each other in helping her make her preparations. Since it must be, it should be as cheerfully done as possible; so Bell packed her trunk, and Gertrude buttered bread with ardour, that Hilda might have luncheon before she went; a good many tears fell into the butter, but Hilda said she did not mind that.

Soon, too soon, alas! all was ready; the little trunk packed and strapped, and Hilda in jacket and hat—the first time in a month that she had worn either—smiling as well as she could, and kissing and shaking hands, almost in silence.

Mr. Merryweather had just come up from the boathouse, and joined his regrets to the general chorus.

"And who is the captain of this black-sailed ship that carries our little girl away from us?" he asked. "Are you going to drive her in, Gerald?"

"No, father," said Gerald, hastily. "I think Roger is going in."

"Yes," said Roger; "I am going in, Miles."

"Oh!" said Mr. Merryweather. "Is there anything special you want to see to in town, Roger?"

"Why—no; I am going for—"

"Then, if it's all the same, suppose you let Phil drive Hilda in. I want your help this afternoon, very much, on the Keewaydin. The boys aren't quite strong enough to tackle her. What do you say, Hilda? You would just as lief have Phil, I dare say, and it will be a treat to him."

What could our poor dear Hilda say? What could she do but smile her assent, when she saw Phil's honest face radiant with pleasure?

Gerald, after looking round in vain for his mother and Bell, who had gone into the house to get something, did indeed mutter that he wanted Phil dreadfully, to do something of great importance, it did not appear precisely what; but he was promptly set down by his father.

Roger Merryweather stood silent. The habit of giving way to others, of letting the youngsters have all the pleasure possible, and taking the workaday parts of life for himself, was strong upon him. And when had he refused his brother Miles anything?

Miles Merryweather nodded in satisfaction, and went into the house to get his letters.

"I am going to send Phil in with Hilda, instead of Roger," he announced, cheerfully. "Is there anything —"

"Oh, father, how could you?" cried Bell, springing to her feet.

"How could I what?" asked her father. "Miranda, have you any errands for Phil to do?"

He looked at his wife, and opened his eyes wide; for the placid woman was ruffling all over, like an angry partridge.

"Don't speak to me, Miles Merryweather!" she cried. "Don't dare to say a word to me! You are a great stupid, stupid,—and Roger is another! Why I ever married into such a family—"

She ruffled away out of the house; Bell hurried after her without a word, only casting a reproachful glance at her father as she went. Mr. Merryweather stood still in utter bewilderment.

"Are these people mad?" he said. "What on earth is the matter? Gerald, will you give these letters to Phil, and tell him—now what is the matter with you, I should like to know?"

For Gerald's bright face was clouded over with unmistakable ill-humour,—a circumstance so amazing that one might well wonder. He actually scowled at his father, whom he adored.

"Donki foolumque cano!" he said. "No disrespect to anybody, sir, but I am thinking of emigrating. This family is too much for me."

He stalked out again, leaving Mr. Merryweather more puzzled than ever.

"Decidedly, they are mad!" he murmured. "Thank goodness, there is one sensible head among all these feathertops! Oh, here you are, Roger! Give these letters to Phil, will you, please, and tell him not to forget the mail."

Roger took the letters, and laughed. His cheek was slightly flushed, and his eyes danced with something very unlike their usual calm intelligence. "All right!" he said. "Give me the letters, Miles. They shall be mailed." He took the packet, and started to leave the room, but turned back for a moment, to lay his hand affectionately on his brother's shoulder. "I am a codger, Miles," he said, "but—do you know—I think you are a bit of a codger, too. It runs in the blood, I suppose. Good-by, old fellow! and let the Keewaydin wait until to-morrow, will you?"

He ran out. His brother, now speechless, followed him: saw him put Phil aside with a word and a smile; saw him lift Hildegard lightly into the wagon, and take his seat beside her; saw the girl, her face bright as a flower, leaning forward to say farewell, and the other faces crowding round her, eager, loving, sorrowful; saw handkerchiefs and caps waving, and heard the cries of "Good-by, dear Hilda! Come again! Oh, come back to us soon!"

Then the woods closed in behind the carriage and it was gone.

Gerald looked long after it; then he advanced to the middle of the piazza, and deliberately turned three back somersaults.

"Would anybody like to tread on the tail of my coat?" he said, joyously. "Phil, you are a double-barrelled, self-revolving idiot, but I love you. Join me, then, in three cheers for the Codger. Long may he wave! Now, then, hip, hip, hurrah!"

"Hurrah!" cried Phil, who had received enlightenment in some way, and was beaming like his brother.

"Hurrah!" cried Mrs. Merryweather and Bell in concert, fixing eyes of triumph on their husband and father.

"Hurrah it is, doubtless," said Mr. Merryweather, looking slightly nettled,—a rare thing in the most cheerful of men. "But MAY I ask why my arrangements are changed without a word to me? I intended that Phil should—"

"Dear Miles!" said his wife. "I am sorry I called you names."

"DEAR papa!" said the Merryweathers in chorus; "we all love you SO much!"

"And were you ever young?" asked Mrs. Merryweather, no longer swelling, partridge-like, but taking her husband's arm with her sweetest smile.

"And did you ever see a girl you liked, Miles Merryweather? and if you ever had, would you have let another boy drive her in town while the breath was in you? Would you?"

"Oh!" said Miles Merryweather.

THE END

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