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BESSIE BRADFORD'S PRIZE

The third of a series of sequels to "the Bessie books"

By Joanna H. Mathews

Illustrated by W. St. John Harper

Dedicated to my dear little friend and fellow author Elizabeth Leiper Martin ("Elsie")

With the wish that the path of authorship may have for her as many flowers and as few thorns as it has had for her friend and well wisher

J. H. M.

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CHAPTER I.

AT THE POLICEMAN'S.

"Here comes Mrs. Fleming," said Jennie Richards, in a tone indicative of anything but pleasure in the coming of Mrs. Fleming.

Mrs. Granby responded with an exclamation which savored of a like sentiment, and rising, she tossed aside the little frock she was working on, as she added:

"I don't see what she's comin' for! I didn't want her a comin' here, bringin' her mournin' an' frettin' an' lookin' out for troubles to pester you, Mary Richards, an' I told her I would be over to her place this evenin'. I did tell her, you know, I'd fit that dress for her Mrs. Bradford give her to Christmas, but she just needn't a come here when I told her I'd go there; an' a kill-joy she is an' no comfort to nobody. You go into the kitchen, Mary, an' stay there till she's gone, which I won't be long fittin' her, an' I'll get rid of her soon's I can,"

Mrs. Richards was about to comply with the suggestion, when Jennie, who was still gazing out of the window, exclaimed with a total change of tone:

"And here come the little Miss Bradfords, with Jane, and Miss Belle
Powers and Miss Lily Norris along with them."

The little sister whom she was diverting by holding her up to the window, began to clap her hands, and Mrs. Richards settled herself back into her chair again, saying:

"I ain't going into the kitchen to miss *them*, and I'll set the sunshine they'll bring against the clouds Mrs. Fleming drags."

Mrs. Granby beamed upon her.

"Well, I declare, Mary Richards, you ain't no great hand to talk, but when you do, you just do it beautiful; now don't she, Jennie? That's the po'tryest talkin' I've heard this long while, real live po'try, if there ain't no jingle about it. I allers did think you might a writ a book if you'd set about it, an' if you'd put such readin' as that kind of talk into it, I'll be boun' it would bring a lot of money, an' I'm right glad the little young ladies is comin', on'y I wish Amandy Flemin' hadn't hit the same time."

It was plain to be seen that the visit of the young party who were on the way to the door was a source of gratification to the policeman's family, whatever that of Mrs. Fleming might be. Their quicker footsteps brought them in before Mrs. Fleming, and they received a warm welcome. It is to be feared that the younger girl had an eye to the loaves and fishes with which they usually came laden on their visits to the Richards' household, as she ran to them on their entrance, saying,

"What did oo b'ing me?"

"Augh! Shame!" said the scandalized Mrs. Granby, snatching her up; and, "You'll excuse her, young

ladies," said Mrs. Richards, mortified also; "but she's only a little thing, and you spoil her, always bringing her something when you come."

That they were not offended or hurt was soon evidenced by the fact that Lily presently had the little one on her lap, while Belle was showing her a linen scrap-book which had been brought for her.

Mrs. Granby was a seamstress, and Jane had brought some work which her mistress, Mrs. Bradford, had sent; and Maggie and Bessie, with Belle and Lily, who were spending the day with them, had chosen to accompany her, the first three because they were generally ready for a visit to the family of the policeman, who had befriended Bessie when she was lost, the latter because she thought Mrs. Granby "such fun." To have Mrs. Fleming come in, as she presently did, was bliss indeed to Lily, who delighted in pitting the cheery, lively little Mrs. Granby against the melancholy, depressing Mrs. Fleming. Nor was the entertainment long in beginning.

Jane was to carry home some work which Mrs. Granby had finished, and as the latter was putting it up Mrs. Fleming came in and was bidden by her to take a seat till she was ready to attend to her.

"And how's little Miss Neville, Miss Maggie?" asked Mrs. Richards. "I think that's the name of the young lady who was so brave in saving her little sister, and was so burned."

"Yes, that's her name," answered Maggie. "She is a great deal better, Mrs. Richards. The doctor has said she is out of danger, and her mother has been able to leave her and to go back to the son who is ill."

"I'm very glad to hear it," said Mrs. Richards, cordially. "My husband was telling me how wonderful and brave she was, and how she never thought of herself trying to save the other children; and how the gentleman Miss Staunton is to marry was burned very bad saving her."

"Yes; it was a terrible time," said Maggie; "but Mr. Howard is much better now, too; so we are all very happy."

All this time Mrs. Fleming had sat nodding her head mournfully, as if she would say, "Don't be encouraged; there is no ground for hope."

"Look! Look at her!" Lily whispered to Bessie. "She's like an insane
Chinese mandarin, rolling round her old head that way."

"Hush!" whispered Bessie, "she'll hear you."

"Don't care if she does," answered Lily.

And now Mrs. Fleming broke forth in just such a lackadaisical, tearful tone as one would have expected to issue from her lips.

"Oh, Miss Maggie," she whined, "if the dear lady, your ma, 'ad but listened to me. I told her no good wouldn't come of 'avin' that number of children to her Christmas tree—twice thirteen; an' I said if thirteen was hunlucky, twice thirteen was twice worse; an' your ma just laughed at me; an' the next day came the burnin'."

Bessie looked gravely at her.

"My mother says that is wrong and foolish, too," she said, in an admonitory tone, "and that thirteen is no worse than any other number."

"You nor your ma can't gainsay that there come the burnin', Miss," persisted the woman.

"I know that Colonel Rush's house was on fire, and that Miss Lena was burned, and Mr. Howard, too," answered Bessie, equally determined to maintain her side of the case. "But they are both a great deal better, and it ought to show you that such things don't make any difference to God, and that He can take just as good care of one number as another."

The other children were rather surprised to hear Bessie speak so decidedly to one older than herself; but this was a subject on which she felt strongly; her own faith and trust and reliance on the goodness and power of God were very strong; and more than one occurrence in her little life had tended to foster these, and she always rather resented the want of them in others. And now Mrs. Fleming, in her turn, resented being chidden by this mite who appeared even younger than she really was. But it pleased her, as usual, to assume the injured role.

"Well, Miss," she said, "'tain't for me to contradick you nor your ma. I can't help havin' my hown feelin's an' hopinions; but the Lord made me to be down-trod, an' I'm willin' to habide 'is will an' stay

down-trod."

This was beyond Bessie; she had no answer, no argument for folly such as this, if, indeed, she grasped the woman's meaning; but she did understand that she was still making her moan over matters and things in general, and that in some way she seemed to be blaming her own dear mother. She looked displeased and turned away; but here Mrs. Granby, who had her head in a wardrobe, looking for a large sheet of paper, withdrew it and came to the front.

"Well," she said, raising her voice so that it might be heard above the rattle of the stiff paper which she unfolded and wrapped about the completed work Jane was to carry back, "well, if so be as you enjoy bein' 'down-trod,' as you do enjoy most things as other folks don't find pleasin', there ain't nobody goin' to hinder you; but you look here, Mrs. Flemin', you nor nobody else ain't goin' to cast no slurs onter Mrs. Bradford which there never was a better lady, nor one that was so far from down-treadin' folks but more like to be upliftin' 'em if only they'll let themselves be uplift, an' all her family the same an' the little ladies brought up accordin'; so, if you please, no slurs on any of 'em afore me an' Mary Richards which we would have feelin's on account of it an' wouldn't stan' it in *this* house. I don't see why you can't live agreeable like other folks; an' it does fret me outer patience to hear a body mortifyin' the Lord's mercies an' you such a heapin' lot sent to you this very winter, an' it's for your own good I speak, which the Lord He does get out of patience with us sometimes I do believe when we're faithless an' mistrustin', an' takes back His blessin's when He finds we don't hold 'em in no appreciation."

By this time Mrs. Fleming had dissolved into tears and buried her face in an already much bewept pocket-handkerchief.

Seeing this Mrs. Granby resumed in a soothing tone and with some self-reproach.

"But just hear me now rattlin' on about my neighbors' short-comin's an' me plenty of my own, me that ain't a woman of many words neither. There, Mrs. Flemin', don't mind, an' if you've a min' to compose your feelin's in the kitchen just step in an' I'll fit your dress soon's Jane's business is over."

But Mrs. Fleming had no idea of retiring to privacy to compose her "feelin's;" she preferred to indulge them in public, and she sat still, sobbing only the louder. The situation was becoming embarrassing to the young party, and Maggie, with her usual ready tact, seized upon an opening to change the subject.

"Why, Mrs. Granby," she said, "I did not know you made dresses. I thought you only did plain sewing such as you have done for our family."

"I do a bit at it, Miss Maggie," answered the seamstress; "though, to be sure, I wouldn't undertake to dress-make for ladies like your ma and aunts an' the like, but for them as hasn't much ambition as to their figgers, I can make out, an' I did tell Mrs. Flemin' I'd fit hers, so she could make it herself an' she shouldn't have to do no expenses about it, for it's on'y right we should all lend a helpin' hand, an' where would me an' the Richardses be if your folks hadn't thought the same an' acted accordin', which there's never a night on my bended knees I don't ask the Almighty's blessin' on you, an' there's none more deserves it, an' I do b'lieve the dear Lord's of the same way of thinkin', for there's none as I see happier nor more prosperin' an' does one's heart good to see it, an' never will I forget the night we was in such a peck of troubles an' seein' no way out of 'em me an' the Richardses, an' your pa comin' in an' turnin' the tide, an' since then, yes, ever since, all goin' so comfortable an' pleasant with us. I did think when I saw Mr. Bradford's face that night I first opened the door to him that he was the agreeablest-lookin' gentleman I ever did see, but me no idea what a blessin' he was a bringin' us all an' help outer our troubles, which the Richardses' troubles is always mine too. But I declare, just hear me runnin' on, as I always do if I get on them times; you'd think I was the greatest hand to talk ever was."

Lily was having her "fun," and she was quite loth to take leave when
Mrs. Granby had the parcel ready and Maggie made the move to go.

"I'm sure, Miss Maggie," said Mrs. Richards, "that I am truly glad to hear that Miss Neville is likely to get well. I suppose she'll be leaving her uncle's now and going away with her mother. It isn't likely Mrs. Neville will want to be leaving her child again after such an escape as she's had. I'm sure I couldn't abide one of mine out of my sight after such a thing. And the bravery of her, too, the dear young thing. My husband says it was a risk a strong man, and one of the police themselves, might have shrunk from."

This was an unusually long speech for Mrs. Richards, who was that which Mrs. Granby so mistakenly called herself, "a woman of few words," for she, as well as the rest of the family, had been greatly interested in the adventure of the heroic little girl who had braved and endured so much to rescue her young brother and sister.

Maggie hesitated one moment, then said:

"No, Mrs. Richards. Mrs. Neville has gone back to her son, but Miss Lena has not gone with her. She is to stay with Colonel and Mrs. Rush for a long time, perhaps a year, and we are all so glad about it."

"And could the mother go and leave her, and she might any time take a turn for the worse, and be took off sudden?" interposed Mrs. Fleming, whose tears did not prevent her from hearing all that passed. "You never know when there's been burnin' if there ain't smothered fire, an' it shows up when you least hexpect it."

No one took any notice of this cheerful prophecy, but Mrs. Granby asked:

"And the young lady is like to be quite well again and about soon,
Miss Maggie?"

"Oh, yes," answered Maggie, confidently; "and we hope to have her back at school before long. She is quite well enough now to enjoy everything except walking; but her feet are still tender and she cannot yet walk about. But come, girls, it is time to go;" and the young party took their leave.

When not far from their respective homes, which were all in the same neighborhood, they met Gracie Howard, and Maggie stopped to speak to her, although Gracie had shown no sign of wishing to do so; indeed, she seemed as if she would rather pass on. Of course, the others lingered too.

"Gracie," said Maggie, "I hope you will come to the meeting of our club the day after to-morrow. It is so long since you have been."

Gracie colored violently, looked down upon the ground, and in a nervous way dug the toe of her overshoe into the snow which had fallen that morning and still lay in some places on the street.

"I don't know; no, I think not—I think—perhaps I may go out with mamma," she stammered, anxious for some excuse, and yet too honest to invent one that was altogether without foundation. Perhaps she would go out with her mother; she would ask her to take her.

"Oh, come, Gracie; do come," persisted Maggie, determined to carry her point if possible. "It is so long since you have been, and you know there is a paper owing from you. Your turn is long since passed; and we'll all be so glad to have you."

Grade's color deepened still more, and she cast a sidelong glance at Lily, who stood at Maggie's elbow; and Lily saw that she was doubtful if that "all" included herself. Lily was very outspoken, particularly so where she saw cause for disapproval, and above all if she thought others were assuming too much; and she had on certain occasions so plainly made known her opinion of some of Grade's assumption, that a sort of chronic feud had become established between the two, not breaking out into open hostility, but showing itself in a half-slighting, half-teasing way with Lily, and with Gracie in a manner partly scornful, partly an affectation of indifference.

Some six weeks since, at a meeting of the club of the "Cheeryble Sisters," to which all three little girls belonged, Gracie's overweening self-conceit and irrepressible desire to be first had led her into conflict with another of her classmates, Lena Neville, in which she had proved herself so arrogant, so jealous and ill-tempered that she had excited the indignation of all who were present. But if they had known what followed after Gracie had been left alone in the room where she had so disgraced herself, how would they have felt then? How she had stood by and seen the source of contention, a composition, which she believed had been written by Lena, torn to atoms by a mischievous little dog, withholding her hand from rescuing it, her voice from warning the dog off from it simply for the indulgence of that same blind, overpowering jealousy. The destruction was hardly wrought, when repentance and remorse too late had followed—repentance and remorse, intensified a thousandfold by after events on the very same day.

But that guilty secret was still locked within her own heart, weighing heavily upon her conscience, but still unconfessed, still unsuspected by others. Ever since that miserable afternoon she had shrunk from meeting her classmates, and although she had been obliged to do so at school, she had avoided all other opportunities of seeing them, and on one excuse and another had refused to attend the meetings of the club which came together every Friday afternoon, the place of rendezvous being at Mrs. Bradford's, Maggie being the president as she had been the originator of the club.

It was true that Gracie had later discovered that the ruined paper was one of her own, a composition on the very same subject as Lena's, and which had, by the merest accident, and without her knowledge, been exchanged for that of the young classmate whom she chose to consider as her rival; and this had in some measure relieved the weight of sorrow and remorse she had felt when Lena was severely burned and lay for days hovering between life and death. But she could not shut her eyes or blind her conscience to the fact that she had been guilty in intention, if not in actual deed, and she could not

shake off the haunting sense of shame or the feeling that others must know of the contemptible action of which she had been guilty.

Knowing nothing of this, Maggie and the other members of the club believed that her avoidance of them and her low spirits were caused by shame and distress for the bad temper and unkindness she had shown to Lena on that memorable day; and now Maggie, feeling sorry for her and also very loath to have any unpleasantness in the club, would fain have persuaded her to join them once more and to put things on their old footing.

Gracie was not doubtful of Maggie, nor of Bessie, nor yet of Belle Powers and Fanny Leroy; in fact, she knew she would be received kindly by the majority of the members, but about Lily and two or three others she had her misgivings, and hence that doubtful, half-deprecating glance at the former, who stood at Maggie's elbow.

Lily caught it, and, although she had intended to be very offish and high and mighty with Gracie for the rest of her days, her heart smote her, and flinging her former resolution to the winds, she followed Maggie's example, and laying her hand persuasively on Gracie's muff, said, with her usual directness:

"Oh, come on, Gracie! Don't let's have any more madness and being offended among us. It's horrid; so let by-gones be by-gones, and come to the club meetings again."

"If they only knew," thought Gracie, "they would not ask me, would not say 'let by-gones be by-gones;'" but she said that she would come to the meeting, and then they parted and went their separate ways.

When Maggie and Bessie reached home, they found Colonel Rush there awaiting them, and heard that he had come to take them to his own house. Lena, his niece, was coming down to dinner for the first time since she had been so badly burned; that is, she was to be carried down, for her poor little feet were still too tender to suffer her to put them to the ground, or to take any steps upon them. But she had been so long a prisoner upstairs that it was quite an event for her to be allowed to join the family at dinner once more; and the Colonel had seen fit to make it a little more of a celebration by coming for Maggie and Bessie to make merry with them on the occasion. Indeed, he was apt to think that such occasions were not complete without the company of his two pets, and they had both been perfectly devoted to Lena during the period of her confinement, so that he was more than ready to make this a little jubilee for all concerned.

Mamma's permission being readily obtained—indeed the Colonel had secured it before the two little maidens had appeared upon the scene—the three friends set forth again, well pleased with one another and with the prospect before them.

"Lena has had quite an eventful day," said the Colonel, as they were on their way to his house. "First and greatest, I suppose, was a letter from her brother Russell—only a few lines, it is true, but the first she has had since he was taken ill, and it was full of loving praises for her presence of mind and her bravery, and for the patience with which she has borne her suffering; so it was very precious to her, for she adores him, you know; and there was another from her father, containing news which she would like to give you herself, I am sure; so I leave it for her to do so. And now comes her first dinner with the family, with you to dine with her. But she is such a cool, composed little woman, and takes things so quietly, that we are less afraid of over-excitement for her than we would be for some I could name."

"Now, Uncle Horace," said Maggie, as he looked down at her with a twinkle in his kind eyes, "you know I would keep quiet if you told me to."

"You would try, I am sure, Midget," answered her friend, "but there are girls and girls, you know, and it is easier for one species to keep quiet under exciting causes than it is for another."

"But you can't tell how *this* species would be in such circumstances," said Maggie, "because I have never been very ill or had any terrible injury, such as Lena's burns."

"I can tell that you are a very 'happy circumstance' yourself, and that I am quite satisfied with you as you are," answered the Colonel, bending another loving look upon the rosy, glowing face upturned to his, and which broke into dimples at the allusion to an old-time joke.

Long ago, when Maggie was a very little girl, she had been very fond of using long words—indeed, she had not yet outgrown this fancy; but in former days, whenever she heard what she called "a new word," she would presently contrive some occasion for using it, not always with the fullest understanding of its exact meaning; and the results, as may be supposed, were sometimes rather droll.

One summer, when Mr. Bradford's family were at the sea-shore, and Colonel and Mrs. Rush were

their near neighbors, Maggie had taken a violent dislike to the mistress of the house where she boarded. The woman was somewhat rough and unprepossessing, it is true, and hence Maggie had conceived the prejudice against her; but she was kind-hearted and good, as the little girl learned later. Having heard some one use the expression, "happy circumstance," Maggie took a fancy to it; and, as she informed Bessie, immediately resolved to adopt it as one of "my words."

An opportunity soon presented itself. Mrs. Jones offended both children, Maggie especially, and soon after, she asked Mr. Jones in confidence, if he thought Mrs. Jones "a very happy circumstance." Fortunately, the man, a jolly, rollicking farmer with a very soft spot in his heart for all children, took it good-naturedly and thought it a tremendous joke, and his uproarious merriment called Mrs. Jones upon the scene to reprove him and inquire the cause, greatly to the confusion and distress of poor embarrassed, frightened Maggie. And this was increased by the fact that she took occasion to praise Maggie and Bessie and to say what good, mannerly children they were.

Mr. Jones, however, did not betray confidence, and later on, Maggie changed her opinion; but the "happy circumstance" had remained a family joke ever since, and the expression was frequently brought into use in the sense in which Maggie had employed it, and the children laughed now as the Colonel used the old familiar phrase.

CHAPTER II.

LETTERS.

They found Lena in the library, ensconced in state in her uncle's comfortable rolling chair, in which, in by-gone days when he was lame and helpless, he had spent many hours, and in which she could easily be conveyed from room to room by the Colonel's man, Starr, without putting her still tender little feet to the ground. It was natural that she should be glad to be down-stairs again after all the past weeks of confinement and suffering; but Maggie and Bessie found her in a state of happiness and excitement unusual with the calm, reserved Lena, and which seemed hardly to be accounted for by the mere fact that she had once more been allowed to join the family circle.

But this was soon explained.

"Maggie and Bessie," she said, with more animation than her little friends had ever seen her show before, "what do you think has happened? Such a wonderful, such a delightful thing! I cannot see how it did happen!"

Such a thing as had "happened" was indeed an unwonted occurrence in Lena's young life; but she had been through so many new experiences lately, that she might almost have ceased to be surprised at anything.

If she could have looked in upon her father and mother and invalid brother Russell, in their far away southern sojourn a few days since, she would have seen what led to the present unexpected occurrence. Mrs. Neville had just read to the two gentlemen a letter from her brother, Colonel Rush, speaking of Lena's continued imprisonment; and they had continued to talk of their little heroine and her achievement.

"Was Lena delirious at any time while she was so very ill?" asked Russell.

"Not exactly delirious," answered his mother, "but somewhat flighty at times; and at those times, and indeed when she was herself, her chief thought and her chief distress seemed to be that she would not be able to enter into competition with her schoolmates for some prize to be gained for composition. Your Aunt Marion told me that this prize was an art education provided by some one for a girl with talent, whose circumstances would not permit her to obtain one for herself; and she said that Lena had become very much interested in an English girl, the daughter of the rector of a poor struggling church in the suburbs of the city, a girl with a very remarkable artistic talent; and that she and those little Bradfords, on whose education and training Horace and Marion seem to base all their ideas respecting children—if, indeed, they have any ideas except those of the most unlimited indulgence and license—had set their hearts on winning this prize for that child. Had it been brought about in any other way and without physical injury to herself, I should be glad that Lena was removed from such competition. I

highly disapprove of all such arrangements. Children should be taught to seek improvement and to do their duty because it *is* their duty, and not with the object of gaining some outside advantage either for themselves or others."

"In this case, it certainly seems to have been for a praiseworthy, unselfish object. Poor, dear little Lena!" said Russell, who was the only member of his family who ever ventured to set up his opinion in opposition to his mother's.

"It is the principle of the thing I object to," she said, a little severely. "As I say, I wish my children to do right because it is right, and not with any ulterior object."

"The inducement seemed to have one good effect, at least," persisted Russell, with a slight shrug of his shoulders which was not, perhaps, altogether respectful, "and that was the wonderful improvement Lena made in letter-writing; in the matter and manner, the style and the handwriting, she has certainly made rapid progress during the time she has been with Miss Ashton. Do you not agree with me, father?"

"Ahem-m-m! Yes, I do indeed," answered Mr. Neville, thinking of a little letter which lay snugly ensconced in his left-hand waistcoat pocket, a letter which had come by the same mail as that which his wife held in her hand, but which he had not thought fit to submit to her perusal. It was a letter thanking him for giving her the liberty of asking for anything she wished for—her choice had been that she might be allowed to remain at her uncle's house during the stay of the family in the country—a letter sweet, tender, and confiding, and giving him glimpses into the child's heart which were a revelation to him; a letter which had touched him deeply, but which he believed Mrs. Neville would call "gush" and "nonsense." And just now he did not care to have it so criticised, so he would not show it to his wife, at least at present.

But before the subject of the conversation had changed, Mrs. Neville was called from the room, and Mr. Neville said to his son:

"Russell, I am feeling that I owe—ahem!—I owe some recognition—ahem!—to the Almighty for the very signal mercies granted to us during the past few weeks, some thank-offering—and, ahem!—perhaps I owe some to Lena, too. You, in a fair way of recovery; and, through Lena's wonderful heroism, a frightful casualty averted; and now she herself doing far better than we had dared to hope. If the child is set upon giving an artist's education to this young countrywoman of our own, and your Uncle Horace thinks well of it,—perhaps it might give her pleasure to have the means of doing so. Being now disabled it will be impossible for her to enter into farther competition with her schoolmates, and I wish her to have the pleasure of making the gift herself. What say you?"

The idea met with unqualified approbation from his son; and not only this, but Russell expressed a wish to join his father in his thank-offering. He was liberal and open-handed, this young man, and, having lately come of age and into possession of quite a fortune in his own right, he was ready to seize upon any opportunity of benefiting others out of his own means. He was a young man after Maggie's and Bessie's own hearts, and they would instantly have stamped him with the seal of their approval had they known of this most desirable characteristic.

Some little further conference on the matter ensued between the father and son, with the result that Lena's eyes and heart had to-day been gladdened by the receipt of two checks of no inconsiderable amount—a fortune they seemed to her—the one from her father representing one thousand dollars, the other from Russell for five hundred. They were enclosed in a letter from Mr. Neville to his little daughter, saying that they were to be appropriated to any charitable purpose which she might designate, subject to her uncle's approval—either for the use of the young artist, or, if she were likely to gain the instruction she required through the means of any of Lena's schoolmates, for any good object which would gratify her.

"It's worth all the burns," said the delighted Lena to her uncle, when she had shown her prize to him and consulted him as to the best disposition of it.

"The true martyr spirit," the Colonel said later to his wife. "And she shows herself a wise and prudent little woman; for when we were discussing the matter she said she would wait to decide what should be done with the money until she knows if Maggie or Bessie or any one of those interested in Gladys Seabrooke wins the prize. She knows that Mr. Ashton's gift will go to Gladys in that case; and then she wishes to devote the money to repairing the old church. If she were thirty instead of thirteen she could not show better judgment or more common sense."

"I am glad that her father is learning to appreciate her at last," said Mrs. Rush, who, being very fond of children herself, deeply resented the keep-your-distance system and constant repression under

which her husband's sister and brother-in-law brought up their family.

So this was the prize which Lena had to show to her young friends, this the story she had to tell. They, Maggie and Bessie, were enchanted in their turn, and as Lena displayed to them the two magic slips of paper which held for them such wonderful possibilities, and which appeared as untold wealth to their eyes, they could not contain their delight and enthusiasm.

"Why, that will build a whole new church; will it not, Uncle Horace?" asked Bessie, whose faith that her own Maggie would win the prize was absolute, especially now that Gracie Howard seemed to have withdrawn from the contest, and that Lena had been disabled, and who therefore never doubted that the rector's little daughter was sure of the gift tendered by Mr. Ashton.

"Well, hardly," said the Colonel, smiling, as he laid aside the evening paper; "hardly, although it will go far towards making some of the repairs which are so much needed, and also towards beautifying the inside of the church a little. And I think that you must let me also have a hand in this, for I, too, have occasion for a thank-offering. So altogether, I hope we shall be able to put the little church into a fairly presentable condition; that is, in case you decide, Lena, to use your funds for that purpose," he added, with the private resolve that the needy church should not be the loser even if the checks were applied to Gladys Seabrooke's benefit. She was the first object with all three children, that was plainly to be seen; but if it should fall out that the means of improvement she so much desired and so much needed were gained for her by Mr. Ashton's trust, then this small fortune was to be devoted to the church of which her father was rector. Then, too, these young home missionaries intended to devote the proceeds of the fair they were to hold at Easter to the help of the same church; so that altogether the prospect for its relief seemed to be promising.

[Illustration: "THAT WILL BUILD A WHOLE NEW CHURCH"]

"I had a letter from Russell, too, written by his own hand, the very first since he has been ill," said the happy Lena. "Oh! and I forgot; I had a letter from Percy, too. I did not read it, I was so excited by Papa's and Russell's and the two checks. Let me see; where is it? Oh, here it is!"

And she opened it; but seeing at a glance that it was unusually long, she decided that she would not try to decipher Percy's irregular, illegible handwriting at that time, but would wait till Maggie and Bessie should have left her and would make the most of their society.

Poor little Lena! her day was not to be all sunshine, for a cloud came over the heaven of her happiness before she laid her head upon her pillow that night. But this cast no shadow as yet, and the evening passed merrily to all three children.

"I do wish that you could come to the club-meeting on Friday, Lena," said Bessie, shortly before it was time for them to separate for the night.

"So do I," said Maggie.

"I am sure that I wish it," said Lena, "but I suppose it will be some weeks yet before I can go."

Mrs. Rush, who was sitting near, overheard the little colloquy, and at once made a charming suggestion.

"Suppose," she said, "that you meet here till Lena is well enough to go to your house, Maggie. My morning room shall be at your service, as your mother's is at present."

"Oh, how good in you!" cried Maggie and Bessie, both in one breath, while Lena's pale face flushed with gratitude and pleasure; and so the matter was arranged, Maggie undertaking to tell all the members of the club of the change in the place of meeting.

But, glancing at Bessie, Maggie saw that she looked somewhat perturbed, and she suddenly remembered what had passed with Gracie Howard that very afternoon, and that she had been urged to resume her accustomed place among the "Cheeryble Sisters," and had consented to do so. How would that do now? Would Lena feel like having Gracie come here? Gracie who had treated her so badly, who had shown such jealousy and unkindness towards her. This was rather a complication, and considering it, Maggie became uneasy and embarrassed, and Lena, who was very quick-sighted, saw it.

"What is the matter, Maggie?" she asked. "Do you think you would rather not come here?"

"Oh, no!" answered Maggie, "you know I always love to come here. But, Lena, this afternoon we met Gracie Howard, and I begged her to come to the meeting to-morrow. She has not been since—since—the day—of the fire."

The flush which pleasure at her aunt's offer had brought to Lena's face deepened to crimson, which mounted to the very roots of her hair as she heard Maggie.

Then after a moment's hesitation, she said, "Will you ask her to come, Maggie?"

"Yes," answered Maggie, doubtfully, "I'll ask her."

"But you think that she will not come?" said Lena.

"I am afraid she will not," answered Maggie; then added, "I am sure I should not if I were in her place; I should be too ashamed. I think she is ashamed, Lena, and sorry, too; I really do."

Lena seemed to be considering for a moment; then she said, evidently with a great effort,—

"Do you think she would come if I wrote and asked her? I—I would do it if you thought she would be friends again. And, perhaps," she added, with a little pathetic wistfulness which nearly made the tears come to the eyes of the sympathetic Maggie and Bessie, "perhaps she would, now, after such a thing happened to me. Do you know," sinking her voice to a whisper, and speaking with an unreserve which she never showed towards any one save these little friends, and seldom to them, "do you know that when they thought I was going to die—oh, I know that every one thought I was going to die—I used to feel so sorry for Gracie, because we had that quarrel that very afternoon; and I knew how I should have felt if I had been in her place, and I used to wish that I could make up with her; and now I would really like to if she will. Shall I write?"

Bessie, whose eyes were now brimming over, stooped and kissed her cheek; and Maggie followed her example, as she answered, with a break in her own voice,

"I don't see how she could help it, Lena; you dear Lena."

Maggie and Bessie were not a little astonished, not only at this burst of confidence from the shy, reserved Lena, but also at the feeling she expressed and her readiness to go more than half way in making advances for the healing of a breach in which she certainly had not been to blame.

But in the border-land through which Lena's little feet had lately trod, many and serious thoughts had come to her; thoughts of which those about her were all unconscious, as she lay seemingly inert and passive from exhaustion, except when pain forced complaint from her; and chief among these had been the recollection of the unpleasant relation which for some time had existed between herself and Gracie Howard, and which had culminated in the attack of jealousy and ill-temper which the latter had shown towards her on the very afternoon of the day in which Lena had been so badly, almost fatally, injured in the fire. And Lena herself, as has been said, had been altogether blameless in the affair, had no cause whatever for self-reproach; nevertheless, she had wished that she could have made friends with Gracie before she died. But she had spoken to no one of this until now, when she thus opened her heart, at least in a measure, to Maggie and Bessie.

Knowing all that they did—and still neither they nor Lena knew one-half of Gracie's misconduct—what wonder was it that they were touched, and filled with admiration for this little friend who, a stranger only a few months since, had come to fill so large a place in their affection and interest.

But Maggie, feeling confident, as she said, that Gracie was both ashamed and repentant, was also overjoyed at this opening towards a reconciliation; for her peace-loving soul could not abide dissension in any shape, and this breach between two members of the once harmonious club of the "Cheeryble Sisters" had been a sore trial to her.

Nor was Bessie much less pleased; and thinking that there was no time like the present, and that it would be well that Lena should act before she had opportunity to change her mind,—this showed that she did not know Lena well, for having once made up her mind that a thing was right, Lena was not more apt to change than she would have been herself,—she offered to bring writing materials, that the note might be written at once; and running into the library, where Colonel Rush was smoking his cigar, she begged for and received them.

But even with those before her and her resolve firmly taken, Lena found not a little embarrassment and difficulty in wording her note; for, owing to the state of affairs between her and Gracie, it was not the easiest thing in the world for her to do.

However, by Maggie's advice, she resolved to write as though nothing unpleasant had passed between herself and Gracie, and she finally produced the following simply-worded note, ignoring all that was disagreeable.

"DEAR GRACIE,

"Aunt Marion has said that I may have the 'Cheeryble Sisters,' Club here to-morrow, and she says she will make it a little celebration for us because it is so long since I have been with you girls. Please come, for I want to have all of you here.

"Your schoolmate,

"LENA H. NEVILLE."

She hesitated over the manner of closing it, for she could not put "affectionately yours," as, although she was striving to put from her all hard thoughts of Gracie, she certainly did not regard her with any affection, nor would she pretend to do so; for Lena was a most determinately honest child and would never express, even in a conventional way, that which she did not feel. She even shocked Maggie and Bessie now and then, truthful and sincere as they were, by her extreme and uncompromising plain-speaking; and perhaps it was as well that she was a child of so few words, or she would often have given offence. Maggie had suggested "truly yours," as being a common form even between strangers; but Lena rejected that also as expressing a sentiment she did not feel, and Bessie finally proposed "your schoolmate," which satisfied the requirements of both truth and civility.

Maggie and Bessie posted the note on the way home, so that it might be sure to reach Gracie early in the morning, and that, as Bessie said, she might have "time to get over the shock of Lena's forgiveness before she came to school."

Lena had been carried upstairs and safely deposited in her own room by Starr; and Hannah, the nurse of the young Nevilles, had gone down-stairs to seek the food which it was still considered necessary for the little invalid to take before going to rest, when Lena bethought herself of her brother Percy's letter, still unopened in the excitement which had attended the receipt of the two from her father and Russell.

With a half-remorseful feeling that she had so long left it unnoticed, she broke the seal of Percy's letter. But the first words on which her eyes lighted sent a pang to her heart, and as she heard Hannah's heavy step returning, she thrust the letter hurriedly out of sight.

"Dear, dear, child!" said the old nurse, as she saw that Lena's hand shook so that she could hardly hold the bowl of broth, or carry the spoon to her lips, and with some triumph in, as she believed, the fulfilment of her own prophecies, "dear, dear, you're hall hupset, Miss Lena. I told the mistress and I told the doctor you wasn't in no state to go downstairs yet, or worse still, to be 'avin' company, not if it was Miss Maggie and Miss Bessie, leastways not hout of your hown room. 'Ere, let me 'old the basin; you're not fit to do it. There now, here, child,—why, bless your 'eart, Miss Lena, what is it?"

Poor little girl! she was still so weak, so nervous from the effects of the frightful experience through which she had lately passed, and of all the consequent suffering, that she was in no state to bear even the slightest shock or excitement. Had Hannah not noticed her agitation she would probably have controlled herself; but the questions and pressing of the old servant were too much for her, and she burst into a flood of hysterical tears.

She retained sufficient presence of mind, however, when Hannah ran to the door to call her assistant, who was in the next room, to open the drawer of the table by which she sat, and shut the letter within. No one must see that letter until she had had time to read it, and find what those first few sentences meant.

Letitia was sent by Hannah for Mrs. Rush, who speedily came; and, knowing no other cause, she believed, as the servants did, that this came from all the excitement of the day, and that they would have to be more guarded with their little convalescent. She soothed and petted her, mingling therewith a little judicious firmness, till Lena's sobs ceased and she was comfortably settled in bed, where she soon forgot both joys and troubles in the sleep of exhaustion.

"Well!" said Mrs. Rush, when she had left her patient in Hannah's care and rejoined her husband, "this puts an end to the project of having the children's club here to-morrow. We have gone too fast, and now prove that Lena is not so strong and cannot bear so much as we thought. I must at once send word to Maggie and Bessie."

CHAPTER III.

When Mrs. Rush came up a couple of hours later to inquire about her little niece, she found her still in that heavy sleep; and with directions to Hannah to call her if needful, left her, with the hope that she would rest undisturbed till morning.

When Lena woke from that dull sleep some time after midnight, all the house was still; the only sound she heard was the regular breathing of Hannah, who slept on a cot on the other side of the room, that she might be near in case Lena needed anything in the night.

She roused to a bewildered half-consciousness of something unusual; what was it, good or ill? What had happened before she went to sleep?

Then came the recollection of those delightful letters from papa and Russell, confiding to her disposal those precious slips of paper which represented so much; oh! what a pleasure it was to have the power of doing so much good; then with a shock came the remembrance of that other letter, and those two or three first lines, which seemed to have burned themselves upon her eyes as she read.

"DEAR LENA,

"I am in the most awful scrape any one was ever in, and you are the only one who can help me out of it. If you can't, there is nothing for me but to be arrested and awfully disgraced, with all the rest of the family too, and the—"

This was as far as Lena had read when Hannah's returning footsteps had impelled her to put the letter out of sight; but it had been enough in her weak state to startle her out of her self-control, and it has been seen what a shock it gave her. "Arrested" had a terrible significance to Lena.

Not very long before Mrs. Neville's family had left home, Lena had seen a boy, about her brother Percy's age, arrested in the streets of London. He had been taken up for some grave misdemeanor, and having violently resisted his captors, they had found it necessary to handcuff him, and when Lena saw him he was being forced along between two policemen, still fiercely struggling, and with his face and hands covered with blood. The sight had made a dreadful impression upon the little girl, and when she heard the word "arrested" it always came back to her with painful force.

Had it been Maggie or Bessie, or any other child whose relations with her mother were as tender and confiding as are usually those between mothers and daughters, the impression might have been lessened by learning that such a sight was not a usual one, and that people when arrested were not apt to resist as desperately as the unhappy youth whom she had seen; but not being accustomed to go to Mrs. Neville with her joys or troubles, Lena had kept her disagreeable experience to herself and supposed it all to be the necessary consequence of an arrest, and Percy's words had conjured up at once all manner of dreadful possibilities. In imagination she saw him dragged along the streets in the horrible condition of the criminal she had seen, and the whole family covered with shame and disgrace.

Percy was four years older than Lena, but had not half his young sister's strength of character, judgment or good sense, and he was, unfortunately, afflicted with that fatal incapacity for saying no, which brings so much trouble upon its victims. He was selfish, too; not with a deliberate selfishness, but with a heedless disregard for the welfare and comfort of others, which was often as trying as if he purposely sought first his own good. He would not have told a falsehood, would not have denied any wrong-doing of which he had been guilty, if taxed with it; but he would not scruple to conceal that wrong, or to evade the consequences thereof, by any means short of a deliberate untruth. His faults were those with which his father and mother had the least patience and sympathy, and those which needed a large share of both; had he ever received these, the faults would probably never have attained to such a growth, for he was in mortal dread of both parents, especially of his mother, and this, of course, had tended to foster the weakness of his character.

Poor Lena lay wakeful but quiet for hours, wondering and wondering what could be the matter, and what those terrifying words with which Percy's letter commenced could portend. And she, he wrote, was "the only one who could help him." She wished vainly for the letter, that she might know the worst at once; but she had no means of reaching it at present. Her feet could not yet bear to be touched to the ground, and she dared not wake Hannah and ask for it. Such an unusual request at this time of night would arouse wonder and surmise, even if Hannah could be induced to bring her the letter and give her sufficient light to read it. The old nurse would think her crazy or delirious, perhaps run and call her aunt and uncle. No, no; that was not to be thought of, the poor child said to herself as she lay and reasoned this all out; she must wait till the day came, and then she must contrive to read the letter when she was alone. Then she could decide whether or no it would do to take Colonel and Mrs. Rush

into her confidence. She could not bear to think of keeping anything from this kind uncle and aunt, who had shown themselves so ready to enter into all her joys and sorrows, who took such an interest—so novel to her—in all her duties, her occupations, and amusements; who, with a genuine love for young people, were at no little pains to provide her with every pleasure suitable for her.

But—Percy—she must think of him first. Oh, if she only knew all that was in that dreadful letter!

But at last she fell asleep again, sleeping late and heavily, far beyond the usual hour. When she awoke, she insisted upon being taken up and dressed, although her aunt and nurse would fain have persuaded her to lie still and rest; and that done, her object was to obtain possession of Percy's letter without attracting attention to it. Being totally unaccustomed to anything like manoeuvring or planning, she could think of no excuse by which she might have the table brought near her chair, or the chair rolled near the table. The maids thought her remarkably fractious and whimsical and hard to please, but laid it all to the reaction from last night's hysterical attack. Do what she would, she could not contrive, poor helpless child, to come at the drawer of the table unless she spoke out plainly, which she could not do, and she had been wheeled into the nursery before the opportunity offered.

But here she found the way opened to her. Hannah, who would let no one else attend to her young lady's meals when they were taken upstairs, departed for Lena's breakfast; and after she had gone, Lena speedily bethought herself of a way of procuring Letitia's absence for a while by sending her down-stairs with directions for some change in her bill of fare.

Then calling her little sister Elsie, who was playing about the nursery, she sent her into her own room, bidding her open the table drawer and bring her the letter she would find there.

Elsie, a demure, sedate little damsel, who always did as she was told and was a pattern child after Mrs. Neville's own heart, discharged her commission and came back with the letter, which she handed to her sister without asking any inconvenient questions, and returned to her dolls in the corner.

Lena ventured to open the letter, knowing that Hannah, at least, was sure to be absent for some moments yet, and sure that Letitia, who was a dull, unobserving girl, would take no notice. She felt that she could wait no longer.

There was a few moments' silence in the room; Elsie, absorbed in her quiet play, took no heed to her sister; Letitia did not return, having stopped on her way back to the nursery to gossip with one of Mrs. Rush's maids; and Lena read on undisturbed, read to the very end of the letter.

Then she spoke to Elsie again, spoke in a voice so changed from its natural tone that the little one looked up in surprise.

"What's the matter, Lena?" she asked, coming to her sister's side; "is your throat sore? Oh!" scanning her curiously, "did something frighten you?"

Lena did not heed either question.

"Elsie," she said, still in that strained voice, as if it were an effort to speak, "put this in the fire, away far back in the fire."

"Why, Lena!" answered the child, "I'm forbidden to go near the fire.
Did you forget that?"

Lena thought a moment, then said, with a strong effort for self-control, and still in that same measured tone:

"Then go in my room and open the small right-hand compartment of my writing-desk and put this letter in it and shut the door tight, tight again, and lock it and bring me the key. Quick, Elsie."

But again, influenced by conscientious scruples, Elsie objected.

"I 'spect Hannah wouldn't like me to go in your room so much, Lena; the windows are all open. She didn't say don't go in there, but I 'spect she thinked it, 'cause she always says don't go where the windows are open."

For the first time in her life Lena condescended to something like cajolery.

"And you will not do that for your poor sister who cannot walk?" she asked, reproachfully.

"Oh, yes, yes; and burned herself for me to save me out the fire," exclaimed Elsie, throwing her arms about Lena, "I don't care if Hannah does scold me; I'd just as lief be scolded for you. But your voice is so queer, Lena; you must be thirsty for your breakfast."

Taking the letter from her sister's hand, the child turned to obey her request, but was again assailed by doubts as to the course of duty.

"If Hannah or Letitia come, shall I tell them to put it away?" she asked.

"No, no!" answered Lena, sharply; then feeling that she must take the child, at least in a measure, into her confidence, she added, hurriedly,

"Hannah is not to see it. No one is to see it, no one; and you are not to speak of it, Elsie. Go now, quickly, and put it in the secretary."

Rather startled by her voice and manner, the little one obeyed and returned to Lena's room with the letter.

But now she fell into difficulties. The door of the compartment into which Lena had told her to put the letter was hard to open; it stuck, and Elsie vainly struggled with it, for it would not yield. Meanwhile Letitia, hearing Hannah come up from the kitchen, had hurriedly returned to her post of duty. She exclaimed on finding the door between the rooms open and a draught of cold air sweeping through, and hastening to shut it, discovered Elsie still struggling with the door of the little closet.

"Well, did I ever!" exclaimed the nursery-maid. "You here in this cold draught, Miss Elsie; an' what'll Hannah say, I wonder?"

"I want to put this in here, and I can't open this door," said the loyal little soul, refraining from shifting the blame from her own shoulders, by saying that she had come on Lena's errand. Letitia went to her assistance, but the door was still obstinate, and before the letter was hidden it was made plain "what Hannah would say;" for the old nurse came bustling in in a transport of indignation at finding Elsie exposed to the risk of taking cold, for she was a very delicate child. She rated both her little charge and her assistant in no measured terms, especially the latter, who, as she said, "had not even had the sense to put down the windows on the child." She snatched the letter from Elsie's hand, the little girl repeating what she wanted to do with it, and bidding her at once to go back to the other room, gave a violent pull to the small door, which proved more successful than the efforts of her predecessors.

"What's all this fuss about putting the letter away, anyway?" she said, glancing at the unlucky document. "Bless me, if t'aint from Master Percy, an' to Miss Lena! Well, an' she never saying a word of it. What's she so secret habout it for?"

Now Hannah's chief stumbling-block was a most inordinate curiosity, and once aroused on the subject of that letter, was not likely to be laid to rest until it had received some satisfaction. She turned the letter over and over, scrutinizing it narrowly; but there was nothing to be learned from the address or the post-mark farther than that it was certainly from Percy, whose handwriting she well knew. Had she dared she would have opened it; but that was a thing upon which even she scarcely ventured, autocrat though she was within the nursery dominions. Also, Lena was rather beyond her rule since the Neville family had come to Colonel Rush's house.

Elsie had lost no time in escaping from the storm which her seeming imprudence had evoked, and the nursery maid had followed; the little girl reporting to her sister that Hannah had taken the letter from her and was putting it away. Poor Lena found her precautions of no avail, and she knew Hannah well enough to feel sure that she would be subjected to the closest questioning. She must brave it out now, and she forced herself to face it.

"*I* sent Elsie in there; it was my fault, not hers," she said, throwing down the gauntlet with an air of defiance which rather astonished Hannah.

"You know she oughtn't to go in that cold hair," said Hannah, sharply. "And why for couldn't you wait till me or Letitia came to put by your letter if you *was* in 'aste habout it? There," mollified by the look in the beautiful dark eyes, now so unnaturally large and pathetic through illness and suffering, which Lena turned piteously upon her without answering, "there, there, child; never mind now. Heat your breakfast, my dear, for you look quite spent and worn out. Ye've got a setback by yesterday's doin's that'll last a week. Come, now, Miss Lena, take this nice chicken an' put a bit of strength into you."

And the old woman bustled about, displaying to the best advantage the dainty breakfast she had brought to tempt the appetite of her young charge.

But Lena could not eat; she was still too sick at heart, and seeing this, Hannah connected it with the letter.

"You 'av'n't 'ad hany bad news, Miss Lena?" she suddenly asked, as she bade Letitia remove the tray with its contents almost untouched. "Master Percy—none of 'em isn't hill?"

"No, no," answered Lena, replying to the latter question and ignoring the former. "I have not heard that any one was ill. Letitia," in a tone of imperious command, very unusual with her when speaking to a servant, "hand me that book—and—Hannah—let me alone."

Hannah was now indeed dumb with amazement, and her suspicions were more than ever aroused. There was something wrong with Percy; he might not be ill—he was sure not to be if the absolutely truthful Lena denied it, but he was in some trouble, and she would not rest until she found it out.

Percy was, of all her nurslings, Hannah's favorite, perhaps for the very reason that the instability of his character had so often led him into scrapes in which she had shielded and helped him. He had, in his childhood, frequently escaped punishment by her connivance, and it was her theory that "the poor boy was put upon" more than any of the others. Now he had been sent away to school, while the rest were enjoying the unwonted liberty and pleasures of their uncle's house; and her affectionate old heart was often sore within her as she pondered over the wrongs she fancied he endured. She was not over-scrupulous as to the means she took to avert the consequences of misdoing from Percy, or any other one of the flock whom she had nursed from earliest babyhood; but so guarded was she that Mrs. Neville had never suspected her of anything like double-dealing, or assuredly her reign in the nursery would soon have come to an end.

That she was right in her surmises she became more and more convinced as she watched Lena and saw that though she kept her eyes fixed upon the open book in her lap, she never turned a leaf. It was evidently to avoid observation and to have a pretext for keeping quiet that she had taken the book. Then, by dint of adroit questioning of the other servants, she managed to ascertain, without letting them know that anything was wrong, that no letters had been carried to Lena that morning, but that Starr had handed her three on the previous afternoon. Lena had spoken of two of these, her papa's and Russell's, had told the old nurse what treasures they contained, but she had said nothing of the other, Percy's. Hannah guessed the truth when she surmised that in the excitement over the first two, Lena had forgotten Percy's and opened it later.

"When she'd come up to bed last night! I see, I see," the nurse said to herself. Percy was surely in some difficulty again, and both he and Lena were trying to hide it; but she would leave no means untried to discover what it was.

Mrs. Rush was quite shocked at Lena's looks when she came up to see her, and so was the colonel in his turn, and Lena found it very difficult to parry their questions, and to appear even comparatively unembarrassed and at her ease in their presence. They both positively vetoed any attempt at coming down-stairs to-day, or the reception of any visitors; and, indeed, Lena had no inclination for either, but was quite content to accept their verdict that she must keep absolutely quiet and try to recover from the over-excitement of yesterday. She did not wish to see any one; even Maggie and Bessie would not have been welcome visitors now when that dreadful secret was weighing upon her, and as for going down-stairs she had no desire to do so; she wanted to remain as near as might be to the fatal letter, would have insisted upon being carried back to her own room had she not feared it would occasion wonder. She was half frantic, too, about the key of the compartment of the secretary. Hannah had not brought it to her, and she dared not ask for it.

Oh, how miserable it was to be so helpless with so much at stake! not to be able even to touch one's feet to the ground to go to find out if the key were still in the lock, the letter safe in the secretary.

Her apprehensions were of the vaguest, for there was no reason that any one should go to her secretary without permission, and she had no cause to suspect that any one would do so, and thus she reasoned with herself; but had she known it, they were not without cause, for Hannah had resolved that she would find out what that letter contained. It must be said for her that although her curiosity was greatly aroused, she was actuated chiefly by her affection for Percy, and the desire to rescue him from any trouble into which he might have fallen.

An opportunity was not long in presenting itself, for when the doctor, who had been sent for, arrived, Hannah made a plausible errand into Lena's room and secured the letter.

Having gained her object the dishonorable old woman found the agitation of her invalid charge amply accounted for. She carried the letter to a place where she could read it undisturbed and free from observation, and make herself mistress of its contents; then returned to Lena's room and put the letter in the place whence she had taken it.

But Hannah's face was very pale, and she was most unusually quiet all that day, falling into fits of

abstraction as if her thoughts were far away. She was more tender than ever with Lena, knowing now too well the trouble which was weighing upon the heart and spirits of the sensitive young sister, and secretly sharing it with her. Hour after hour she pondered upon ways and means for relieving her favorite from the trouble into which his own folly and weakness had led him, and how she might do so without betraying either this or her own shameless conduct in possessing herself of the secret.

CHAPTER IV.

PERCY.

Percy Neville had been placed by his parents at a small private school where only twelve pupils were taken, and where they intended he should be, as Mrs. Neville said, "under the strictest personal supervision." The school had been chosen not only on this account, but also because the principal was an Englishman, and had formerly been tutor in a school which Mr. Neville had attended when a boy.

Only two of the masters and tutors resided in the school, one of them being a young man of the name of Seabrooke, who was half tutor, half scholar, giving his services for such lessons as he took. He was a youth of uncommon talent, studious and steady, and much thought of by Dr. Leacraft and the other masters. Six of the twelve pupils were in one dormitory under charge of this young man; the other six in another, in the care of Mr. Merton. Had Dr. Leacraft but known it, just the opposite arrangement would have been advisable, as the half-dozen boys in Mr. Merton's room were a much more steady set than those in young Seabrooke's.

Seabrooke himself had little idea of the lawlessness which reigned in the quarters under his charge; he was an unusually heavy sleeper, and all manner of pranks were carried on at night without rousing him.

The leader of these escapades was a boy of the name of Flagg, utterly without principle or sense of honor; but plausible, and, being quick at his studies, making a fair show with his masters. Over Percy Neville this boy had acquired a most undesirable influence, and led him into many pranks and violations of rules which were little suspected by the authorities. Poor Percy, weak, vacillating, and utterly without resolution or firmness of character, was easily led astray, although his conscience, his judgment, and his sense of truth were often offended by the wrong-doing into which he suffered himself to be persuaded.

About a mile from the school lived a man of the name of Rice, who kept boats, fishing-tackle and one or two horses which he let out; while back of his place was a small lake which afforded good fishing in the summer and excellent skating in the winter. His house was not a gambling or drinking place, at least not avowedly so; but some rather questionable doings had taken place there, and the spot was one absolutely forbidden to the scholars of Dr. Leacraft's school. Nevertheless, some of the wilder spirits were in the habit of going there when they could do so without risk of discovery; and they also employed Rice to procure for them such articles as were tabooed and which they could not purchase for themselves. Lewis Flagg was one of his most constant customers, and he had gradually drawn every one of the boys in his dormitory into various infringements of regulations. He had found Percy an easy victim, and by degrees had drawn him on from bad to worse, until he had brought him to a pass where he was afraid to rebel lest Lewis should reveal his former misdoings, as he threatened to do.

Within the last few weeks it had been the practice of the six boys in Seabrooke's dormitory to slip out of the window at night upon the roof of the porch, thence by the pillars to the ground, and then off and away to Rice's house, where a hot supper, previously ordered, awaited them. This flagrant violation of rules and order had taken place several times, and, so far, thanks to Seabrooke's heavy slumbers, had not yet been discovered.

About this time a hard frost of several days duration had made the skating unusually good; and there was no place within miles of the school so pleasant or so favorable for that pastime as Rice's pond. Tempted by this, all the boys under Dr. Leacraft's care had signed a petition, asking that they might be allowed to go upon this pond if they would promise not to go into the house.

An hour or two after this petition had been sent in, but before it had received an answer, a telegram came to the doctor calling him to Harvard, to his only son, who had been dangerously hurt. The boys were all assembled at the time for recitation to the doctor, and rising in his place he made known the

subject of the despatch, and then said:

"In answer to the request which I have just received from you, young gentlemen, I must return a positive negative. My reasons for forbidding you to go near Rice's place have lately been given additional force, and, although I cannot take time to mention them now, I must request, I must absolutely *forbid* each and every one of you from going in the neighborhood of Rice's house or Rice's pond. I cannot tell how long I may be away; meanwhile the school will be left under the charge of Mr. Merton and Mr. Seabrooke, and I trust that you will all prove yourselves amenable to their authority, and that I shall receive a good report. I leave by the next train. Good-bye."

The doctor's face was pale and his voice was husky, as he bade them farewell, dreading what might have come to him before he should see them again. He was gone in another moment, and in half an hour had left the house.

Dr. Leacraft was a kind, a just, and a lenient master, granting to his pupils all the indulgence and privileges consistent with good discipline, and the more reasonable among the boys felt that he must have just cause for this renewed and emphatic prohibition against Rice's place. But Lewis Flagg and his followers were not reasonable, and many and deep, though not loud, were the murmurs at his orders. Lewis' boon companions saw from the expression of his eye that he meditated rebellion and disobedience even while the doctor was speaking; and Percy Neville and one or two others resolved that they would refuse to share in them.

Nor were they mistaken. No sooner were the six choice spirits alone together than Lewis unfolded a plan for "a spree" for the following night.

The moon was about at the full, and his proposal was that they should leave the house in the manner they had done more than once before, by means of the window and the root of the porch, go to Rice's and have a supper, which was to be previously ordered, and afterwards a moonlight skate on the lake.

"Rip Van Winkle will never wake," said Flagg, "not if you fire a cannon-ball under his bed, and we'll be back and in our places and have a good morning nap before he suspects a thing."

But some of the better disposed among the boys demurred, fresh as they were from the doctor's late appeal to them, and their knowledge of the sad errand upon which he had gone; and foremost among them was Percy Neville.

"I don't know," he said, doubtfully, when Lewis Flagg unfolded his plan. "I don't know. Isn't it rather shabby after what the doctor said to us? And—you know—Dick Leacraft might be dying—might be dead—they say he's awfully hurt—and we wouldn't like to think about it afterwards if we were breaking rules when the doctor—"

But the expression upon Flagg's face stopped him.

"Hear the sentiment of him!" sneered the bad, reckless boy; "just hear the sentiment of him! Who'd have thought Neville was such a Miss Nancy, such a coward? But you're going if the rest go, for we're all in the same box and have got to stand by one another—none are going to be left behind to make a good thing for themselves if anything does leak out."

"I shouldn't, you know I shouldn't say a word!" ejaculated Percy, indignantly.

"No, I don't believe you would," said Flagg; "but we can't have any left behind. One in for it, all in for it. Pluck up your courage and come along, Percy. If you don't,"—meaningly—"you and I'll have some old scores to settle."

This threat, which meant that former misdeeds and infringements of rules would be betrayed by Lewis if Percy did not yield, took effect, as it had done more than once before; and Percy agreed to join in the prohibited sport. He had not the strength, the moral courage, to tell Lewis that cowardice and weakness lay in that very yielding, in the fear which led him into new sin sooner than to face the consequences of former misdeeds,—misdeeds more venial than that now proposed. It was not the doctor of whom Percy stood in such awe half so much as his parents, especially his mother. It is more than possible that he would have gone to the former and made confession of past offences rather than continue in such bondage as Flagg now maintained over him; but he could not or would not face the displeasure of his father and mother, or the consequences which were likely to follow. Leniency, or a tender compassion for their faults, were not looked for by any of the Neville children; when these were discovered they must be prepared to bide the fullest penalty.

"I don't know about Seabrooke." said Raymond Stewart. "He has not slept as soundly as usual these last few nights. I've been awake myself so much with the toothache, and I know that he has been

restless and wakeful; and he might chance to rouse up at the wrong time and find us going or gone."

"He's seemed to have something on his mind and to be uneasy in the daytime, too," said another boy, "and he's been so eager for the mail, as if he were expecting something more than usual. He's everlastingly writing, too, every chance he finds."

"Oh, he fancies he has literary talent," said Flagg, "and he's forever sending off the results of his labors. I suppose he expects to turn out an author and to become famous and a shining mark."

"The doctor says he will be," said Raymond, "and I know that one or two of his pieces have been accepted by the magazines and paid for, too. I saw them myself in a magazine at home. It must be a great thing for a fellow who has his own way to make in the world, as Seabrooke has. I know his family are as poor as rats. His father is rector of a little shabby church just out of the city, and I know they have hard work to get along. You know Seabrooke teaches for his own schooling."

"I'll see that he sleeps sound enough not to interfere with us to-morrow night," said Lewis Flagg. "Leave that to me."

He spoke confidently; but to all the questions of the other boys as to how he was to bring about this result, he turned a deaf ear.

But he succeeded in bringing every one of his five schoolmates to his own way of thinking, or, at least, to agreeing to join in the proposed expedition; and his arrangements were carried on without any further demur openly expressed from them.

Seabrooke was in the habit of taking a generous drink of water every night the last thing before he retired. On the evening of the following day, and that for which the aforesaid frolic had been planned, Lewis Flagg might have been found in the dormitory at a very unusual hour; and had there been any one there to see, he might have been observed to shake the contents of a little paper, a fine white powder, into the water carafe which stood filled upon the wash-stand in Seabrooke's alcove. Then, with the self-satisfied air of one who has accomplished a great feat, he stole from the room and back to his schoolmates.

"Seems to me Seabrooke has been uncommonly chirk and chipper this evening," said Charlie Denham, when the boys had gone to their rooms, as their masters supposed-for the night.

"Yes, he had a letter by the evening mail which seemed to set him up wonderfully," said Raymond. "I hope it has eased his mind of whatever was on it so that he won't be wakeful to-night."

"Oh, he'll sleep sound enough, I'll warrant you," said Lewis Flagg, with a meaning laugh.

Ensconced in bed, every boy fully dressed, but with other clothes so arranged as to deceive an unsuspecting observer into the belief that all was as usual, they waited the time when Seabrooke should be asleep.

The young tutor's alcove was not within the range of Lewis' vision, but Percy from his bed could see all that went on there, and he lay watching Seabrooke. As usual, at the last moment the latter poured out a glass of water and proceeded to drink it down; but he had not taken half of it when he paused, and Percy saw him hold it up to the light, smell it, taste of it again and then set the glass down, still more than two-thirds full.

Harley Seabrooke had no mental cause for restlessness that night; the evening mail had, as Raymond said, brought him that which had lifted a load of suspense and anxiety from his mind, and he was unusually light-hearted and at ease. His head was scarcely upon his pillow when he was asleep, but not so very sound asleep, for Flagg had over-shot his mark, and the sleeping potion which he had so wickedly put into the carafe of water had given it a slightly bitter taste, so that Seabrooke had found it disagreeable and had not drank the usual quantity, and the close he had taken was not sufficient to stupefy him, but rather to render him wakeful as soon as it began to act.

Believing themselves safe as soon as they heard his regular breathing, the six conspirators slipped from their beds out of the window upon the roof of the piazza, and thence down the pillars to the ground, and then off and away to Rice's.

Hardly had they gone when Seabrooke, on whom the intended anodyne began to have an exciting effect, awoke, and lay tossing for more than an hour. Weary of this, he rose at last, intending to read awhile to see if it would render him sleepy; but as he drew the curtain before his alcove, in order to shield the light from the eyes of the companions whom he supposed to be safe in their beds fast asleep, he was struck with the unusual silence of the room. Not a rustle, not a breath was to be heard,

although he listened for some moments. He could hardly have told why, but he was impressed with the idea that he was entirely alone, and striking a light, he stepped out into the main room and went to the nearest bed.

Empty! and so with each one in succession. Not a boy was there!

Remembering the petition to Dr. Leacraft and the resentment which his refusal to accede to it had provoked, it did not take him long to surmise whither they had gone; and hastily dressing himself he made his exit from the house in the same way that they had done and hastened in the same direction, filled with indignation at such flagrant disobedience and treachery at a time when the doctor was in such trouble.

The runaways had had what they called a "jolly supper" and were in the hall of Rice's house donning great-coats and mufflers before going out upon the lake, when the outer door was opened, and Percy, who stood nearest, saw Seabrooke. His exclamation of dismay drew the attention of all, and the delinquents, one and all, felt themselves, as Percy afterwards said, "regularly caught."

"You will go home at once, if you please," was all the young tutor said; but, taken in the very act of rebellion to the head master's orders, not one ventured to dispute the command. He marshalled them all before him, and the party walked solemnly home, five, at least, thoroughly shamefaced.

"Don't you feel sneaky?" whispered Raymond to Lewis Flagg.

"No" answered the other; "I'm not the one to feel sneaky. I haven't been spying and prying and trapping other fellows."

But this bravado did not make the others easy.

Seabrooke made his captives enter by the way in which they had left, so that the rest of the household might not be disturbed, and ordered them at once to bed.

"What are you going to do about this?" Lewis asked.

"Report to Mr. Merton in the morning; and then write to the doctor, I presume, as Mr. Merton's hand is too lame for him to write. It will be as he thinks best," answered Seabrooke, dryly. "I do not wish to talk about the matter now."

Contrary to his usual custom, Lewis Flagg did not attempt to treat lightly and as a matter of no consequence the displeasure of his masters, but seemed depressed and restless the next morning, and Percy remarked upon it.

"You'd be cut up too if you were in my place," said Lewis, roughly; "you're only afraid of your father and mother and the doctor; and you see I've been in a lot of scrapes this term and been awfully unlucky about being found out, and my uncle threatened to stop my allowance if he caught me in another, and he'll do it, too; and I've lots of debts out—a big one to Rice—and you know what the doctor is about debt, and my uncle is still worse; there'll be no end of a row if he knows it. If this fuss could only be kept quiet till after I have my next quarter-and that's due the first of next week—I could pay off Rice, at least. But if word goes to the doctor, he'll let my uncle know—he promised to, by special request," he added, bitterly. "Uncle will make ten times more row over my debts than he will over one lark, and I promised Rice he should have his money next week. I'm in awfully deep with him, Percy, and I don't dare let it be found out. We'll see what old Merton says this morning. But—the doctor sha'n't hear of it just yet if I can help it."

Percy wondered how he *could* help it; but before he could ask the question the school-bell rang and the boys took their places.

After school was opened, Mr. Merton rose, and, with what Lewis called "threatening looks" at the delinquents, said, quietly:

"Young gentlemen of Mr. Seabrooke's dormitory, it is hardly necessary to say that this evening's mail will carry to Dr. Leacraft an account of last night's flagrant misconduct. Till I hear from him, I shall take no further steps, save to request that you will not go outside the house without either myself or Mr. Seabrooke in attendance."

Lewis Flagg was a bright scholar, and so far as recitations went, maintained his standing in the class with the best; but to-day he was far below his usual mark, and his attention constantly wandered; and most of his fellow culprits were in like case. In view of the escapade of the previous night and its impending consequences, that was hardly to be wondered at; but Lewis was wont to make light of such matters, and he was evidently taking this more seriously than usual.

But the truth was that this did not rise from shame or regret—at least not from a saving repentance—but because he was absorbed in trying to find a way out of his difficulties.

Mr. Merton was suffering from acute rheumatism in his right hand, and being disabled from writing, he had, after consultation with his junior, delegated him to make the necessary disclosures to the absent doctor. Seabrooke was observed to be doing a great deal of writing that afternoon, and was supposed to be giving a full account of the affair.

The letters to be taken out were always put into a basket upon the hall table, whence they were taken and carried to the post-office at the proper hour by the chore-boy of the school. Here, Lewis thought, lay his opportunity.

Drawing Percy aside again, he said that Seabrooke's letter to the doctor must be taken from the basket before Tony carried all away, and be kept back for a day or two; then it could be posted and nothing more would be suspected than that it had been belated. Meanwhile his allowance would arrive, and then Dr. Leacraft was welcome to know all the particulars of the escapade.

Percy was startled and shocked, and at first refused to have any part in the matter; but the old threat brought him to terms, and he at last agreed to Lewis' plans that they should contrive to abstract Seabrooke's letter to Dr. Leacraft from among the others laid ready for the post, and keep it back until Lewis' allowance had been received.

But although the two boys made various errands to the hall, they found no opportunity of carrying out their dishonorable purpose before Tony had started on his round of afternoon duties, taking with him the letters for the post.

Scarcely had he disappeared when Mr. Merton said to the six culprits:

"Young gentlemen, you will go for afternoon exercise to walk with Mr. Seabrooke. The cold will prevent me from venturing out," touching the crippled right-arm, which lay in a sling, "or I should not trust you from beneath my own eyes; but if I hear of any farther misconduct, or you give him any trouble, there will be greater restrictions placed upon you, and there will be another chapter to add to the sad account which has already gone to the doctor."

"Dr. Leacraft will be tired before he comes to a second volume of the thing Seabrooke has written to him," Flagg whispered to Percy, as they started together for the walk under Seabrooke's care. "Did you see him writing and writing page after page? He must have given him every detail, and made the most of it. And he fairly gloated over it; looked as pleased as Punch while he was doing it; never saw him look so happy."

"I'm likely to lose my Easter vacation, and dear knows what else for this," said Percy, who was exceedingly low in his mind over the consequences of his lawlessness.

"I'll have worse than that," answered Lewis. "I wouldn't mind that; but if my quarter's allowance is stopped I don't know what I *shall* do. Oh, if I only could get hold of that letter!"

Percy made no response; for, much as he dreaded to have this affair come to the knowledge of his parents, he shrank from the thought of abstracting and destroying that letter.

Seabrooke had not much reason to enjoy his walk that afternoon if he had depended upon his company; his charge were all sulky and depressed; but, somewhat to their exasperation, their young leader did not pay much heed to their humors; his own thoughts seemed sufficient for him; and, to judge by the light in his eye and his altogether satisfied expression, these were pleasant society.

"Seabrooke's been awfully cock-a-hoop all clay," said Raymond
Stewart; "wonder what's up with him."

"He's glad we're in a scrape," said Lewis, bitterly.

"Don't believe it," said Raymond; "that's not like him."

Seabrooke led the way to the village store, a sort of *omnium-gatherum* place, as village stores are apt to be, and which contained also the post-office.

Entering, the party found Tony there before them, the letters he had carried from the school lying on the counter; for there were several small parcels and newspapers which would not go into the receiving box, and the post-mistress was sorting the afternoon up mail, and the delivery window of the office was closed; so Tony was waiting his chance for attention. He stood with his back to the counter, examining some coal shovels, having received orders to buy one. Seabrooke was at the other side of the store,

making some purchases; the rest of the boys scattered here and there.

"He hasn't put the letters in the box yet; now's our chance," whispered Lewis to Percy, and he sauntered up to the counter where the letters lay, drawing the reluctant Percy with him.

With a hasty glance at the letters, he snatched up the bulky one which he believed to be that to Dr. Leacraft, gave another quick look at the address and thrust it within his pocket; then, humming a tune, he walked leisurely away with an air of innocent unconcern, still with his arm through that of Percy.

"That was good luck, wasn't it?" he said. "Now we'll keep it till my allowance comes and then post it."

Seabrooke and the six boys had just reached the door of the school, when Tony rushed up to the young tutor, and said, hurriedly:

"Mr. Seabrooke, sir, did you take that letter you told me to be particular of?"

"No," said Seabrooke, turning hastily. "You haven't lost it?"

"I couldn't find it, sir," faltered the boy; "but I know I had it when I passed the bridge, for I was lookin' at it and rememberin' what you told me about it."

Seabrooke waited for no more, but darted off upon the road back to the village, followed by Tony.

"We're in a fix, now," whispered Lewis to Percy, "if there's going to be a row about that letter. Isn't he the meanest fellow in the world to be so set upon having the doctor knowing about last night? Percy, I'll tell you what! We've got to put the letter out of the way now. And there's old Merton coming, and he's asking for me. Quick, quick; take it!" drawing the stolen letter from his pocket and thrusting it into Percy's unwilling hands. "Put it in the stove, quick, quick! There's no one to see; no one will suspect! Quick now, while I go to Mr. Merton and keep him back. You're not fit to meet him: why, man, you're as pale as a ghost."

And Lewis was gone, meeting Mr. Merton in the hall without.

With not a moment for thought, save one of terror lest he should be found with the missing letter in his hand, Percy opened the door of the stove, thrust the letter within upon the glowing coals, and closed the door again, leaving it to its fate, a speedy and entire destruction, accomplished in an instant.

An hour passed; the supper gong had sounded and the boys had taken their places at the table, when Seabrooke returned, pale as death, and with compressed lips and stern eyes.

Mr. Merton, who was extremely near-sighted, did not observe his appearance as he took his seat, but the boys all noticed it.

"I have not seen it," or, "I have not found it," was all the response he had to make to the inquiries of, "Have you heard anything of your letter?" and so forth.

"Have you lost a letter, Harley?" asked Mr. Merton, at length, his attention being attracted.

"Yes, sir," answered Seabrooke.

"How was that? Was it a letter of importance?" asked the gentleman,

"Yes, sir, a letter of importance, a letter to my father," answered his junior, but in a tone which told the older man that he did not care to be questioned further on that subject.

To his father!

Percy's fork dropped from his hand with a clatter upon his plate, and Lewis' face took an expression of blank dismay which, fortunately for him, no one observed.

His father! Had they then run all this risk, been guilty of this meanness, only to delay, to destroy a letter to Seabrooke's father, while that to the doctor, exposing their delinquencies, had gone on its way unmolested.

CHAPTER V.

"Neville and Flagg, I want to speak to you. Will you come into the junior recitation-room?" said Seabrooke, as soon after supper as he could find opportunity of speaking apart to the two terrified culprits.

Fain would the guilty boys have refused, but they dared not; and they followed Seabrooke to the place indicated, where he closed the door and, turning, confronted them.

"Lewis Flagg and Percy Neville," he said, sternly, and his voice seemed to carry as much weight and authority as that of Dr. Leacraft himself when he had occasion to administer some severe reproof, "I suppose that you are striving to annoy me in this manner in revenge for my detection of your deliberate infringement of rules last night, but your tricks have recoiled upon your own heads, although even now I will spare you any farther disgrace and punishment if you will make restitution at once, for you do not know the extent of the crime of which you have been guilty. Robbing the mail is an offence which is punished by heavy penalties. You, Lewis, were seen to take a letter from among those which Tony carried to the post-office; you, Percy, standing by and not interfering, even if you were not aiding and abetting. No matter who told me; you were seen; but it is looked upon as a school-boy trick, and, by my request, will not be spoken of if you return the letter without delay. Nor shall I betray you. Lewis, where is that letter? For your own sake, give it to me at once. You do not know what you have done."

Lewis would have braved it out, would perhaps even have denied taking the letter, for he was not at all above telling a lie; but he could not tell how far evidence would be given against him, and, at least, immunity from farther punishment was held forth to him and his fellow-culprit.

But—restitution! Percy, as he knew, had followed out his instructions and put the letter in the fire.

"I'm sorry," he said, with a forced laugh, but with his voice faltering; "but we had no idea the letter was of special importance. We thought it was to the doctor about last night, and we only meant to keep it back for a day or two and—and—well, when you made such a row about it—Percy—Percy burned it up. But to call it 'robbing the mail—'"

He was stopped by the change in Seabrooke's face.

"*You burned it!*" he almost shouted, forgetting the caution he had hitherto observed in lowering his voice so that it might not be heard by any one who might be outside the door. For one instant he stared at the two startled boys, looking from one to the other as if he could not believe the evidence of his ears. "You burned it!" he repeated, in a lower tone; then, covering his face with his hands, he bent his head upon the table before him with something very like a groan. When he raised his head and uncovered his face again he was deadly pale.

"There were two hundred dollars in that letter," he said; "you have not only stolen and destroyed my letter, but also all that sum of money."

Stolen! All that money!

They were sufficiently appalled now, these two reckless, thoughtless boys; Percy to an even great degree than his more unprincipled comrade.

Lewis was the first to find his voice.

"There was not! You're joking! You're only trying to frighten us," he said, although in his inmost soul he was convinced that this was no joking matter, no mere attempt to punish them by arousing their fears. Seabrooke's agitation was not assumed, that was easy to be seen.

Then followed a long and terrible pause, while the three boys, the injured and the injuring, stood gazing at one another. Then, despite his wrongs, the unutterable terror in the faces of the latter touched Seabrooke, especially in the case of Percy, for whom he had a strong liking; for the boy had many lovable traits, notwithstanding the weakness of his character.

"What can we do?" faltered Percy, at last.

"What will you do?" asked Lewis, almost in the same breath.

Trembling and anxious, the two culprits stood before the young man, scarcely older than themselves, who had become their victim and was now their accuser and their judge, in whose hands lay their sentence.

"Wait, I must think a minute," he said, willing, out of the kindness of his noble heart, to spare them

ruin and disgrace, and yet scarcely seeing his way clear to it.

"Listen," he said, after some moments' pondering. "You thought that letter was to Dr. Leacraft, you say, giving an account of last night. Mr. Merton, who is disabled, as you know, asked me to write to the doctor; but I begged him to let me off and to ask one of the professors to do it. That letter you destroyed was to my father, and, as I told you, contained two hundred dollars in money—money earned by myself—money which I must have and which you must restore. Give it back to me—I will wait till after the Easter holidays for it—and this matter shall go no farther. No one but myself knows that the letter contained money; only one saw you take it out, and that one will be silent if I ask it. I will write out a confession and acknowledgment for you both to sign. Bring me, after the holidays or before, each your own share of the money and I will destroy that paper; but if you fail, I will carry it to the doctor and he must require it of your friends. I will not—I cannot be the loser through your wickedness and dishonesty. If you refuse to sign I shall go to Mr. Merton now and to the doctor as soon as he returns. I do not know if I am quite right in offering to let you off, even upon such conditions; but if I can help it I will not ruin you and cause your expulsion from the school, which, I know, would follow the discovery of your guilt."

Percy, overwhelmed, was speechless; but Lewis answered after a moment's pause, during which Seabrooke waited for his answer:

"How are we to raise the money?"

"I do not know," answered Seabrooke, "that is your affair. I worked hard for mine and earned it; you have taken it from me and must restore it—how, is for you to determine. If your friends must know of this, and I suppose that it is only through them that you can repay me, it seems to me that it would be better for you to make a private confession to them than to risk that which will probably follow if Dr. Leacraft knows of it. Are you ready to abide by my terms?"

"You will give us till—" stammered Lewis, seeing no loophole of escape, but, as he afterwards told Percy, hoping that something "would turn up" if they could gain time.

"Till Easter—after the holidays—no longer," answered Seabrooke. "I know very well that you could hardly raise so much at a moment's notice; so, although it is a bitter disappointment not to have it now, I will wait till then if you agree to sign the paper which I will have ready this evening after study hour. Quick now; the bell will ring in two minutes."

What could they do? Seabrooke was evidently inexorable, and they knew well that he could not be expected to bear this loss.

"Yes, I will sign it," said the thoroughly cowed Percy. But Lewis suddenly flashed up and answered impudently:

"How are we to know that the money was in that letter?"

"I can prove it," answered Seabrooke, quietly; "and, Lewis Flagg, I can prove something more. I tested the water that was in my carafe last night, and found that it had been tampered with. I know the object now, and have discovered who bought the drug at the apothecary's. Do you comprehend me? If the doctor hears of one thing he will hear of all."

Utterly subdued now, Lewis stammered his promise to comply with the young tutor's request.

"One question," said Seabrooke, as the two younger boys turned to leave the room. "How did you come to take a letter directed to my father for one addressed to Dr. Leacraft?"

"I don't know," replied Percy, at whom he was looking. "I didn't look at it particularly, but just put it in the stove when Lewis handed it to me and told me to do it. We saw you writing for ever so long, and thought that thick letter was to the doctor. We are—were in such a hurry, you see."

"And I am sure Leacraft and Seabrooke are not so very different when one is in a hurry," said Lewis.

"I see," said Seabrooke; "you made up your minds that the letter was to the doctor, and were so afraid of being caught at your mean trick that you did not take time to make sure. There's the study bell."

The confession and acknowledgment of their indebtedness was signed that night by both of the guilty boys.

And this was the story which the sensitive, honorable Lena, the faithful old Hannah had read—Percy's letter, which had commenced:

"DEAR LENA,

"I am in the most awful scrape any boy ever was in, and you are the only one who can help me out of it. If you can't there is nothing for me but to be expelled from the school and arrested and awfully disgraced, with all the rest of the family; and the worst is that Russell will be so cut up about it—you know his Royal Highness always holds his head so high, especially about anything he thinks is shabby—and I am afraid it will make him worse again. As for the mother! words could not paint her if she hears about it. And if the doctor gets hold of it!! I've told you how strict he is and what the rules are. If it hadn't been an iron-clad place, I shouldn't have been sent here. I hate these private schools where one can't do a thing without being found out. Well, here goes; you must hear about it, and it is a bad business."

Then followed, in school-boy language, an account of the whole disgraceful transaction. A "bad business," indeed; even worse it appeared to the young sister and the old nurse than it did apparently to Percy.

"And now, dear Lena," he continued, "there's no one but you who can help me. Lewis Flagg is going to have his share. He has a watch that was his father's, a very valuable one, and his older brother wants it awfully, and told him long ago he would give him a hundred dollars for it; he has money of his own, the brother has, and Lewis says it isn't half what the watch is worth; but he'll have to let it go. So he's all right.

"But what am I to do? I have no such watch. I have nothing I could sell without mamma and papa finding it out, and think of the row there would be if they did. You are my only hope, Lena, and you might do something for me. At any rate, think of Russell. Havn't you something you could sell? Or—I do not like very much to ask you, but what can a fellow in such a scrape do?—couldn't you ask Uncle Horace to let you have it? I am sure he owes you something for saving his house from being burnt up, and things would have been a great deal worse if you hadn't found it out and been so brave; and besides, he thinks so much of you since he will do anything for you, and you can just tell him you want it for a private purpose. He'll give it to you; it's only twenty pounds, Lena, and what is twenty pounds to him? what is it to any of our people, only one wouldn't dare to ask papa or mamma for it. We wouldn't get it if we did, and everything would have to come out then; they never trust any one and *would* know. Only get it for me, dear Lena, and save me and save Russell, too. You have from now till after the Easter holidays; and think what you'll save me from! Oh, dear! I wish I'd never seen Lewis Flagg. He don't care a bit, so that he sees the way out of his own scrape. As for that solemn prig, Seabrooke, who you'd think was one of the grown masters with his uppish airs, well, never mind, I suppose he has let us off easy on the whole, if I only raise my share of the money; and he is honor bright about it and don't even act as if we two had done anything worse than the others. Oh! do think of some way, and try Uncle Horace. I know he'll prove all right, and you see we never meant to do this.

"Your affectionate brother,

"PERCY H. NEVILLE.

"Oh, I forgot, how are the feet?

"Save Russell!"

The shock of the whole thing; the disobedience and rebellion against rules; the disgraceful theft of the letter; its destruction; the peril in which Percy himself stood—all faded into comparative insignificance with the risk for her adored elder brother. Absolute quiet, freedom from all worry and anxiety during his protracted convalescence had been peremptorily insisted upon by his physicians, and it had proved before this that any excitement not only retarded his recovery, but threw him back. That the knowledge of Percy's guilt could be kept from Russell if it came to the ears of her father and mother never occurred to her, and beyond words did she dread its effect upon him. She knew that the news of her own serious injuries a few weeks since had been very hurtful to him, and now her chief thought was for him.

She lost sight altogether of the contemptible meanness of Percy's appeal to her—a helpless girl—to rescue him from the consequences of his own worse than folly, but she was bitterly stung by his suggestion—nay, almost demand—that she should ask from their kind and indulgent uncle the means of satisfying the justly outraged Seabrooke; the uncle who had opened his heart and home to them, whom she credited with every known virtue, and for whose good opinion and approbation she looked more eagerly than she did for those of any other human being, even the beloved brother Russell. No, no; she would never ask him for such a thing, that honorable, high-minded, hero-uncle, with his scorn for everything that was contemptible or mean; "fussy," Percy had called him, about such matters.

Nor did it occur to her that in his selfish desire to secure her aid, Percy had perhaps exaggerated the risk to himself—the risk of his arrest and public disgrace, which would reflect upon the family.

Poor little girl! In her inexperience and alarm she did not reflect that it was not at all probable that Percy would be arrested, even though he should not be able to comply with Seabrooke's just demands; and all manner of direful possibilities presented themselves to her mind. Little wonder was it that she was perfectly overwhelmed, or that mental excitement had prostrated her again and brought on a return of her fever.

Nor was Hannah less credulous. She magnified the danger for Percy as much as the young sister did, although her fears were chiefly for the culprit himself. She had the means of relieving the boy's embarrassment if they were but in her own hands, but she had put the greater part of these in her master's care for investment, and she could not obtain any large sum of money without application to him. And, like Lena, she was afraid of exciting some inquiry or suspicion if she did so. The poor old soul stood almost alone in the world, having neither chick nor child, kith nor kin left to her, save one bad and dissipated nephew whom she had long since, by the advice of her master, cast off. If she asked Mr. Neville for the sum necessary to help Percy out of his difficulty, he would, she felt confident, suspect that she was about to give it to this reprobate nephew, and would remonstrate.

Besides the accumulated wages in her master's hands she had one other resource, quite a sum, which she carried about with her; a number of bright, golden guineas tied in a small bag which she wore fastened about her waist, and which was really a burden to her, since she lived in constant fear of losing it. But this was for a purpose dear to old Hannah's heart, namely, her own funeral expenses and the erection of what she considered a suitable head-stone for herself after she should have done with life. She would not trust this precious gold to any bank or company, lest it should fail and leave her without the means for what she considered a fitting monument for herself. Within the bag was also an epitaph, composed by herself, which was to be put upon the proposed gravestone. For Hannah had no mean opinion of her own merits, and this set her forth as an epitome of many Christian graces, reading thus:

"Here lies the mortal body of Hannah Achsah Stillwell which she was hed nurse in the family of Howard Neville eskire for years and brung up mostly by hand his children and never felt she done enuf for them not sparin herself with infantile elements walkin nites and the like, pashunt and gentle not cross-grained like some which the poor little things they can't help theirselves teethin and the like, respeckful to her betters knoin her place, kind to them beneth her—which she was much thort of by all above and below her—and respected by her ekals. Which to her Gabriel shall say in fittin time:

"Well done good and faithful servant
Come to the skys
Stranger read this pious lesson
Go and do likewise."

This gem she had read in turn to each of her nurslings as they came to what she considered a fitting age to appreciate it; and they had regarded it with great awe and admiration, till they outgrew it and began to consider it as a joke. Not to Hannah, however, did any one of them confide the change in his or her views, although they made merry over it among themselves; and Harold and Elsie still looked upon it as a most touching and fitting tribute to the merits of their faithful old nurse, albeit it had been composed and arranged by herself.

Hannah had also frequently found the bag and its contents an incentive to well-doing, or an effective and gentle means of coercion, as upon any rare symptoms of rebellion or mischief which would occasionally arise within the nursery precincts, in spite of iron rules and severe penalties, she was wont to detach the bag from its hiding-place and, retiring to a corner, would count the gold and read over the future epitaph, murmuring in sepulchral tones, befitting such a lugubrious subject, that she should soon have need of both.

This course had generally sufficed to bring the small rebel to terms at once, and it would promise to be good if she would only consent to live and continue her care of the nursery. And now, how could she make up her mind to sacrifice this cherished sum even for the reckless, selfish boy whom she loved? It had been dedicated to that one purpose, and it had never before entered her thoughts to divert it to any other. She was devoted to each one and all of her charges, past and present; but for no other one than Percy would she ever have thought of resigning this gold. Not to relieve the sickening terror and anxiety of the poor little invalid; not to save the whole family from the disgrace which she apprehended, would she have entertained the slightest thought of doing so; but for the sake of her beloved scrapegrace! Could she resolve to do it, was the question which was now agitating her mind. If Hannah was worried she was apt to be cross, and for the next day or two she was captious and exacting beyond anything within the past experience of the nursery, driving Letitia to the verge of rebellion, and

exciting the open-eyed wonder of the pattern Elsie. Over Lena she crooned and hovered, petting and coddling her, and longing to speak some words of hope and comfort, but not daring to do so lest she should betray herself and the dishonorable way in which she had become possessed of the child's secret.

Colonel Rush was seated in his library one afternoon when there came a knock at the door; and being bidden to enter, the portiere was drawn aside and old Hannah appeared, her face wearing an unusually solemn and portentous expression.

"Beggin' your pardon, Colonel," she said, dropping her curtsey, "but I'm not much hacquainted with these Hamerican monies, and would you be so good as to tell me the worth of twenty-one gold guineas in the dollars they uses in this country. More shame to 'em, say I, that they didn't 'old by what was their hown when they was hunder the rule of hour gracious lady, Queen Victoria, but 'ad to go changin' an' pesterin' them what 'asn't no partickler hacquaintance with harithmetic."

Hannah was a privileged character, and sometimes expressed her opinions with some freedom in the presence of her superiors.

The colonel did not think it worth while to enlighten her on the subject of American history, or to explain that the United States, and even the early colonies, had never been beneath the rule of Queen Victoria; but he gave her the information she desired.

"Twenty-one golden guineas would be somewhere from a hundred and five to a hundred and ten or fifteen dollars, Hannah," he said; "it might be even a little more; that would depend upon what is called the price of gold. A guinea would be worth something over five dollars in American money at any time, sometimes more, sometimes less, but always beyond the five. Why?"—knowing of the secret fund for future expenses, the story having been told to him by his nephews,—"have you gold of which you wish to dispose? If so, I will do my best to sell it for you at advantage."

"No, thank'ee, sir," she answered. "I'm only fain to know what it would fetch," and with another curtsey she was gone, not daring either to wait for farther questioning or to ask the gentleman to exchange her gold for her. Indeed, upon the latter point she had not, hitherto, at all made up her mind. But now it seemed to her that it was clearly intended that she should make the sacrifice.

"Seems as if it was a callin' of Providence," she murmured to herself, as she slowly and thoughtfully mounted the stairs and returned to the nursery; and had any one known the circumstances he might have seen that the old nurse's resolution respecting that gold was wavering; "seems as if it was a callin' of Providence. 'Twould just be a little more than the poor boy needs—oh, will he never learn to say no when it's befittin 'he should!—just a little more, and it do seem as if it were put hinto my 'ands to do it. An' I s'pose I might believe the Lord will take care of them banks and railroads an' things where the master 'as put what he's hinvested for me. I don't know as I put so much faith in this hinvestin', you never know what'll come of it with the ups and downs of them things. Dear, dear! if I 'ad it now there needn't be no trouble about Master Percy. But"—feeling for the precious bag—"I think I couldn't rest heasy in my grave if I 'ad the statoo of the queen 'erself hover me if I'd let the child I brought up come to this disgrace an' 'im the puny, weakly baby he was, too, when I took 'im, the fine, sturdy lad he is now if he is maybe a bit too soon led hastray. But what can you hexpect of a lad when he's kept hunder the way hour boys is. An' he's not a bad 'eart, 'asn't Master Percy, an' maybe he might put up a monyment and a hepithet 'imself for me if he did but know I'd done that for 'im. It's a risk, too; Percy's no 'ead on his shoulders, an' I might be left with no tombstone an' no hepithet."

To one who knew Hannah it might have been easy to see which way the balance was likely to turn; that cherished gold was sure to be taken for Percy's rescue from the difficulty he was in; but she persuaded herself that she had not yet made up her mind about the matter.

CHAPTER VI.

A CONFIDENCE.

Meanwhile Lena was fretting herself ill over the terrible secret which she imagined she shared with no one in the house; turning over and over in her mind all manner of impossible devices for the relief of her scapegrace brother. Not for one instant would she entertain the thought of applying to her uncle in

accordance with his indelicate suggestion; and her father and mother were, to her mind, as well as to Percy's, utterly out of the question. No idea of applying to them entered her head. The change in her, her troubled, worried expression, the almost hunted look in her beautiful eyes made her uncle and aunt extremely anxious, especially as they could find no clew to the cause, for they knew nothing of the letter from Percy.

The child wrote to her brother and told him that she could see no way of procuring the money for him, for she *would not* apply to their uncle; but she would try and contrive some means of helping him.

With the heedless *insouciance* which distinguished him, or rather with the selfish facility with which he threw a share, and a large share, of his burdens upon others, he had comforted himself with the thought that Lena would surely contrive some way of helping him; would, in spite of her declarations to the contrary, apply to Colonel Rush, guarding his secret, and taking upon herself all the weight and embarrassment of asking such an unheard of favor. But although he did strive to be hopeful, he had times of the deepest despondency and dread, when he looked his predicament fully in the face; and he felt it hard that Lewis, who, after all, had been the chief offender, should be, as he in his careless way phrased it, "all right" at what seemed to be so little cost to him, while he, Percy, was under this cloud of apprehension and uncertainty.

Harley Seabrooke was not hard-hearted, although he was determined that the two boys should make full restitution, and justly so, and he could not but feel sorry for Percy when these fits of despair overtook him.

"Neville," he said to him one day, "have you written to your parents about this matter?"

"To my father and mother! oh, no!" answered Percy, looking dismayed at the bare idea of such a thing; "Oh, no, of course not. How could I?"

"It seems to me," said Harley, eying the boy curiously, "that such a thing is the most natural course when one is in such a difficulty. Certainly it must involve confession, but they would be the most lenient and tender judges one could have. Why not make a clean breast of it, Percy, and have it over? You hardly, I suppose, can obtain such a sum of money except by application to them; or have you some other friend who will help you?"

"I have—I did—I mean I will," stammered Percy. "I have asked and—and—I know I must have it somehow."

He looked so utterly depressed and forlorn that Harley's heart was moved for him.

"If I were rich, Percy," he said, "if I could in any way afford it, I would not insist upon such early payment of my loss; but it is only just that you should make it good. You did not know what you were doing, it is true, the extent of the injury to me; but you had suffered yourself to be tempted into wrong by a boy much worse than yourself, and you meant to play me a sorry trick, which has recoiled upon yourself. That money, the check you destroyed, I had received from a publisher for a piece of work over which I had spent much time and which I had devoted to a special purpose. I have a young sister who has a wonderful talent for drawing and painting, is, in fact, a genius; and her gift ought to be cultivated, for we hope it will, in time, be a source of profit to herself and others; but my father is a poor clergyman, and all of us try to do what we can to help ourselves and one another. You know on what terms I am here; and it is only through the kindness of Dr. Leacraft that I enjoy the advantages I do; and of late I have been able to earn a little by articles I have written for papers and magazines. This two hundred dollars I had received for a little book, and I intended it should be the means of giving my little sister at least a beginning of the drawing lessons which would be of so much use to her. You may judge then if I do not feel that I must have it back, and that without farther delay. I am sorry for you, but I cannot sacrifice my sister."

Seabrooke was regarded by the boys as unsympathetic, cold, and stiff in his manner—perhaps he was somewhat so—and as he seldom spoke of himself they knew little of his affairs or of his family relations; and he was also considered to have a rather elderly style of talking, unbefitting his comparatively few years.

Percy's manner, which had been rather sullen and listless when the other began to speak, had brightened as Seabrooke went on; and when he mentioned his sister, his face lighted with a look of interest which somewhat surprised his senior.

"What is your sister's name? Gladys?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Harley, surprised at the question. "Do you know her?"

"Yes—no—my sister and some other girls I know, know her," said Percy; and then followed the story of the meeting in the church and of the interest taken in the young artist by Lena, Maggie and Bessie.

"So it was your friends and relatives, then, who sent the check for the church to my father, and the Christmas box to my sister?" said Seabrooke, feeling much more inclined to forgive Percy than he had felt since the destruction of his letter.

"I don't know anything about a check," answered Percy, for Colonel Rush had not mentioned that little circumstance to the junior portion of his family, "but I do know that the girls sent your sister a Christmas box, for I helped to pack it myself, and they are all agog about some prize they hope to win among them, a prize which will give them somehow, an artist education, which they can give to some girl who needs it. I don't know exactly how it is, only I do know they are all just agog about it, and they want it for your sister Gladys, at least for a girl of that name. But I believe I ought not to have spoken of that; it is only a chance, you know; there are ever so many girls to try for the prize, and our girls may not gain it."

"And my sister don't want the chance," said Harley, the stubborn pride which was one of his characteristics, up in arms at once. "We may be and are poor, but we will not ask for charity."

"Well, you needn't be so highty-tighty about it," said Percy, taking a more sensible view of the matter than his older companion did. "*I* don't call it charity, and if it is, it comes from somebody who is dead, so one needn't feel any special obligation to the girls. It is only that they earn the right to say to whom the gift shall go; they don't *give* it. And," he added, with his usual happy faculty for saying the wrong thing, "I don't see why you should be so stiff about it when you yourself"—he paused, seeing by the dark look which came over Seabrooke's face that he had touched upon a sore point.

"You would say," said Harley, stiffly, "when I accept favors from Dr. Leacraft for myself; but you will please remember that I, at least, give some equivalent for my tuition, so I am not altogether a charity scholar. And it is my object to provide for my sister myself, and I still insist that you shall pay me what you owe me, Neville. If your friends earned forty scholarships for Gladys, that would make no difference in my just demands."

"Nobody asked that it should!" exclaimed Percy, flying into one of the rare passions to which his amiable, easy-going nature would occasionally lapse under great provocation, "nobody asked that it should; and you are"—and here he launched into some most uncomplimentary remarks, and then dashed from the room, leaving Harley to feel that he had made a great mistake, and missed, by the insinuation that Percy fancied he would abate his demands for restitution, an opportunity of influencing the boy, who was easily led for either good or evil.

The result of this was, on Percy's part, another frantic appeal to Lena to find some means of helping him before Easter, that Seabrooke was very hard on him and determined not to spare him.

This letter would never have reached Lena had it not been delivered into the hands of Colonel Rush, who met the postman at the foot of his own steps, and took this with others from him. For Hannah, following out her policy that the end justified the means, and undeterred by the scrape into which Percy had brought himself by means somewhat similar, kept on the watch for letters for Lena, determined to hide and destroy any which should come from Percy.

She fancied that she had not yet made up her mind to the course she would pursue; but she really had done so, though the faithful old nurse clung till the last moment to the cherished gold, with a faint hope that something might yet chance to save it.

The colonel went up to pay a little visit to Lena, and came down looking rather perturbed and anxious.

"That child continues to look badly," he said to Mrs. Rush, "and she appears to me to have something on her mind. Do you think it is possible, now that Russell is better?"

"I am sure of it," answered his wife, "sure that something is troubling her very much, and I was about to speak of it to you. She is such a reticent, reserved child, that I did not like to try and force her confidence, although I have opened the way for her to give it to me if she chose to do so."

"I brought her a letter from Percy yesterday," said the colonel, "and when I handed it to her, she flushed painfully and seemed very nervous, and I noticed that she did not open it while I was in the room. I wonder if he is in any trouble."

Mrs. Rush shook her head. She had not even noticed this, and had no clew whereby she might guess at the cause of Lena's depression; but she said:

"I am going to send for Maggie and Bessie to come and spend the day with her. She is able, I think, to have them with her, and they may brighten her a little."

No sooner said than done; the colonel, always glad of any excuse for bringing these prime favorites of his to his own house, went for them himself, and finding them disengaged, this being Saturday and a holiday, brought them back with him.

He had the pleasure of seeing Lena's pale face light up when she saw them, and soon left the young patient with her two little friends to work what healing influences they might.

Now, although Lena was very fond of both these girls, Bessie was her special favorite, perhaps because she, being less shy than Maggie, had been the first to offer her sympathy and comfort at the time when Lena had been left at her uncle's with her heart wrung with anxiety and distress for her brother Russell who was then very dangerously ill.

And Bessie was now quick to see that something was wrong with Lena. Maggie saw it too, but shy Maggie, unless it was with some one as frank as herself, could not seek to draw forth confidences. But, with her usual considerate thoughtfulness, she did that which was perhaps better; she presently withdrew herself to the next room with Elsie and little May and amused them there, so that Lena might have the opportunity of speaking to Bessie if she so chose.

But not even to Bessie would or could Lena confide the story of Percy's misdoing and its direful results, longing though she might be for her sympathy and advice. Lena knew Bessie's strict conscientiousness, which was almost equalled by her own, and she knew also Bessie's complete trust in her parents, and how in any trouble her first thought would be to confide in them in full faith that they would be only too ready to lift the burden from her shoulders.

No, Bessie was not like herself; she had no dread of her father and mother, nor had any of the children in that large and happy family; and it would have seemed unnatural to them to have any such fears.

But there was a question which had been agitating her own mind which she meant to ask Bessie and hear her clear, straightforward views on the matter; for Lena feared, and justly, that her own wishes might have too much weight with her own opinion, and she dared not yield to these for fear of doing wrong.

"Lena, dear," said Bessie, "is your brother Russell worse?"

"No," answered Lena, "he is improving every day now, mamma says."

"You seem rather troubled and as if something were the matter," said Bessie, simply, but in half-questioning tones, thus opening the door for confidence if Lena wished to give it.

"I would like to ask you something," said Lena, wistfully. "You remember the checks papa and Russell sent me?"

"Oh, yes, of course," answered Bessie. "How could I forget them?"

"Do you think," said Lena, slowly and doubtfully, "that if a person who was not a poor person was in great trouble, it would be quite right to use some of that money to help them out of their trouble? You know papa and Russell say I may use it for any charity I choose. Do you think it would be called charity to do that when the person was in trouble only because he had been—had done very wrong?"

"I don't know. I don't quite understand," said Bessie, quite at sea, as she might well be, at such a vague representation of the case. "I suppose," thoughtfully, "that it might be right if you felt quite sure that your father or brother would be willing."

"But they would not be—at least—oh, I do not know what to think or what to do," exclaimed poor Lena, breaking down under the weight of all her troubles and perplexities.

"I can't tell what to say unless I know more about it," said Bessie, taking Lena's hand; "but, Lena dear,"—approaching the subject of Lena's relations with her own family with some reluctance, "but, Lena dear, if you do not want to ask your father and mother, why do you not ask Uncle Horace? He is so very nice and good, and he knows about almost everything."

But before she had finished speaking she saw that the suggestion did not meet the case at all.

"Uncle Horace! Oh, no!" ejaculated Lena, "that would be worse than all! Oh, if I could only tell Russell!"

"Why do you not?" asked Bessie.

"It would make him ill again; it might kill him," answered Lena, more excitedly than ever. "Tell me what it is right to do by myself, Bessie."

"How can I, dear, when I do not know what it is?" said the troubled and sympathizing Bessie.

Lena looked into the clear, tender eyes before her own, and her resolution was taken; although, knowing, as she did, Bessie's almost morbid conscientiousness and her horror of anything small, mean or tricky, she knew that she would be terribly shocked when she heard the source of the trouble; but she *must* tell some one, must have a little advice.

"I want to tell you, Bessie," she said, falteringly, "but you will not tell any one, will you? Not even Maggie?"

"No. Maggie is very good about that, and not at all curious," said Bessie. "I couldn't keep a secret of my own from her; but some one else's she would not mind. But mamma—could I not tell mamma?"

"Oh, no," said Lena, "no! *Must* you tell your mother everything—things that are not secrets of your own?"

Bessie stood thoughtful for a moment.

"No," she at last answered, a little reluctantly. "If mamma knew it would be a help to some one to have me keep a secret, I do not think she would mind; for mamma has a good deal"—of confidence in her children, she would have added, but checked herself with the thought that Lena enjoyed no such blessing, and that she was presenting too forcible a contrast between her own lot and that of her little friend, and she hastily substituted, "a great deal of good sense for her children. But, Lena dear, you do not know how well my mamma keeps a secret, and how she can help people out of trouble."

"No, no!" said Lena again, "I couldn't let her know. He wouldn't like it; he would never forgive me," she added, forgetting herself.

Light flashed upon Bessie.

"Lena, is it Percy?" she asked.

"Yes," faltered Lena; and then followed the whole story; at least, the whole as she knew it, so much as Percy had revealed to her.

Bessie was indeed shocked, perhaps even more at the contemptible selfishness and weakness which had led Percy to throw the burden of this secret upon his young sister, and to appeal to her for help, than she was by his original fault. Her own brother Harry was noted for his chivalrous gallantry to girls; so much so, that it was a subject of joke among his schoolmates and companions; and Fred, although known as a tease, was quite above anything small or petty, and would have scorned to ask such a thing as this from any girl, especially from one who was weak and ill, and but just coming back from the borders of the grave. Bessie felt no sympathy whatever for Percy, but more than she could express for the innocent Lena; and her indignation at the reckless brother found vent in terms unusually emphatic for her.

But, alas for Lena! Bessie could see no way out of the difficulty more than Lena could herself. In spite of her ardent wish to do this, her upright little soul could by no means advise or justify for this purpose the use of any part of the sums put by Mr. Neville and Russell into Lena's hands.

"For you know, dear Lena," she said, "your father and brother said for charity, didn't they? And Percy is not a 'charity.'"

"No," answered Lena, with a pitiful, pleading tremor in her voice, "but papa said I could use it for any good object I chose. See, Bessie, here is his letter, and that is just what he says."

"Yes," said Bessie, glancing at the lines in Mr. Neville's letter to which Lena pointed, "yes; but Percy is not an 'object.' At least not what your father means by 'any object.'"

"And he certainly is not good" she added to herself; then said slowly again: "But, Lena, why don't you tell your brother Russell, when you say he is so good and nice?"

But to this also Lena returned the most decided negative. No, Russell must not be worried or made anxious and unhappy, no matter what might happen to Percy or to the rest of the family. Russell must be spared, at all hazards, and it was plainly to be seen that, distressed as she was for Percy, his welfare was by no means to be weighed in the balance against that of his elder brother.

Bessie, helpless as Lena herself, had no farther suggestion to offer, and save that she now shared the burden of her secret with some one who could sympathize, Lena had gained nothing by imparting it to her little friend; and when Maggie returned, she found her looking as depressed and anxious as before, while Bessie's sweet face also now wore a troubled expression.

Maggie asked no questions; but when they were at home that evening,
Bessie said to her:

"Maggie, dear, I have to have a secret from you. It is not mine, but Lena's, and she will not let me tell even you; and she will not tell Uncle Horace or Aunt Marion or any of her people. And then again it is not her very own secret, but some one else's, and it is a great weight on her mind because she does not know what to do about it. And so it is on mine," she added, with a deep sigh.

"I wish you could tell me," said Maggie; "not that I am so very curious about it, although, of course, I should like very much to know; but cannot you tell mamma, Bessie?"

"No," answered Bessie; "it seemed to me mamma would not mind if I promised I would not tell even her, when Lena seemed to have such a trouble and wanted to tell me. I can't bear not to tell her or not to tell you; but I thought I would promise, because Lena is such a very good girl and so very true, and she has such a perfectly horrible mother. Maggie, every night when you say your prayers, do you thank God that Mrs. Neville is not your mother? I do."

"Yes, and about a thousand times a day besides," answered Maggie.
"But, Bessie, could you help Lena in her trouble?"

"No," said Bessie, her face shadowed again, "and I do not see how any one can help her, so long as she will not tell any grown-up person. Not one of us children could help her."

Bessie was depressed and very thoughtful that evening, and so silent as to attract the attention of her family; but to all inquiries she returned only a faint smile without words, while to her mother she confessed that she had "a weight on her mind," but that this was caused by another person's secret which she could not tell.

Accustomed to invite and receive the unlimited confidence of her children, Mrs. Bradford still treated them as if they were reasonable beings, and on the rare occasions, such as the present, when they withheld it, she was satisfied to believe that they had good and sufficient reasons for so doing.

CHAPTER VII.

A BOX OF BONBONS.

If there was one of the two sisters who lay awake after the proper time in the pretty room which Maggie and Bessie Bradford called their own—a thing not of frequent occurrence, it was usually Maggie, when she was revolving in her mind some grand idea, either as the subject of a composition, or some of the schemes for business or pleasure which her fertile brain was always devising. But on this night it was Bessie who could not sleep for worry and anxiety over Lena's perplexities. As a usual thing she was off to the land of Nod the moment her head was on the pillow; but to-night she lay tossing and uneasy until she thought the night must be almost gone. Then suddenly, as a bright thought came to her—an idea which she thought almost worthy of Maggie herself—she heard her mother in her own room.

"Mamma," she called, "is it almost time to rise?"

"Why, no, my darling," said Mrs. Bradford, coming in, "it is only half-past ten o'clock. What woke you?"

"Oh, I have not been asleep at all, mamma," answered her little daughter. "I thought I had been awake all the night."

"Oh, no," said Mrs. Bradford; "but it is certainly time that you were asleep. Have you been troubling yourself, dear, over that secret?"

"I suppose that I have, mamma," answered Bessie; "but I have had a very nice thought which I believe will help that secret, and I will try not to be troubled about it any more."

And five minutes later, when her mother looked in again to see if she were quiet, she found her sleeping.

"Papa," said Bessie, walking into the library the next morning, all ready for school, and not seeing for the moment that any one was with her father, "papa, are you going early to your office?"

Mr. Bradford was fond of a long walk on a pleasant morning, and would occasionally start from home with his little girls on their way to school, leave them at Miss Ashton's, and then proceed on his way down town. They always considered this a treat, and he knew now that Bessie hoped for his company in lieu of that of Jane, the nursery-maid.

"I think that I shall do so that I may have the pleasure of escorting two little damsels to school," he answered.

"Then perhaps I shall be fifth wheel to a coach that only needs three," said a deep, jolly voice from the other side of the room; and Bessie, turning, saw the tall form of her Uncle Ruthven standing before one of the book-cases, in which he was searching for a book he had come to borrow.

Her face brightened with a look which told that this "fifth wheel" could never be *de trop*; and she sprung toward him with a welcoming kiss and good morning.

Uncle Ruthven was mamma's dear and only brother, and a great favorite with his young nieces and nephews, who thought this much travelled, "much adventured uncle," as Bessie had once called him, a wonderful hero, and the most entertaining of mortals. So Maggie was as well pleased as Bessie when she heard by whom they were to be escorted to school, papa and Uncle Ruthven forming as desirable a pair of cavaliers as could well be imagined by any two little maidens.

But Uncle Ruthven was somewhat amused to see how Bessie contrived that he should walk with Maggie, while she took Mr. Bradford's hand and tried to keep him a little behind. Observing this, and rightly conjecturing that she had something to say to her father, Mr. Stanton obligingly drew Maggie on a little faster till they were sufficiently in advance of the others to permit Bessie to make her confidences.

"Papa," said the little girl, as soon as she thought that her sister and uncle were out of hearing, "papa, you know that you told me I might begin to take music lessons after Easter?"

"I remember my promise quite well, dear, and you shall certainly do so," answered her father. "You have been a dear, patient child about those lessons, and you may depend now upon your reward."

Bessie had for a long time been anxious to take lessons upon the piano; but her father and mother had thought it best to defer it, as she was not very strong, and they had considered that her daily lessons at school were sufficient for her without the extra labor which music lessons and practising would involve. This decision had been a disappointment to her, but she had borne it well, never fretting and teasing about it, only looking forward eagerly to the time when she might begin; and her parents now thought her old enough for this.

"Well, I want to ask you something, papa," she said, coloring a little, but throwing back her head to look up into his face with her clear, fearless eyes. "How much would it cost for me to take music lessons?"

"Forty dollars a quarter is Miss Ashton's price, I think," answered Mr. Bradford, wondering what this earnest little woman was thinking of now.

"And two quarters would be eighty dollars—and twenty more would be a hundred," slowly and thoughtfully said Bessie, who was not remarkably quick at figures. "That would take two quarters and a half a quarter to make up a hundred dollars, would it not, papa?"

"Yes," answered her father.

"Then," said Bessie, eagerly, "if I wait for my music lessons for two quarters and a half longer, will you let me have the hundred dollars they would cost, papa? I would rather have it; oh, much rather, papa."

"My child," said her father, "what can you possibly want of a hundred dollars? Have you some new charity at heart?"

"No, papa," answered the child with growing earnestness; "it is not a *charity*, but it is for a secret—not my secret, papa,—you know I would tell you if it was—but another person's secret. And that person is so very deserving, anybody ought to be very glad to do a kindness for that person, and she cannot tell anybody about it—only she told me, and mamma knows I have a secret—and I do want so very much to help her, and I think I would say I would never take music lessons all my life to do it."

And more she poured forth in like incoherent style, pleading too, with eyes and voice and close pressure of her father's hand.

Mr. Bradford was a lawyer of large practice and not a little note, accustomed to deal with knotty problems, and to solve without difficulty much more intricate sums than the putting of this two and two together, and he could guess pretty well in whose behalf Bessie was pleading now. He had heard during the past week of Lena Neville's unaccountable depression and nervousness, and of her refusal to disclose its cause; knew that his little daughters had spent the previous afternoon with her, and that Bessie had returned from Colonel Rush's house with "a weight on her mind," as she always phrased it when she was troubled or anxious, and that even to her mother and Maggie she had not confided the source of that "weight."

To Mr. Bradford, accustomed to the open natures and sweet, affectionate ways of his own daughters, Lena Neville was by no means an attractive child; but so far as he could judge, she was upright and perfectly straightforward, and with no little strength of will and purpose; and petted as she was by her indulgent aunt and uncle, he could not believe that she had brought herself into any difficulty which she could not confess, on her own account.

No; there must be something behind this; there must be some other person whom she was shielding, and whom she and Bessie were striving to rescue from the consequences of his or her own folly and wrong-doing, and Mr. Bradford believed that he had not far to look for this person. He had, even in the short period of the Christmas holidays, when Percy had been much with his own boys, marked the weakness of his character and the ease with which he was swayed for either good or evil, according to the temptations or influences presented to him; and he now felt assured that he had fallen into some trouble and had appealed to his sister for pecuniary aid; and that this must be very serious, Mr. Bradford rightly judged, since Lena dared not apply to the uncle who was so ready to do everything to make her happy and contented in his house.

And what to do now, Mr. Bradford did not know. It might not be best that Percy—if it were indeed he for whom these two little girls were acting—should be shielded from the consequences of his wrong-doing; and in his own want of knowledge of the circumstances he could not, of course, judge how this might be; but his pity and sympathy were strongly moved for Lena; and she was, indeed, unselfish, little heroine that she was, deserving of any kindness or relief that could be extended to her. But to act thus in the dark was repugnant to him; and his judgment and his feelings were strongly at variance as he listened to Bessie's pleadings that she might be allowed to make this sacrifice.

"I must think this over for a little, my darling," he said; but when he saw the disappointment in her face and the gathering tears in her eyes, he felt that he could not altogether resist her, and he added, "I think we shall find some way out of this difficulty; but are you sure that this person has no grown friend to whom she could apply?"

"She thinks not, papa," answered Bessie,"*I* think she could and ought to, but she thinks not; and I feel quite sure you would let me do this if you knew all the reasons."

"Mamma and I will talk the matter over, dear," said Mr. Bradford; "and you are a dear, generous little girl, to be willing to do this; for I know how much your heart has been set upon your music lessons."

"But my heart is more set upon this, papa; oh, quite, quite more set," said Bessie, quaintly.

"We must hurry on now a little," said Mr. Bradford, giving an encouraging pressure to the small hand within his own, "and you must try not to worry yourself over this matter."

"What is in that little woman's mind? May I know?" asked Mr. Stanton, when he and his brother-in-law had left their two young charges at Miss Ashton's door and had turned their faces business-ward. "Or is it of a private nature?" he added.

"Well, I suppose I may tell you what she asked; for if I yield every one will know it, as she has talked so much of her music lessons," said Mr. Bradford; "and I will tell you my suspicions. I fear that I am perhaps too much inclined to yield to her plea, while I am not satisfied that it is wise to do so. But I am not sure that you will be a very unprejudiced adviser," he added, knowing well that Uncle Ruthven was generally of the opinion that it was well to yield to the wishes of his favorite nieces, Maggie and Bessie.

Then he told of Bessie's proposal, and of whither his own suspicions tended.

"The dear little soul!" said Mr. Stanton, "and these music lessons have been the desire of her heart for the last two years."

"Yes for a longer time than that," said Mr. Bradford; "she is making a real sacrifice in offering to give them up. Of course, there is no necessity for her to do that; she shall have her music lessons. But the question with me is whether it is well to work blindly in this way, even for the purpose of relieving these two innocent children."

"I ask nothing better for my girls than that they may grow up like yours," said Mr. Stanton, extending his hand to his brother-in-law. But he offered no advice, expressed no opinion.

Many a time during his busy day did his little daughter's pleading face rise before Mr. Bradford, and he found himself unable to resist it, and resolved that he would cast scruples to the winds and tell Bessie she should have the sum she had asked for. But although he would not tell her this yet, she should not lose her much desired lessons; she should begin them at the promised time, and they should be his Easter gift to her.

Mr. Stanton found a little private business of his own—quite unexpected when he left home—to attend to after he parted from his brother-in-law at the door of his office, a little business which was attended with the following results.

Mr. Bradford reached home that afternoon, and entering the door with his latch-key was just closing it behind him when Bessie came flying down the stairs and precipitated herself upon him like a small whirlwind, followed by Maggie in a state of equal excitement and making like demonstrations.

"Spare me, ladies," he said, when he could speak; "with your kind permission I should wish to take farewell of the remainder of my family before I am altogether suffocated. Might I ask the cause of this more than usually effusive greeting?"

The answer to this was continued embraces and caresses from both his captors, a series of the little ecstatic squeals Maggie was wont to give when she was especially delighted with anything, and from Bessie the exclamation of:

"Oh, you dear, darling papa! You needn't try to be anonymous, for we know you did it! There was nobody else, for nobody else knew. We know it was you; we know it!"

"If I might be allowed to take off my overcoat and to sit down," gasped Mr. Bradford.

Then he was released, and proceeded to take off his overcoat, while the two little girls seized upon one another and went dancing about the hall to the music of Maggie's continued squeals.

"Have I made a mistake as to my own house and found my way into a private insane asylum?" said Mr. Bradford, pretending to soliloquize. "It must be so, else why this wild excitement? These must be two of the wildest and most excitable of the inmates. I must escape."

[Illustration: "HAVE I FOUND MY WAY INTO A PRIVATE INSANE ASYLUM?"]

And he made a feint of trying to do so, running into his library and sinking into an easy chair where he was speedily held captive again by two pair of arms piled one above the other about his neck, while all manner of endearing epithets were lavished upon him.

"Thank you very much," he said at last, "for all these compliments, but really I am ignorant why I am particularly deserving of them at the present moment."

"Oh, you needn't pretend you don't know now, you sweet, lovely darling," said Maggie, with a fresh squeeze and a kiss, planted directly upon his right eye. "You have lifted the most dreadful weight off of Bessie's mind. I don't know what it was, but I know that she had one, and now it is all gone."

"And you did it in such a delightful way, too, papa," said Bessie; "sending it in that lovely box of bonbons."

"Sending what—the weight?" said Mr. Bradford.

"Now, papa!" expostulated both at once. "You know what we mean, and you needn't pretend that you don't," said Bessie. "No, you took away the weight, and you're just too good for anything."

"If you would throw a little light, perhaps I could understand," answered her father; "but really, as it is, I cannot take credit to myself for having lifted any one's burdens to-day, at least, not knowingly."

"Oh, papa," said Bessie again, "you know you sent me what I asked you for this morning in a box of Huyler's, all beautifully done up, and—oh! I know you, papa—my name written on the parcel by some one else, so I wouldn't know. But just as if I wouldn't know; it *could not* be any one but you, because no one else knew that I wanted it."

"Upon my word, this is very embarrassing," said Mr. Bradford. "I should be very glad to be able to say that I had been so generous and given so much pleasure; but I must disclaim the deed. Upon my honor, as a gentleman, I know nothing of your box of bonbons or its contents."

To tell the truth, he was really somewhat embarrassed, for he could give a very good guess as to the donor of the gift, who, since he had chosen to be "anonymous," must not be betrayed, and these very interested inquirers were likely to put some searching questions which it might be difficult to evade. To avoid these—truth compels me to state—Mr. Bradford took an ignominious flight, for, saying that he must hasten upstairs to dress for dinner, he put aside the detaining arms which would have kept him till conjecture was satisfied, and once more assuring his little girls that he had absolutely nothing to do with the box of bonbons and its valuable contents, and congratulating Bessie that her heart's desire was attained, he hurried away to his own room. Here he found Mrs. Bradford, who had thought, as did the little girls, that he had been the one to relieve Bessie's mind by this means.

Discreet Bessie, and equally discreet Maggie, had neither one betrayed the little circumstance of the gift to the former to the general household, mamma alone sharing the secret, and even she did not know for what purpose it was destined.

The two girls had been with their mother in Mrs. Bradford's morning-room after they returned from school, when Patrick came to the door and delivered "a parcel for Miss Bessie."

The nature of this parcel disclosed itself even before it was opened. There is a peculiar distinctive air about such parcels which stamps them at once as mines of delight, and Maggie had little hesitation in pronouncing it to be "a monstrous box of Huyler's! Must be three pounds at least!"

Uncle Ruthven—that which proved a mystery to Maggie and Bessie need prove no mystery to us—was a generous giver, and when he did a kind action it was carried out munificently; and the wrappings being taken off and the cover of the box removed, a most tempting sight was disclosed.

"There is a note to tell you who it is from," said Maggie, seeing an envelope lying on the top of the bonbons.

But Maggie was mistaken, for the envelope contained no writing, nothing to give, by words, a clue to the giver; but the candies were forgotten when Bessie drew therefrom a new crisp one hundred dollar bill. For a moment both she and Maggie stood speechless with surprise; then the color surged all over Bessie's face, and clasping her hands together she said, softly, but not so softly but that mamma and Maggie did not catch the words:

"Papa, oh, papa! I know what that is for." Then turning to her mother, she said: "It is my secret, mamma; that is, that other person's secret."

But mamma and Maggie, although in the dark and much puzzled about all this mystery, rejoiced with her in the relief which was evidently afforded by this gift, the removal of the "weight;" and Maggie was quite as ecstatic over papa's goodness as was Bessie herself.

And nowhere was papa disclaiming all knowledge of the gift, at least disclaiming all responsibility therefor. The mystery thickened for all concerned. Who could have known, thought Bessie, how very much she wished for this sum of money?

But how to convey this money to Lena was now the question with Bessie.

In her innocent simplicity she believed that she had not disclosed the identity of the person whose secret she was bearing, that this was still unsuspected by her parents and Maggie, to whom she had confided that the secret existed. Mystery and management and all concealment were hateful to her; and as has been seen, she was no adept at them, and she now felt herself much nonplussed. If she asked to go to Lena, or to send the money to her, suspicion would be at once aroused, and loyalty to Lena forbade this.

Moreover, judging not only by herself, but also by what she knew of Lena, she feared that the pride and independence of the latter would rebel, even in such a strait, against receiving pecuniary aid from one who, until a few short months ago, had been a stranger to her, and she would spare her if possible.

Then suddenly an idea occurred to her which removed, at least, the latter difficulty. Why not make use of the very way in which this well timed gift had come to her and send it to Lena anonymously? No thought of keeping it or converting it to her own use had for one instant entered Bessie's mind; to her it seemed Heaven-sent, and as if destined for the very purpose for which she had been longing for it. To the bonbons she felt that she could lay claim for herself and her brothers and sisters, but for her own part she could not really enjoy them until the more valuable portion of the contents of the box was on its way to its destination.

After some thought and planning about the method of accomplishing this, she carried an envelope to Jane, the nursery maid, believing rightly that Lena would not recognize her handwriting, made her put Lena's address upon it, and then privately enclosed therein the precious hundred dollar note; and the next morning on the way to school with her own hand she posted it in the letter-box on the nearest corner. Lena was not to know whence or from whom it came. She never thought of any risk in sending it in this unprotected manner; but happily it fell into honest hands throughout the course of its journeyings and safely reached those for which it was intended.

The relief that it was to Bessie to have this accomplished can scarcely be told.

"Oh!" she said to herself, "I'll never, never, never again let any one tell me a secret which I may not tell to mamma and Maggie, especially mamma."

The concealment and the management to obtain her object without revealing it had been more of a cross to her than can well be imagined, unaccustomed as she was to anything of the kind.

CHAPTER VIII.

"INNOCENTS ABROAD."

Hannah had asked for "a morning out;" a request which greatly amazed her temporary mistress, Mrs. Rush, inasmuch as the old woman had no friends or acquaintances in the city, and was possessed of a wholesome dread of the snares and pitfalls with which she believed it abounded, and even when out with her charge would never go without an escort beyond the park on which Colonel Rush's house fronted and whence she could keep it in view.

But permission, of course, was granted, and Hannah, after ascertaining that a banker's office was the proper place to exchange her precious gold, sallied forth with it, having finally resolved to sacrifice it for Percy's relief without further delay, as Easter was drawing near and the time of reprieve was coming to a close.

It would take too long to tell of the trials and tribulations she encountered on her way to her destination. She consulted every single policeman she met, and then had so little confidence in their directions and advice that she still felt herself hopelessly bewildered and at sea in the business streets of the great city; while whenever she was obliged to cross among the trucks, express-wagons and other vehicles, she felt as if there would be an immediate necessity for the epitaph. As may be supposed, she afforded no little sport to the guardians of the peace, but they were, on the whole, kind and considerate to her and often passed her on from one to another.

But at length, unshielded for the time by any such friendly protection, she stood at the corner of the greatest and most thronged thoroughfare and one almost equally crowded which intersected it, and vainly strove to cross. The policeman on duty there was for the moment engaged with a lost child and had no eyes for her.

She made several frantic dives forward; but the confusion of wheels, horses' heads and shouting drivers speedily drove her back to the sidewalk after each fresh essay; and she was beginning to be in despair when she felt herself spasmodically seized by the arm, and a terrified voice said in her ear—no, not in her ear, for Hannah's ear was far above the diminutive person who had clutched her, and whom she turned to face,—

"Don't! don't! You'll be run over—yes, over—over indeed! Wait for the policeman—yes, policeman —'liceman, indeed!"

Hannah's eyes fell upon a very small old lady, attired in a quaint, old-fashioned costume, with little

corkscrew curls surrounding her face, and carrying a good-sized leather satchel, while her every movement and word betrayed a timid, nervous, excitable temperament.

"Don't, don't!" she reiterated, "you'll be crushed—yes, crushed, indeed, crushed; that horse's head touched you, head—indeed—yes, head. What a place this city is—city, indeed, yes, city. Why did I come back to it, back, yes, back?"

There are some who may recognize this old lady, but to Hannah she was an utter stranger, and she gazed upon her in surprise. She was generally very offish and reserved with strangers, but now a common misery made her have a fellow-feeling for the little oddity, and she responded graciously.

Seizing the hand of the woman, whom she could almost have put into her pocket, she drew it through her arm, and said:

"Ye may well say it; what a place hindeed! But hover I must go some ow, so come on, ma'am. If so be we're sent to heternity, we'll go together, an' I'll see you safe through it."

But, apparently, the prospect of going to eternity at such short notice and under such doubtful protection was not pleasing to Miss Trevor, and she shrank back from the thronging dangers before her.

But now came the policeman and escorted the two women, both large and small, through the terrors which had beset them, landing them safely on the other side of the street.

Hannah's eye had recognized the lady even beneath Miss Trevor's shabby black dress and strange manner, and she now turned to her with a respectful:

"Which way are you bound, ma'am? If so be your way's mine, we might 'old on together. There seems to be pretty much men around 'ere, an' I never did take much stock in men. Leastway honly in one or two," with an appreciative remembrance of Colonel Rush and her young master, Russell Neville.

"I'm going to the banker's—yes—banker's—banker's—yes, going," answered Miss Trevor, still flustered and nervous, and forgetting, in the distractions of the crowd, her usually besetting terror that every one who addressed her or looked at her in the street was actuated by purposes of robbery, and speaking as if there were but one banker in the great city.

But Hannah was wiser.

"There be a lot of 'em I 'ear," she said, "an' I don't know which is the best of 'em. What do you say, ma'am? Who be you goin' to, by your leave?"

"To Mr. Powers," answered Miss Trevor. "Powers, yes, Powers. A good man and a kind—yes, man, indeed, man."

"Is he the kind of a one—a banker, I mean," said Hannah, "that would give you a note for gold—golden guineas?"

Miss Trevor looked at her suspiciously for one moment. Was this a trap? Was this friendly person, who was seemingly as much at sea as she was herself in this wilderness of business streets and crowd of business men, some swindler in petticoats, some decoy who would lead her where she might be robbed of all she had about her that was valuable, of the really precious contents of that shabby, worn satchel? The bare idea of such a thing was enough to lend wings of terror to Miss Trevor's feet; and she was about to dart away from Hannah's side when the hand of the latter in its turn arrested her, giving, if possible, new force to the fears of the old lady.

"What did I come for?" she ejaculated, "yes, come. I wish I was back in Sylvandale—yes, Sylvandale, indeed, 'dale."

"Sylvandale!"

The name had a familiar—since the events of the last few days, an unpleasantly familiar sound to Hannah, and she gave a little start.

"Sylvandale," she repeated; "do you know Sylvandale?"

But again her inquiry only provoked increased alarm in the breast of Miss Trevor. She had heard of swindlers pretending to know of places and people belonging to those whom they would victimize; and had not Hannah's hold upon her been firm she would have wrenched herself free and fled.

Hannah repeated her question in a rather different form and with an addition.

"Do you come from Sylvandale? And you maybe know Dr. Leacraft's school? An' you maybe 'ave seen my boy, Master Percy Neville, my boy that I nursed?"

Now it so happened that Miss Trevor had seen and marked Percy Neville, and moreover that she had a very exalted opinion of the young scapegrace. For she did live in Sylvandale, with a nephew who had some years since persuaded her to give up teaching in the city in Miss Ashton's and other schools, and to come to him and let him care for her in her old age. The home she had gladly accepted; but she possessed a spirit of independence, and insisted on giving such lessons as she could procure. She had been fairly successful in this, and had laid by quite a little sum, which she intended to leave to this kind nephew. But while this money was in her own keeping, it was a burden and a care to her, for she lived in constant dread of robbers and of losing her little savings; therefore she had come to the city to place it in safe keeping. Belle Powers had been her favorite pupil while she taught at Miss Ashton's, the child having a remarkable talent for drawing and making the most of the instruction she received. Belle thought so much of her queer little teacher that she had interested her doting father in the old lady, and he had performed two or three small acts of kindness for her which her grateful heart had never forgotten. Consequently she credited Mr. Powers and Belle with every known virtue, and believed that she could not possibly place her savings in any safer place than the hands of that gentleman; and perhaps she was not far wrong.

But on her way to the city and to Mr. Powers' office she had been warily on her guard for snares and pitfalls tending swindlerwise, until she had fallen into the hands of Hannah. But her unworthy suspicions of that good person were speedily put to flight by the mention of Percy Neville's name.

Coming up the village street of Sylvandale one day, she had been chased by a flock of geese, and as she was hurrying along as fast as her age and infirmities permitted—anything in the shape of dignity she had cast to the winds before such foes—she encountered some of Dr. Leacraft's scholars returning from an afternoon ramble. Most of them had laughed at the predicament of the terrified old lady, who certainly presented a ridiculous sight; but Percy, pitying her plight, and with a strongly chivalrous streak in his nature, had made a furious onslaught on the geese, and presently turned the pursuers into the pursued. Then he had picked up the ubiquitous satchel which Miss Trevor had dropped in her flight, attempted to straighten her bonnet which was all awry—she thought none the less of him because his awkward efforts left it rather worse than before—and escorted her quite beyond the reach of the hissing, long-necked enemy, who seemed inclined to renew the attack were his protection removed and the coast clear.

From this time Percy Neville was a hero and a young knight *sans peur et sans reproche* with Miss Trevor. She had inquired his name, and maintained that it just suited him, and her wits had been constantly at work all winter to devise such small gifts and treats for him as she was able to procure. Many a basket of nuts and apples, many a loaf of gingerbread, or other nice home-made dainty, had found its way into Percy's hands, and had met with ready acceptance and been heartily enjoyed by the schoolboy appetites of himself and his companions. Percy always exchanged a cheery nod and smile with her when he met her, or a pleasant word or two if he encountered her in the village store or elsewhere.

And now she heard his name in terms of proprietorship and tenderness from this woman who claimed to be his nurse; and she was at once arrested in her attempt to shake her off.

"Master Percy Neville—Neville, indeed, Percy!" she exclaimed; "yes, yes—oh, yes—the dear boy! Those other geese were after me—yes, geese, indeed, chasing me down the sidewalk—yes, sidewalk, geese they were—geese—and he came, the dear boy—came and shoo-ed them away—shoo-ed them, yes, shoo-ed, indeed, shoo-ed."

And now she was quite ready to answer any and every question which Hannah might put to her, and, so far as she was able, to put her in the way of that which she was seeking. She confided her own purpose to the old nurse, and Hannah was fain to tell her hers, at least so much as that she was anxious to convert her gold into a bank-note which she might send to Percy without exciting his suspicions as to whence it came. Of course she gave no hint of his wrong-doing, saying only that she wished him to have the money and that he should not know the donor.

But, jostled and pushed about by the passers-by hurrying on during the most busy time of the day, they could not talk at their ease there on the sidewalk; and presently Hannah proposed retiring within the shelter of the broad hallway of an imposing building, where the two old innocents sat themselves down on a flight of stone stairs and exchanged confidences. They exchanged more; for before the close of the conference Hannah's gold, or the greater part of it, was in Miss Trevor's satchel and a hundred-dollar note in Hannah's hands.

Hannah's arithmetic was much at fault, notwithstanding the information she had gained from Colonel

Rush on the subject of her finances; and her unheard-of confidence in this utter stranger of an hour since was further strengthened when Miss Trevor, with her superior knowledge, made it clear to her that she was about to give her too much gold in exchange for the bank-note.

Moreover, the odd little drawing-teacher, whom Hannah afterwards, when some qualms as to her own prudence assailed her, characterized as "hevery hinch a lady if she was that queer you'd think she'd just hescaped the lunatic hasylum," removed another stumbling-block from the path of the latter. She offered, if Hannah desired it, to carry the money for Percy back to Sylvandale, and to see that it was safely given into his hands; thus delivering the faithful old nurse from her dilemma as to the means of conveying it to him. Having once lost some money through the mail, she had also lost all faith in that, and knowing nothing of the ways now afforded for sending it in safety, she had been in some perplexity over this. And, will it be believed? she committed it to Miss Trevor's keeping without other guarantee than her word that Percy should receive it without knowing whence it came. Hannah would readily have let the boy know that she had sent it, for she was not disposed to hide her light under a bushel; but she dared not, lest she should betray the dishonorable part she had played in reading his letter to Lena and so discovering the disgraceful secret. She was further satisfied, however, as to Miss Trevor's good faith, after she had, at her request, accompanied her to Mr. Powers' office. The name of Powers had not conveyed any especial meaning to Hannah, although she did know that one of Lena's classmates was named Belle Powers, and she had seen the little girl once or twice; but when she entered the gentleman's office and remembered that she had seen him at the Christmas party at Mr. Bradford's and afterwards at Colonel Rush's, she at once set the seal of her approval upon him as being "the friend of such gentry;" and when Mr. Powers received Miss Trevor with great respect and attention, and promised with many expressions of good will to carry out her wishes, she plumed herself upon her sagacity in so intuitively discovering the quality of the little old lady's "hinches." It is true that these were few in quantity, but Hannah believed that they were of the right material; nor was she far wrong.

But to make assurance doubly sure she stepped up to Mr. Powers at a moment when Miss Trevor, intent upon securing the lock of her satchel, had turned her back, and whispered to him:

"She's all right, isn't she, sir?"

"Oh, yes, yes; only a little odd, but quite herself; as sane as you are," answered the gentleman, supposing that Miss Trevor's manner had led Hannah to infer that she was insane.

"If she wasn't hall right I'd lose my buryin' and my moniment for nothing," said Hannah, almost in the same breath; and Mr. Powers stared at her, believing that she herself must be a candidate for the lunatic asylum. Hitherto he had not paid much attention to her, merely glancing at her as she came in, and supposing her to be Miss Trevor's attendant; but at this extraordinary speech he scrutinized her narrowly, wondering if she were quite in her right mind and if it were safe to let Miss Trevor go about under her guidance.

Having transacted her business, Miss Trevor asked Mr. Powers concerning Belle and some of her young friends whom she also taught. And then, to Hannah's dismay, she asked him if he could tell her anything of Mrs. Rush and her sister, Mrs. Stanton, names very familiar to Hannah, and which she was not pleased to hear at the present juncture. She would never have taken Miss Trevor into partial confidence, would never have entrusted her with the mission to Percy, had she known that the old lady was acquainted with members of the very family in whose service she was, with the uncle and aunt of the boy whom she was secretly striving to save from disgrace.

What should she do now? And here was Mr. Powers actually advising the old lady to go up and see Mrs. Rush and her late pupils if she had time to do so. Poor Hannah! she may almost be forgiven for the dishonorable way in which she had contrived to possess herself of Lena's letter, for the sake of her loyalty to and self-sacrifice for her nurslings. Her chief thought now was less for her money than for the risk of the discovery of Percy's secret by his relatives. She must be very careful to keep out of the way of any one coming to Colonel Rush's house, at least, for a day or two. She was in a very bad humor now, this old Hannah, and as dissatisfied with the turn matters had taken as but a short time since she had been well pleased. She quite resented Miss Trevor's acquaintance with Mrs. Rush and other friends of the Neville family, and her looks toward that lady were now so glum and ill-natured that Mr. Powers could not fail to notice them, and was more than ever beset by doubts as to her perfect sanity. They were a queer couple, he thought, to go wandering together through the distracting business streets.

When Hannah was worried she was cross, as has been seen; and now, being thus assailed with doubts as to the wisdom of the course she had pursued, she proved herself no agreeable companion, and laid aside the respectful tone and manner with which she had hitherto treated Miss Trevor, till the old lady began to feel uneasy in her turn, and her manner and speech became more queer, jerky, and confused than ever.

At last, when they reached the corner of the street, she grabbed the arm of a policeman and in her broken, incoherent way, begged to be put into a street car; and as one happened to be passing at the moment, the request was complied with and Miss Trevor borne away before Hannah had fairly realized that she had left her.

Poor Hannah! If she had been uneasy before, it may be imagined what a state of mind she was in now. She stood watching the retreating conveyance in a bewildered sort of way till it was almost lost to sight among the crowd of vehicles; and then, with some vague notion of pursuing Miss Trevor and demanding back her money, hailed another car and entered it.

But after she was seated, sober second thought came to her aid, and all the reasons she had before formed for trusting Miss Trevor, returned to her, till she once more rested satisfied that the means for Percy's rescue from the toils he had woven for himself were in safe hands.

CHAPTER IX.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

"Who do you think is going to win that prize of Mr. Ashton's?" asked Fred Bradford of his sisters that day at the dinner table. "It is coming near Easter, you know, and you must have some idea by this time."

"Why, Maggie, of course," answered Bessie, positively, for the question was not one which admitted of dispute to Bessie's mind. She gave no time for her sister to answer, and Maggie did not reply.

"You seem to be very sure of your position, little woman," said her father.

"Well, papa," said Bessie, still confidently, "Lena has not been able to try for it, you know, since she was burned; and Gracie *will not* try. She says she don't want it, and she acts very queerly and seems to have no interest about it at all."

"Perhaps she's ashamed of the way she behaved that day she had the row with Lena," said Fred, who had heard the account of Gracie's ill-behavior, not from Maggie and Bessie, but from some of "the other fellows" whose sisters were members of the "Cheeryble Sisters."

Bessie shook her sunny head.

"No, I don't think so," she answered. "At least she has never said so, and if she felt sorry enough to keep her from trying for the prize, I should think she would tell Lena so."

"*You* would, but not she," said Fred. "Catch Gracie Howard eating humble pie. But you don't seem to have much idea of gaining it yourself."

"I!" said Bessie, opening wide her eyes in undisguised astonishment, "why, no; I am not even trying for it."

"Well, it is too late now, as it is so near Easter," said Harry; "but since the prize is for general improvement and not for any one particular composition, I do not see why you should not have tried and generally improved as well as the others."

"Well, I did try to do the best I could and to improve myself," answered Bessie; "but I did not think about gaining the prize. I know I couldn't."

"Catch Bess not doing her level best for conscience' sake, prizes, or no prizes," said Fred. "Oh, I say, Bess, you are going to begin your music lessons at Easter, are you not?"

The color flushed all over Bessie's face and neck as she answered, after a moment's hesitation, "No, I am not, Fred; and no questions asked."

"'No questions asked,'" repeated Fred, laughing, "but that is rather hard on our curiosity, when you have been so wild for music lessons for the last year or more. What have you been doing that they are forfeited, for I know papa promised them to you after Easter?"

"I told you no questions asked," repeated Bessie, in a slightly irritated tone, and looking very much disturbed.

"Hallo!" said the astonished Fred, taking these for the signs of guilt. "Hallo! our pattern Bess has never been doing anything wrong, has she? And so very wrong that—ouch! Hal, what was that for? I'll thank you not to be kicking me that way under the table!"

For Harry had given him a by no means gentle reminder of that nature; and now his father, too, came to the rescue.

"Let your sister alone, Fred," he said. "I can tell you that she has done nothing wrong. She and I have a little understanding on this matter; but she has forgotten that there is no necessity for doing without the music lessons, and she is, I assure you, to have them. But, as Bessie says, 'no questions asked.' We will drop the subject."

Bessie's soft eyes opened wide, as she gazed at her father in pleased surprise. Although the money which had been devoted by her to Lena's relief had not come through him, it actually had not occurred to her until this moment that she would not be called upon to give up the music lessons. She had made the sacrifice freely for Lena's sake, and had had no thought of evading its fulfilment, even after circumstances had turned out so differently from anything that she had expected.

She flashed a grateful, appreciative glance at her father from out of the depths of those loving eyes, but said nothing; and, as Mr. Bradford had decreed, the subject was changed. The father and his little daughter understood one another.

Mr. Bradford did not, however, tell Bessie that he had never intended that she should be obliged to carry out her sacrifice; she had offered it unselfishly, and in good faith, and he would let her have the satisfaction of feeling that she had been willing to do this for her little friend.

Bessie was not sure whether or no she was in haste to see Lena and hear from her of the providential gift she had received. She was so little accustomed to conceal her feelings, to evasion, or to affectation of an ignorance which did not exist, that she did not know how she was to maintain an appearance of innocence when Lena should tell her that which she would doubtless believe to be surprising news; and more and more confirmed became her resolution "never, never, never to have another secret" which she could not share with her mother and Maggie.

But when she did see Lena—which was not until the latter had sent for her to come to her—all difficulty on that score was removed, for the news which her friend had to communicate to her was really so extraordinary and unlocked for that she did not need to affect surprise, or to feel embarrassed over her own share in the events Lena had to relate. And the possibility of Bessie being the donor of that sum of money never occurred to Lena. Perhaps she would have been glad to know it, for Lena was a proud child, with a very independent spirit, and in spite of the immense relief it was to her to be able to free Percy from the difficulties in which he had involved himself, there had been an uncomfortable feeling back of that from the sense of obligation to some unknown person. Who could have sent her that money? Who could have been aware of her extreme need of it?

There is small occasion to say that it had scarcely come into her hands when it was sent again on its travels; this time to Percy.

The hilarious acknowledgment which immediately came back to her was a relief in more ways than one, although she was half provoked at the *insouciant*, devil-may-care-now spirit which it evinced.

Percy wrote:

"DEAR LENA,

"You're the dearest of little sisters, the brickiest of bricks! But there is no need for me to rob you of your hundred dollars. You say somebody sent it to you anonymously; well, the same somebody, I suppose, has done the same good office for me, sent me a hundred dollars. You say you don't know who it could be; why, it was Russell, of course. You know he's just as generous as generous can be, and since he came into his own money he can't rid himself of it fast enough, but must always be finding out ways of spending it for other people. And I don't see anything so strange in this way of doing it. He knew the powers that be would make an awful row if they knew we had all that money to spend at our own sweet wills, so he took this way of sending it to us, so that we could keep our own counsel; and if they do find out we have it, we can say we don't know where it came from. It is a blessed thing they will never know that I had mine, at any rate, or ask where it went. You may be sure it did not stay in my hands long, but went into those of Seabrooke in five minutes. How I did want to keep it too. But there, Seabrooke is paid, and I'm free and no one the wiser; at least, no one that I'm afraid of, so no harm is

done. But to think I've had to lose that money for such a thing as that. I suppose it was a shabby trick to play, and I tell you I think I never heard anything quite so scurvy as Flagg putting that stuff into Seabrooke's carafe to make him sleep, and I'm sure Seabrooke feels more put out about that than he does about the letter, because that was malice prepense, and the other was—well—an accident; at least, we did not know the mischief we were doing, and we have made it all right. But he can't get over the drugging, and I'm glad I had no hand in it, for I do not know what the doctor will say to it. He is not back yet; but his son is better, and he will be here when we come after the Easter holidays. I'm rather sick of Flagg anyway; he has mean ways, and our dear old Russell wouldn't tolerate him for a moment, so I'll shake him off all I can when I come back to school. I'll keep your hundred dollars till I come home, and hand it to you then. You're a trump, Lena, and I never would have taken it if I could have helped it. But I would have had to do it if this other hundred had not come. And, do you know, there is one thing that puzzles me. It came by post from New York in a hair-pin box, and done up in about a thousand papers-at least there were six—so I suppose Russell sent to some one in the city to do it for him; but the whole thing was awfully womanish. The address was in the most correct, copy-book-y handwriting, every point turned just so, every loop according to rule. But it came just in the nick of time, and saved me and your money. Bless your heart, how are the feet?

"Your own all the same everlastingly obliged brother,

"PERCY NEVILLE."

Thankful as Lena had been to receive this letter, so annoyed was she by Percy's indifferent, careless way of looking upon his own misdeeds that she did not show it to Bessie; she was ashamed to do so, knowing, as she did, Bessie's conscientiousness and strict sense of honor and honesty. "All right now." Was this indeed all the impression made upon Percy by his late peril, all the shame and regret he could feel? Child though she was, and several years younger than her erring brother, the ways of right and wrong were so much clearer to her than they were to him, she had so much more steadfastness of character and purpose.

"Now," she said, when she had told Bessie all, "now if I could only find out who sent me that money and return it when Percy sends it back to me. But you see, Bessie, I am not so sure that it was Russell. It is not at all like the way he does things; he is never mysterious or anonymous; and he is not at all afraid of papa or mamma, and can do what he likes with his own money. He is very, very generous, and always takes such nice ways of being kind to people and giving them pleasure; and I do not think that this would be at all a nice way of sending presents to Percy and me. Do you, Bessie?"

"No," answered Bessie, doubtfully, remembering her own way of conveying to Lena the means of rescuing Percy,—"no—I—do not like anonymousity very much; but I suppose there are times when one has to do it."

"Um-m-m; no, I do not think so," said Lena, all unconscious of Bessie's secret, and looking at her with surprise; for she knew Bessie's ideas about underhand dealings to be as uncompromising as her own.

But Bessie stuck to her point; she had known of a case where "to be anonymous" was the best and only course to take, so it had seemed to her, and she was not to be convinced that there were not times when it was justifiable.

However, she was not anxious to dwell upon the subject, and soon changed it. She knew that Lena's unknown friend was not her brother Russell, and she was herself mystified about the other sum sent to Percy; but, fearful of betraying her own part, she began to talk of something else.

"Do you remember, Lena," she said, "that next Sunday is Easter Sunday, and that Saturday is the day for Miss Ashton to name the one who deserves Mr. Ashton's prize?"

"Yes," answered Lena, rather despondently, "but that cannot make much difference to me, except that I shall be so glad if you or Maggie win it."

"Oh, Maggie will, certainly," said Bessie, secure in her belief that no one could compete with her sister, now that Lena was supposed to be out of the question and Gracie Howard had decidedly withdrawn from the contest. "Maggie is sure to have it, and you know that she is anxious for it so she can give it to Gladys Seabrooke, as you would have done."

"I was thinking," said Lena, with a little hesitation, very different from her usual straightforward, somewhat blunt way of speaking, "I was thinking that you and Maggie praise me too much for wishing to earn the prize for Gladys Seabrooke. I would like to be the one to win it for her; but I think—I know—

it is more for my own sake than for hers. You know I told you I wished so much that papa and mamma would think me so much improved by Miss Ashton's teaching that they would wish me to stay with her; and they would think it a sign of that if I did win the prize."

"Yes, I know," answered Bessie; "but I thought your father had promised that you should stay with Uncle Horace and Aunt May, and go to Miss Ashton's while you were in our country."

"Yes," said Lena, "but I want to stay here till I am quite grown up and educated. I want papa and mamma to think that I am doing better here, improving more than I have ever done before—as I am—so that they will leave me till I am grown up and quite old. Uncle Horace and Aunt May would keep me; Uncle Horace said he would like to have me for his girl always."

Not even her opinion of Mrs. Neville as a mother, not even her appreciation of the happiness of a home with her beloved Colonel and Mrs. Rush could quite reconcile Bessie to the fact that Lena was not only willing but anxious to leave her own home and family and to remain in a country where she would be separated from them for years to come; but nevertheless she felt a great sympathy for her and a strong desire that this wish should be fulfilled. Still she could not but have a little feeling of gladness that, according to her belief, there was no one who could now compete with her own Maggie for the prize; and she rather evaded the subject and took up that of school-news until Maggie, who had come with Jane, the nursery-maid, to take Bessie home, ran in.

She brought with her the papers read at the last meeting of the "Cheeryble Sisters' Club," such papers being, at Lena's special request, always turned over to her for perusal.

"Whose are these?" asked the young convalescent, when Maggie delivered them to her.

"One is Bessie's, and it is poetry. Did you know that Bessie had begun to write poetry?" said Maggie.

"Two poetesses in one family!" said Lena. "No, I did not hear that
Bessie wrote poetry too."

"And this is so sweet," said Maggie; "such a pretty idea. And this paper is Lily's. Lily has given up the resolution that she would never let her compositions be read in the club, and this is the second one she has given us. It is good, too," she added. "And this is another one from Frankie. He seems to think himself quite a 'Cheeryble Sister,'" she added, laughing.

"Can you not read them to me before you go?" asked Lena, and Maggie assented.

"I'll read the best first," with a smile full of appreciative pride at Bessie, "for fear Jane comes and asks me to hurry because she has a million things to do."

And accordingly she unfolded one of the papers she had laid upon Lena's table when she came in; but before she had time even to commence it, Jane put her head in at the door with the usual formula.

"Miss Maggie and Miss Bessie, will you please come. I have a million things to do, and ought to be at home."

"In a few moments," answered Maggie; but Jane added to her persuasions by saying:

"And it's snowing, too; a snow kind of soft-like that'll be turning into rain before long, and Miss Bessie'll get wet."

This moved Maggie, as the politic Jane knew that it would do, for it was not expedient for Bessie to be out in the damp or wet; and when she glanced out of the window and saw that the maid's words were true, she lingered no longer, but laid the papers down again and told Lena they must go; and Jane, congratulating herself that she had gained her point so easily, was bearing away her young charge when an interruption occurred.

The children were in Mrs. Rush's sitting-room, and just at this moment she came in, accompanied by a little old lady, who will, doubtless be immediately recognized by those who have met her before.

"Maggie and Bessie, you are not just going, are you?" said Mrs. Rush. "Here is an old friend who would like to see you, at least for a few moments."

"I think we must go, Aunt May," said Maggie, "for it is snowing, and mamma would not like Bessie to be out." Then, turning to the little old lady, "How do you do, Miss Trevor? It is a long time since we have seen you."

"Time, indeed; time, yes, time," said Miss Trevor, shaking hands warmly with both Maggie and Bessie. "And you've grown, yes, grown, actually grown—why, grown!" she added, in a tone which would

indicate that it was a matter of surprise two girls of the ages of Maggie and Bessie should grow. Then she put her head on one side and critically scanned her quondam pupils, giving them little nods of approval as she did so.

Maggie and Bessie were used to Miss Trevor's odd ways and manner of speaking; but to Lena they were a novelty, as she had never seen her before, although she had heard of her from her aunt and from her schoolmates, who often made merry over the recollection of her peculiarities when she had been their teacher in writing and drawing.

Presently she turned to Lena and surveyed her as if she were a kind of natural curiosity; yet there was nothing rude or obtrusive in the gaze.

"My niece, Lena Neville, Miss Trevor," said Mrs. Rush. "Lena, dear, this is Miss Trevor, of whom you have often heard me speak."

"So this is the little heroine," murmured Miss Trevor, "heroine, yes, heroine, indeed. Fire, oh yes, indeed, fire; such courage, such presence of mind, yes, mind, indeed, mind."

Lena was annoyed. She did not like allusions to the fire, to her own bravery and her rescue of her little sister, even from those who were near and dear to her; and from strangers they were unendurable to her. She shrank back in her chair and half turned her face from Miss Trevor, while the dark look which Mrs. Rush knew so well, but which she seldom wore now, came over it.

She hastened to effect a diversion.

"Miss Maggie, if you please, it's snowing fast," said Jane, "and I've a mil—"

"The young ladies cannot walk home in this wet snow," interposed Mrs. Rush. "The carriage has gone for the colonel; when it returns it shall take them home. And, Miss Trevor, it shall take you also. You can go to the nursery if you choose, Jane."

So Jane, forgetting the "million things" in the prospect of a comfortable gossip with old Margaret, departed to the nursery till the carriage should return and her young ladies be ready to go.

Miss Trevor, who was at her ease with Mrs. Rush and her former pupils of Miss Ashton's class if she was with any one, asked many questions about the studies of the latter and of the progress they were making in the two branches in which she had been their instructress, and gave some information respecting herself; Lena listening and looking on in wonder at her peculiarities of speech and manner, but taking no part in the conversation.

But at last Miss Trevor turned to her again.

"Neville, you said, my dear Mrs. Rush,—your niece—yes, Neville, indeed, Neville. Such a favorite with me—me, indeed, yes, favorite. I know a boy, yes, boy—indeed, youth—such a fine youth—such a hero—ro, indeed, ro—does not fear geese—hissing creatures, my dears—yes, creatures, indeed creatures, my dears, yes, creatures, indeed. Neville he is, yes, Neville—chevalier *sans peur et sans reproche, 'proche*, indeed, *'proche*."

Now, as may be supposed, Lena was far from regarding her brother Percy as a "chevalier *sans peur et sans reproche*." She had little reason, in view of late occurrences, to do so, and she never connected him with the heroic youth on whose praises this odd little old lady was dwelling. She felt no interest in her, only a sort of impatient surprise, and wished that her aunt would take her away.

Miss Trevor dwelt farther upon the episode of the geese and Percy's coming to the rescue; and while Lena maintained a sober face, seeing nothing especially funny in the story, Maggie and Bessie, and even Mrs. Rush, had some difficulty in restraining themselves from laughing outright at the tragic tale she contrived to make out of it, and the thought of the droll spectacle the old lady must have presented as she flew down the street, pursued by the hissing, long-necked foe.

But presently Lena's attention was aroused.

"But are flocks of geese allowed to wander loose in the streets of Utica, Miss Trevor?" asked Mrs. Rush. "I thought it was too much of a place for that."

"Oh, no, my dear not Utica, no indeed, not Utica—did you not know?
We moved, yes, moved, a year ago, yes, 'go, to Sylvandale, yes,
Sylvandale—yes, 'dale," said Miss Trevor.

"Sylvandale! Neville!" said Mrs. Rush. "Lena has a brother at school at Sylvandale. Percy Neville! Can

it be that our Percy is your young cavalier, Miss Trevor?"

"Percy Neville," repeated Miss Trevor, "yes, indeed, that is his name, name, yes, name. Is it possible he is your brother?" turning to Lena with a face now radiant with pleasure at this discovery. "Ah! such a boy, boy, indeed, boy!"

Lena was interested now, and, perhaps a trifle uneasy, lest by any possibility some knowledge of Percy's escapades should have come to Miss Trevor and might by her be incautiously betrayed to Colonel and Mrs. Rush. She turned rather an anxious eye upon the old lady, wishing that she would not pursue the theme of Percy and his valorous deeds, but not seeing very well how she could change the subject. Words did not come easily to Lena.

And her fears were not without foundation, although Miss Trevor knew nothing of Percy's troubles. Further and more startling revelations were to come.

For just at the moment, to this assembled group, entered Hannah, bearing in her hands a tray, on which was a cup of beef-tea for Lena. She was close to her little lady before she perceived the stranger, whom she would have shunned as she would a pestilence. The recognition was mutual, and to Hannah most unpleasant, and in the start it gave her she nearly dropped the tray and its contents.

"Merciful Lord!" she ejaculated, taken completely off her guard; but the exclamation was far more of a prayer than an irreverent mention of her Maker's name.

For was not her beloved nursling in danger? Her Master Percy, for whom she had sacrificed so much, was he not in danger of betrayal and disgrace in case this old lady should touch upon the subject of the money confided to her care to be conveyed to him?

She was not gifted with presence of mind, and she stood perfectly still, staring in undisguised perturbation at Miss Trevor.

Perceiving this, Miss Trevor believed that it was caused not only by surprise at seeing her there when she had told Hannah that she expected to return at once to Sylvandale, but also by the fear that the money had not reached its destination in good time, and she hastened to relieve her, thus bringing on the disclosures which Hannah was dreading.

"Good morning," she said, kindly. "Your money has gone, yes gone, my good woman, gone. I stayed in the city, yes, stayed, but the money has gone. He has it, the dear boy, yes, boy, he has it."

It was not her money but her boy that Hannah was fearing for now, and for whom she stood dismayed at the sight of Miss Trevor. Moreover, although she knew her place, and generally treated her superiors with all due respect, if there was one thing more than another which exasperated her, it was to have any one call her "my good woman;" and, hastily setting her tray upon the table, she looked daggers at Miss Trevor, as she answered, snappishly:

"I wasn't askin' ye nothin', ma'am."

Then she turned and fled, desirous to avoid all questions, although it was not Hannah's way to flee before danger, either real or apprehended.

[Illustration: "I WASN'T ASKIN' YE NOTHIN', MA'AM."]

CHAPTER X.

FRANKIE TO THE FRONT AGAIN.

It was the worst thing she could have done for her cause. It was her custom to stand over Lena "till hevery drop of that beef-tea is taken," knowing, as she did, that her young charge was averse to the process; and, had she stood her ground she might have evaded or parried questions, and perhaps have conveyed to Miss Trevor her desire for secrecy; but her dark looks and sudden exit, evidently caused by the presence of the latter, put the timid old lady into one of her flutters.

"What is it, my dear?" she asked, turning to Mrs. Rush, and speaking in a kind of panic. "What did I do? Does she think—yes—think that the money has not gone? Oh, yes, indeed, yes, I sent it so carefully,

carefully indeed, fully, and the dear boy has it, yes, has it, indeed, long before this, long!" Then to Lena, "Your brother, my dear, yes, brother. Oh, I would have gone home myself to take it to him, yes, take, if I could not have sent it quite safely, yes, safe; but they persuaded me to stay, and so I sent it by post, sent it, yes, post."

Lena gave a little gasp.

Here then was a partial solution of the mystery of that second hundred dollars. She and Bessie both saw it; Hannah had sent it to Percy, and by some strange means, through Miss Trevor. And Hannah was now evidently very angry and disturbed. What could it all mean?

Bessie wondered: but the matter was not of as much moment to her as it was to Lena, who was more bewildered, if possible, than ever. And she knew what must follow—questions, explanations, and disclosure to her aunt and uncle of Percy's wrong-doing. Now, however, that he was released from the other dangers that had threatened him, the child felt this to be almost a relief: she had so suffered under the knowledge that she was keeping his secret from them, had felt such a sense of positive guiltiness in their presence.

"What is all this, Miss Trevor?" asked Mrs. Rush. "Where have you met Lena's old nurse before? And what is this about Percy; for I take it for granted he is the brother of Lena of whom you are speaking."

Her manner was so grave that Miss Trevor was alarmed, and imagining that she had brought herself and her young cavalier into some difficulty, she became more incoherent, nervous and rambling than usual. Repeating herself over and over again, she related, in such a confused manner, the story of her encounter with Hannah, and of how the latter had entrusted her with the money for Percy; of how she had intended to return to Sylvandale at once when she had accepted the trust, but had been persuaded by her friends to remain in the city until after Easter, and how she, mindful of the task she had undertaken, and not knowing where she could find Hannah to inform her of the change in her plans, had sent the money by post; but, as she assured Mrs. Rush, with the greatest precautions. Only those who were accustomed to her ways of speech could have thoroughly understood her, and even Mrs. Rush, who had known the old lady from her own childhood, had some difficulty in patching together a connected tale; and all she arrived at in the end only increased her desire to know more of the matter and to understand for what purpose Hannah had sent such a sum of money to Percy, and in such a mysterious manner.

As for Lena, a new thorn was planted in her poor little heart, a new shame bowed her head.

This much she understood, that Hannah had been sending money to Percy. Was it possible that her reckless brother had been so lost to all sense of what was fitting that he had actually applied to his faithful old nurse, this servant in his father's family, for aid? Oh, Percy, Percy; shame, shame!

As we know, she wronged Percy in this; but as she had no means of ascertaining how Hannah had become possessed of his secret and of his extremity, it was the most natural thing in the world that she should think he had so far forgotten himself. She could guess at more than Mrs. Rush or Bessie Bradford could, and had no doubt to what purpose the money entrusted to Miss Trevor had been destined.

And an added pang of shame and regret was given to the proud, high-spirited child when, at the conclusion of Miss Trevor's rambling tale, her aunt turned to her, and said:

"Why, Lena, that gold must have been those cherished sovereigns which Hannah destined for her monument and '*epithet*.' Why should she have sent them to Percy? It is not possible that she would trust them to the keeping of a careless schoolboy."

As yet, it was plain, Mrs. Rush had suspected nothing wrong, so far as Percy was concerned about the disposal of Hannah's money, but now when she observed the painful flush and startled, shamed look upon the little girl's face, she could not but see that Lena was distressed, and instantly coupled this with the low spirits and nervous restlessness which had, for some time past, so evidently retarded her recovery. Lena could make her no answer in words, but her expression and manner were enough, and Mrs. Rush asked no more, intending to leave the matter to the judgment of her husband. She gave no hint of her suspicions to Lena, moreover, passing over the child's agitation in silence; and when the carriage had returned with the colonel, and the visitors departed, she set herself to divert Lena, offering, if she chose, to read the "club papers" Maggie had brought with her.

Lena assented, more to divert attention from herself and to turn her aunt's thoughts from the subject of the mysterious doings of Hannah, than from any real interest in the compositions; but as Mrs. Rush read her attention was presently attracted.

"This is one of Maggie's, I see," said Mrs. Rush, perceiving one in Maggie's handwriting. "Oh, no," glancing at the commencement and seeing that it was by no means in Maggie's style, "it is another effusion of Frankie's; she has only written it out from his dictation. I wonder if it will be as droll as 'Babylon Babylon.'"

"THE MAN THAT BROKE GOOD FRIDAY."

"Once there was a boy, and he never told a lie, and his name wasn't George Washington either. And I don't think it was anything so great to tell about that everlasting cherry-tree that everybody's tired hearing about; and when I come to be the Father of my Country and I do something bad, I'll just go and tell my papa about it without waiting for him to go poking round and having to ask me if I did it. I think it is awfully mean to do a fault and wait till somebody comes and asks you about it; it is skimpy of telling the truth. And if you do bad things your fathers don't always claps you in their arms and say they'd rather you'd do a hundred bad things than tell a lie; sometimes they punish you, all the same, and you don't always get out of it that way.

"Well, this boy didn't think so much of himself because he didn't tell lies; he was used to not telling them, and he didn't get himself put into the history books about it and make himself chestnuts. He was very polite to girls, too, and always got up and gave them a chair and gave them the best of everything, just like our Hal. Hal's awfully generous, and Fred is, too; only Fred teases, and the boys call Hal 'Troubadour.'

"Well, there was a man lived by this boy's house, and he was a real bad man, and it came Good Friday, and this man didn't go to church or anything; but he bought a flag—a great big, new one, and he put it right up on his flag-staff with his own hands. He just must have been glad that God was dead. The good boy saw it, and he knew it wasn't any use to tell that man he was breaking Good Friday, 'cause he would just say 'mind your own business,' so the boy ran to the President and told him about it, and the President came down out of his Capitol and ran with the truth-telling boy and came to the man and said, 'Hi, there, you! Pull down that flag this minute on Good Friday! And the man was awfully frightened 'cause he knew the President has such lots of soldiers and policemen, and he was afraid he'd set them on him; so he pulled down the flag mighty quick. But he was so mad he made faces at the President; but the President didn't care a bit. Presidents grow used to disagreeable things, and it is worse having people not vote for you than it is to be made faces at. He had a lot of laws to make that day and he thought he'd make a new one about putting up flags on Good Friday; so he hurried home to his Capitol; but when he came there, he said to his wife:

"'My dear, I'm afraid that man might do something horrid to that truth-telling boy—I know just by the look of him he don't like people who tell the truth; so you run and peep round the corner and watch!'

"And the President's wife said, 'Yes, your Presidency, I will'; and she put on her best frock and her crown, so as to make the man think she was very grand, so he'd be respectful to her, and she kissed the President for good-by and went and peeped around the corner.

"Well, you see after the President went away that man had grown madder and madder, but he didn't dare to put the flag up again, only he didn't like it 'cause somebody meddled with his business; generally people don't like it if you meddle with their business; and he stamped his feet and clenched his hands, and just screamed, he was so mad. It sometimes makes you feel a little better to scream if you're mad, only your fathers and mothers don't like it, but this man was so old and grown up his father and mother had had to die long ago; but they saw him out of heaven and were mad at him. Well, all of a sudden he said, 'I guess it was that boy who never tells lies; he looked real mad when he saw that flag, and I'll pay him off, oh, won't I though!' Then he cut off a great big piece of his flag-staff; he forgot the flag wouldn't go so high if he did it, and he was going to run at that boy who didn't tell lies; but the boy wasn't going to wait for him to ask, and he went up to him and said:

"'Hi, there, you! I told the President about you; I don't want you to ask me any kestions, 'cause always I speak the truth without waiting for people to ask me, and I did it, so, there now!'

"Then the bad man struck at the boy with the piece of the flag-staff in his hand; but the boy was too quick for him, and he couldn't reach him, and the President's wife screamed right out and ran for her husband's soldiers. She would have gone to help the boy herself; but she had to be very proud and stiff of herself because she was the President's wife.

"When the President heard her scream he knew it was because that man was trying to do something to the boy; so he looked in his laws dictionary to find what to do to him; but the man that made the dictionary never thought that any one would be so bad as to break Good Friday, so there was nothing about it. So he made a new law himself very quick and told the soldiers what to do, and they came; and the President's wife was hollering like anything and nervous; but the boy was just laughing and

jumping around the man, saying, 'Catch me; why don't you catch me, old Good Friday breaker.'

"Well, this boy had a fairy of his own—this is partly a fairy tale and partly a Bible story, 'cause it is about Good Friday; and I don't know if it's very pious to mix up the two, but I have to end up the story—and this fairy came to help him, and she opened a hole in the ground and let the man fall right through to Africa, where the cannibals got him and eat him up; but he was so bad he disagreed with them, so even after he was killed he was a nuisance. Then the President gave the boy a beautiful present, and told him he'd vote for him to be President when he grew up, and he'd give him a whole regiment of soldiers for his own.

"So this is what you get for always telling the truth, and for not being afraid to tell when you've done a bad thing. Anybody is an awful old meaner to hide it when he's done it, and you ought to tell right out and not be sneaky. A boy who hides what he's done *is* a sneak, I don't care. The End."

There were some parts of this fanciful tale which made Lena wince, as she saw how much clearer an idea of right and wrong, truth and justice, had this little boy of seven than had her own brother of more than twice his age. If Percy could but think that it was "mean and sneaky" to endeavor to hide a fault, could but see how much nobler and more manly it was to make confession, and, so far as possible, reparation. True, the money had been repaid to Seabrooke; but through what a source had it come to him; and there were so many other things to confess, things which had led to this very trouble with Seabrooke. The rambling, half-incoherent nonsense written, or rather, dictated by the little brother of her young friends made her feel more than ever the shame and meanness of Percy's conduct, and she could not laugh at Frankie's contribution to the "Cheeryble Sisters," as her aunt did.

And Frankie practised that which he preached, as Lena very well knew. Mischievous and heedless, almost to recklessness, he was not only always ready to confess his wrong-doing when questioned, but when conscious of his fault, did not wait for his parents to "go poking about to find him out," but would go straightway and accuse himself. Like all the Bradford children, strictly truthful and upright, he scorned concealment or evasion, and accepted the consequences of his naughtiness without attempt at either. But well could Lena remember how in the nursery days from which she and Percy had but so recently escaped, he would hide, by every possible device, his own misdoings, even to the very verge of suffering others to be blamed for them. Hannah would even then strive to shield him from detection and punishment at his parents' hands, thus fostering his weakness and moral cowardice. With over-severity on the one hand, and over-indulgence on the other, what wonder was it that Percy's faults had grown with his growth and strengthened with his strength?

It cannot be said that Lena put all this into words, even to herself: but such thoughts were there, or those very much like them. She was given to reasoning and pondering over things in the recesses of her own mind, and she was uncommonly clear-sighted for a girl of her age. Probably the child was not the happier for that.

To Maggie and Bessie, in their joyous lives, full of the tenderness and confidence and sympathy which existed between them and their parents, such ideas would never have come, even while they wondered at and pitied the utter lack in Lena's existence of all that made the happiness of theirs.

And another trouble, perhaps now the greatest which weighed upon Lena's mind, was the knowledge that their faithful old nurse had sacrificed her long-cherished gold, with its particular purpose, to the rescue of Percy from his dilemma. For, after hearing Miss Trevor's story, Lena could not—did not doubt that this was so.

And Aunt May, having also heard the tale, would tell Uncle Horace; there was no doubt of that. Lena was not at all relieved by the fact that her aunt asked no questions, never once alluded to the subject. She suspected something wrong, and was only waiting for an opportunity to submit it to the colonel. Lena did not imagine, of course, that her aunt blamed her in any way in the matter; there was no reason that she should do so, and in one respect it would be almost a relief to have her aunt and uncle know all. But for Percy's sake she still shrank from that.

But Hannah, and Hannah's cherished money! Dear, faithful old Hannah!
Oh, the shame, the shame of it!

Mrs. Rush, with her suspicions already tending Percy-wise in connection with Lena's late low spirits, and noting how devoid of interest she seemed to be in the papers she was reading for her benefit, had those suspicions more than ever confirmed since she observed the effect Miss Trevor's revelation had had upon her; she felt assured now that Percy had fallen into some trouble from which his sister and his old nurse had endeavored to extricate him. And it must be indeed a serious trouble which made needful such secrecy, such mysterious, underhand doings.

Suddenly Mrs. Rush saw Lena's countenance change; a look of relief passed over it, and her head was lifted and her eye brightened again. For it had flashed upon the child that there was a way out of a part of the difficulty, at least. That second hundred dollars could be taken to return to Hannah that which she had sacrificed. Percy had written that he would bring it to her when she came home for the Easter holidays; she would somehow contrive to have it turned into gold and give it back to the old woman, telling her at the same time that she and Percy had discovered her generosity, and loved her all the more for her faithful tenderness.

Ah! she said to herself, how stupid she had been not to see this at once, and how strange that Percy had not thought of doing it when he must at least have suspected the truth after applying to Hannah.

Mrs. Rush took up the second paper and glanced over it, then laughed.

"This is Lily's," she said. "Spelling does not seem to be her strong point."

"No," answered Lena, "she says she never can spell, and I do not think she tries very hard. Miss Ashton takes a great deal of trouble with her, too; but Lily just laughs at her own spelling and does not seem to think that it matters very much. But she is so nice," she added, apologetically, "and we all like her so much."

"Yes," answered Mrs. Rush, "Lily is a dear child, and so truly noble and upright and conscientious, in spite of her sometimes careless way of speaking of right and wrong. Shall I read this, Lena; do you care to hear it?" For she had noticed that Lena appeared *distraite* during the reading of Frankie's composition.

"Oh, yes, if you please, Aunt Marian," answered Lena, more cheerfully than she had spoken before. "Lily's compositions are always rather droll, even if they are not very correct."

"But does Miss Ashton leave it to Lily's own choice to say whether she will write compositions or no?" asked Mrs. Rush.

"Oh, no," answered Lena, "she has to write them regularly, as the rest of us do; but she has never before been willing to have one read in the club, and even this she will not allow to go in our book."

"'Good Resolutions' is the title of the piece," said Mrs. Rush, beginning to read from the paper in her hand.

"Good resolutions are capitle things if you keep them, but generally they are made to be broken; at least I am afraid mine are. I think I've made about a thousand in my life, and about nine hundred and ninety-seven have been broken. But there is one good resolution I made I have never broken and never shall, and that is, forever and ever and ever to hate Oliver Cromwell. I shall always kepe that. I know of lots of bad men, but I think he was the worst I ever knew. He made believe he was very pious, but he was not at all, he was a hipokrit and deceiver; and he made believe he had the king killed for writeousness' sake, and I know he only did it so as to take the head place himself. I think I can't bear Cromwell more than any one I ever knew. I just hate him, and it is no use for any one to say he was doing what he thought was best for his country and he meant well. I don't believe it, and I hate people who mean well; they are always tiresome. The poor dear king! I would like to have been there when they tryed him, and I would have been like Lady Fairfax and would have called out, 'Oliver Cromwell is a rogue and a traitor,' and not been afrade of anybody when I wanted to stand up for my king. I love Lady Fairfax."

"What a stanch little royalist Lily is and would have been had she lived in those days," said Mrs. Rush, smiling as she came to a pause.

"Yes," said Lena, "she always stands up for kings and the rights of kings."

"But I am amazed," said Mrs. Rush, "that Lily does not write a better composition than this. It is really not as good as some which I have seen written by the younger children of the class, Bessie, Belle and Amy."

"No," answered Lena, "and we all think it is because Lily does not choose to take pains with her compositions. She is so bright and clever about all her other lessons, history, geography, French, and everything but composition and spelling; but she only laughs about her bad report for those two, and does not seem to care at all or to take any trouble to improve in them. Miss Ashton is sometimes quite vexed with her, and says it is only carelessness."

"And even the wish to earn the prize did not spur her on?" asked Mrs.
Rush.

"Oh, no," answered Lena, "she only said she knew she could never gain it, and wasn't going to try. I think Maggie persuaded her to write a paper to be read in the club in the hope that it would make her take a little pains and try to improve."

"But it hardly seems to have answered the purpose," said Mrs. Rush. "But" she added, as she took up again Lily's paper, which she had laid upon the table, "she is a dear child, and as you say, very bright. Do you wish to hear more of this, dear; or are you tired?"

"Oh, yes, please," answered Lena, who was now so relieved by the remembrance that the debt to Hannah could be paid as soon as her brother returned, that she felt as if some heavy weight had been lifted from her, and looked, spoke, and acted like a different child from the one of a few moments since; "if you please, Aunt Marian. Lily goes on for some time in such a nonsensical way and then comes out with something so clever and droll that we cannot help laughing. I would like to hear the rest of it; and there is Bessie's piece, too."

But before Mrs. Rush had time to commence once more the reading of Lily's composition, the colonel sent up a message to ask his wife to come to him.

CHAPTER XI.

A TRUST.

The puzzled colonel, even more puzzled than were his wife and Lena, since he had not all the clews to guide him which they had received, and, moreover, rather astonished that the former had not come to greet him, according to her usual custom, when he entered the house after an absence of some hours, had his tale to tell and his riddle to solve.

"Where have you been? Why did you not come before? Is Lena worse?" were questions he propounded in a breath, not waiting for an answer to the first till he had asked all three.

No, Lena was not worse, Mrs. Rush said, but she had been startled and worried, and she had stayed with her and tried to divert her until she should be more comfortable. And then she told the story of Miss Trevor's visit, of her encounter with Hannah, and the latter's evident dismay and displeasure at seeing her there; of how the old lady had betrayed that which the old nurse had plainly intended should be kept a profound secret; of how there could be no doubt that Lena had had the key to these revelations, and of how she had been much distressed and agitated by them, but had tried to conceal this and had told her nothing.

The colonel had his say also, and told how he had met Miss Trevor at the door with Maggie and Bessie when they came down to take the carriage; of how she had, in her own queer, incoherent way, told him some story of which he could make nothing clear save that Hannah had, through her, sent a large sum of money to Percy; and how he, coupling one thing with another, had arrived at the conclusion that Percy had fallen into trouble through his own fault, and so had not dared to apply for help to those upon whom he had a legitimate right to call, but had confided in Hannah, and begged and received aid from her. There could be no doubt of this, both the colonel and his wife agreed; nor that the depression and anxiety shown by Lena some time since was to be referred to the same cause, whatever that might be.

But as Percy would be home for the Easter vacation in a couple of days, the colonel said he would not question Lena or disturb her further at present. If Percy were in fault and had been guilty of any wrong-doing, he must be made to confess; if not, it would still be expedient that it should be known why a sum of money, so large for such a boy, should have been conveyed to him by a servant in such a surreptitious manner. If no information on the matter could be obtained from either Lena, Percy or Hannah, he should feel it only right to write to Percy's father and place it in his hands; and in any case Hannah must be repaid. The story of the exchange of the gold for Miss Trevor's bank-notes left little doubt in the mind of either Colonel or Mrs. Rush that the sum consecrated to the monument and epitaph which were to commemorate the virtues of the faithful old woman, had been sacrificed to Percy's needs; and now the colonel remembered how she had asked him the value of British gold in American paper.

So nothing more was said till Percy should come, and Lena, seeing that her uncle and aunt were just

as usual, and that they plied her with no questions, took heart of grace, and consoled herself with the reflection that she had alarmed herself unnecessarily, and that they were not going to "make a fuss" over Miss Trevor's revelations.

Meanwhile Percy had kept his promise to his sister, namely, that he would henceforth avoid Lewis Flagg; at least, he had done so as far as he was able, for it is easier to take up with bad company than it is to shake it off; that is, if the desire to do so is not mutual, and the bad company has no mind to be discarded. And this was the case with Lewis. He had reasons of his own for wishing to keep his influence over Percy, and he did not intend that he should escape it if it were possible to maintain it.

So, in spite of Percy's avoidance of him, which became so marked that the other boys noticed it, he persisted in seeking his company at all times and in all places. He was not by any means blind to Percy's endeavors to avoid him, but chose to ignore them and to be constantly hail-fellow-well-met with him as he had been before.

But, fortunately for Percy, Seabrooke had his eye on both. While seeing all the weakness and instability of the younger boy's character, he saw also much that was lovable and good; and moreover, a kindly feeling towards him had been aroused through gratitude to his friends and relations.

He had heard through his sister Gladys and his father, not only of the kindness shown to the little girl, but also of the generous donation made by Colonel Rush to the struggling church of which his father was rector; and he knew through Percy of the efforts of Lena and her young friends to gain the scholarship for Gladys. In spite of his rather stubborn pride which had led him so haughtily to answer Percy that his sister was not an object of charity, he could not but feel grateful to the sweet little strangers who were striving to earn such a benefit for his own sister; and for the sake of Percy's relatives as well as for that of the boy himself, he had resolved to keep an eye upon him during the few remaining days of the term and to endeavor to keep him from going astray again. And Percy, who had been pretty thoroughly frightened, and also truly ashamed of the disgraceful scrape into which he had fallen, was far more amenable than usual to rules and regulations, and was not without gratitude to Seabrooke for having dealt so leniently with him.

But even now, as Harley Seabrooke could plainly see, Percy had no proper sense of the gravity of his late offence; the dread of Dr. Leacraft's displeasure and of the exposure to his relatives being what chiefly concerned him.

Percy had told Seabrooke whence he had received the money with which he had been enabled to repay him, and had been rather troubled by his reluctance to accept it through the means of a girl who was totally innocent of any share of blame. Careless as he was, Percy could not but feel that it cast a reflection upon him. Hence he had been glad when that second remittance arrived in such a mysterious manner to let Harley know of it, and to declare that he should repay his sister at once on his return to his uncle's house at the approaching Easter holidays.

But Seabrooke had little faith in Percy's strength of purpose in case any new temptation presented itself in the meantime; that is, any temptation to spend the money in any other way.

"Don't you think it is what I ought to do?" asked Percy, when he had told Seabrooke of his intentions, and observed, as he could not help doing, that the other seemed a little doubtful.

"Certainly, I think it is what you ought to do; it is the only thing you *can* do if you have any sense of right and honor," answered Seabrooke, looking at him steadily.

"But you think I won't," said Percy, awakening to a sense that
Seabrooke had no confidence in his good resolutions.

"I think you are open to temptation, Neville, more than any one I know," answered his uncompromising mentor; and Percy could not deny that there was too much truth in the assertion. He took it in good part, however, although he made no answer beyond what was conveyed by a rather sheepish look; and presently Seabrooke said:

"Does any one know that you have received this money, Neville?"

He would not ask the direct question which was in his mind, namely, whether Lewis Flagg knew of it.

"Oh, yes, all the fellows know of it," answered Percy; "they were all there when I opened that odd-looking parcel. I thought it was a hoax—wrapped up in paper after paper that way—and I was not going to open the hair-pin box when it came out at last; but Raymond Stewart cut the string and there was the hundred-dollar note. A nice thing it would have been if I had tossed it in the fire, as I had a mind to do half-a-dozen times while I was unrolling those papers. Oh, yes; they all saw it. Flagg says I am the

luckiest fellow he knows."

"Yes," thought Seabrooke, "and he'll persuade you to make way with it before it goes into your sister's hands, if I know him aright. I say, Percy," aloud, "why don't you put that money into Mr. Merton's hands till you are going home?"

"Why?" asked Percy, rather indignantly. "You don't suppose any one is going to steal it, do you?"

"Of course not," answered Seabrooke, who really had no such thought, and only feared that Percy himself might be tempted to do something foolish—in his situation something almost dishonorable Seabrooke thought it would be. It was due to Percy's sister that this sum should be employed to repay her; it would be an absolute wrong to employ it for anything else. "Only," he added, with a little hesitation, "I thought you might find it a sort of a safeguard to have it in the hands of some one else."

"A safeguard against myself, eh?" said Percy, laughing good-naturedly, and not at all offended, as Seabrooke feared he might be. "All right, if you are unhappy about it take care of it yourself."

And drawing his purse from his pocket he opened it, took from it the hundred dollar note, and thrust the latter into Seabrooke's hand.

"I suppose it's wisest," he said; "but I *know* I shouldn't spend it. However, if it gives you any satisfaction it is as well in your pocket as mine."

"It will not lodge in my pocket," said Seabrooke; "how can you carry such a sum of money in such an insecure place, Neville? Playing rough-and-tumble games, too, when any minute it is likely to fall out of your pocket. I shall lock it up, I can tell you; and what if you tell me not to return it to you till we are breaking up?"

"All right," said Percy again. "I request you not to give it back to me until the day we leave."

"I promise," said Seabrooke. "Remember now; I shall keep my word and take you at yours, and *will* not return this money to you until Thursday morning of next week."

"No, don't," said Percy, laughing. "I give you full leave to refuse to return it to me till then."

"Self-confident, careless fellow!" said Seabrooke to himself as the other turned away in a series of somersaults down the slope on the edge of which they had been standing. "He is so sure of himself; and yet, I know, at the very first temptation he would forget all about his debt to his sister and make way with that money. But I can't help having a liking for him, and for the sake of that sister who has been so nice to Gladys I shall do what I can to keep him straight."

"I say, Neville," said Raymond Stewart, meeting Percy not half an hour afterward, "aren't you going to stand treat out of that fortune of yours?"

"No," answered Percy, "not this time. I have something else to do with that fortune of mine."

"Turned stingy all of a sudden, eh?" said Raymond, with the disagreeable sneer which was almost habitual with him; and Percy, in spite of his boasting self-confidence, felt glad that his money was in other keeping than his own. He knew perfectly well that he would not have stood proof against the persuasions and sneers, perhaps even threats, which might be brought into use to induce him to part with at least a portion of it. Seabrooke had foreseen just some such state of affairs when he heard that the other boys all knew of Percy's fortune, and hence the precautions he had taken. He would have felt that they were fully justified had he overheard the present conversation.

Further pressure, not only from Raymond Stewart, but from several of the other boys was brought to bear upon Percy: but, as he laughingly declared, he had not the money in his hands, and so could not spend it.

"Where is it, then?" "What have you done with it?" "Have you sent it home?" asked one and another; but Percy still refused to tell.

Only Lewis Flagg did not beset him, did not ask any questions or seem to take any interest in the matter; but that would easily be accounted for by the coolness which had arisen between Percy and himself during the last few days. But this state of affairs had really nothing to do with it, for Lewis did not choose to be snubbed so long as he had any object to gain, and the coolness was all on Percy's side.

But Lewis could give a very good guess as to the whereabouts of Percy's money at present, or at least, as to the person in whose custody it was.

He had been standing at one of the school-room windows while Seabrooke and Percy had been

talking at the top of the slope, and had seen the latter take out his pocket-book, take something from it and hand it to Seabrooke, and he rightly conjectured how matters were, that Seabrooke had persuaded Percy to give him the money for safe-keeping.

And then arose a thought which had made itself felt before, that it was hard that Percy had been furnished not only with the means to defray the claim of Seabrooke, and that through no sacrifice or exertion of his own, but also with a like sum which he was at liberty to spend as he pleased, while he himself had been obliged to dispose of his watch in order to obtain the sum which would save him. He felt quite wronged, and as if some injustice had been done to him, forgetting or losing sight of all the meanness, underhand dealing and disobedience of rules which had brought him to his present predicament. And the doctor would be here tomorrow,—for his son was out of danger and he was coming back to close the school,—would hear the account of his misconduct and would report at home, if nothing worse. A feeling of intense irritation against both Seabrooke and Percy Neville took possession of him, a feeling as unreasonable as it was spiteful; and he said to himself that he would find means to be revenged on both, especially on Seabrooke, whom he chose to look upon as the offender instead of the offended, the injurer instead of the injured.

Then another idea took possession of him, and one worthy of his own mean spirit, namely, that Seabrooke had been demanding and Percy giving a further prize for the silence of the former in the matter of the burnt money; and he immediately formed in his own mind a plan by which he might be revenged upon Seabrooke. He called it to himself, "playing a jolly good trick;" but Lewis Flagg's "jolly good tricks" were apt to prove more jolly to himself than to his victims, and they did occasionally, as we have seen, recoil upon his own head.

"I say, Percy," said Raymond Stewart, "you hav'n't made over that hundred dollars to Flagg, have you? We know that he can get out of you anything that he chooses. Has he, Flagg? Own up now if he has. I shouldn't wonder."

"No, I hav'n't," said Percy, exasperated by the assertion that Flagg could do as he pleased with him. "No, I haven't given it to him, and he can't make me do as he pleases. No one can."

At this assumption of his own independence from the facile, easily-led Percy a shout of derision was raised; and then began a running fire of schoolboy jeers and jests. The good humor with which Percy generally took such attacks was apt to disarm his tormentors; but now, probably because he was conscious that their taunts were so well-deserved, he resented them and showed some irritability in the matter. Had he not felt assured that Seabrooke would abide by his word and insist upon keeping possession of the money until the day of the breaking up of school, there is little doubt that he would have allowed himself to be urged into demanding it back and spending at least some portion of it for the entertainment of his school-fellows.

"See here," said one of the boys, apropos of nothing it seemed, "see here, do you know Seabrooke is going to dine with the dons up at Mr. Fanshawe's to-night?"

"Then who's going to be sentinel at evening study?" asked Raymond Stewart.

"Mr. Merton," answered the other.

"Isn't he invited?" asked Raymond.

"Yes, but he wants Seabrooke to go because he says he has but little pleasure; so he told him he would decline and take the evening study, so that he might go to the dinner. Here he comes now. Hallo! Seabrooke, what a big-bug you're getting to be! Going out to dine with the dons and so forth."

Seabrooke passed on with a cold, indifferent smile just moving the corners of his mouth. He had little of the spirit of good comradeship and was not accustomed to meet any joke or nonsense from his companions in a responsive manner; so it was little wonder that he was not very popular with the other boys.

But as he passed Percy, who stood leaning with his back against a tree, rather discontentedly kicking the toe of his shoe into the ground, he saw that the boy was vexed about something, and paused to speak to him.

"Hallo, Neville," he said; "what is the matter? You look as if the world were not wagging your way just now."

"Nothing," answered Percy, half-sulkily, "only I wish I hadn't given you that money. The fellows think I'm awfully mean."

"So soon!" said Seabrooke to himself; then replied aloud, "Why, because you wish to pay a just debt?"

"No, they don't know about that," said Percy, "only they think I ought to stand treat."

"I shall keep my word to you," said Seabrooke, significantly, and walked on.

"You wouldn't like it yourself," answered Percy; but Seabrooke only shrugged his shoulders and gave no symptom of yielding to his unspoken desire.

"Weak, unstable fellow!" he said to himself. "He would have asked me for that money if he had thought there was the slightest chance I would give it to him, and would have spent a part of it rather than have those fellows chaff and run him. After his sister's sacrifice, too. Pah!"

He had never been a boy who was subject to temptations of this nature, or who cared one iota for the opinion of others, especially if he believed himself to be in the right; and he had no patience with or pity for weakness of character or purpose. To him there was something utterly contemptible in Percy's indulging in the least thought of withdrawing from his resolution of using the sum he had confided to his keeping to repay his debt to his sister, and he wasted no sympathy upon him or his fancied difficulties.

Seabrooke went to dine with "the dons," caring not so much for the social pleasure as for the honor conferred upon him by the invitation; Mr. Merton taking, as had been arranged, his place in the schoolroom during evening study.

The tutor cast his eye around the line of heads and missed one.

"Where is Lewis Flagg?" he asked.

"I don't know, sir," answered one of the boys. "I saw him about ten minutes ago."

Scarcely had he spoken when the delinquent entered the room and hastened to his seat.

"Late, Lewis," said Mr. Merton, placing a tardy mark against his name.

"I did not hear the bell, sir," answered Lewis, telling his falsehood with coolness, although his manner was somewhat flurried and nervous.

Percy was running across the play-ground the next morning when he came full against Seabrooke, who was just rounding the corner of an evergreen hedge. He would have been thrown off his balance by the shock had not Seabrooke caught him; but the next instant he shook him off, while he regarded him with a look of the most scornful contempt.

"Hallo!" said Percy, not observing this at first, "that was a concussion between opposing forces. I beg your pardon. I should have been down, too, but for you"

"You're pretty well *down*, I should say," replied Seabrooke, sneeringly. "You're a nice fellow to call yourself a gentleman, are'n't you?"

Percy opened his eyes in unfeigned astonishment. The grave, studious, young pupil-teacher was no favorite with the other boys, who thought him priggish and rather arbitrary; but at least he was always courteous in his dealings with them, and, indeed, rather prided himself upon his manners.

"Well, that's one way to take it," said the younger boy, resentfully, his regrets taking flight at once as they met with this apparently ungracious reception. "Accidents will happen, and, after all, it was just as much your fault as mine."

"I would not try to appear innocent. It will hardly serve your turn under the circumstances," said Seabrooke, still with the same disagreeable tone and manner. "But let me tell you, Mr. Neville, that I have a great mind to report you for trespassing in my quarters. You may think you have the right to demand your own if you choose to break a compact made for your own good, but you have no right to be guilty of the liberty and meanness of ransacking another man's belongings in search of it."

"I don't know what you are talking about. What do you mean?" exclaimed the astonished Percy, really for the moment forgetting that Seabrooke had anything belonging to him in his keeping.

But Seabrooke only answered, as he turned away, "Such an assumption of innocence is quite thrown away, I repeat, sir and the next time you meddle with my things or places, you shall suffer for it, I assure you."

But Percy seized him by the arm.

"You shall not leave me this way," he said. "What do you mean? Explain yourself. Who touched your things?"

"It shows what you are," answered Seabrooke, continuing his reproaches, instead of giving the straightforward answer which he considered unnecessary, "that you have not the decent manliness to demand that which rightfully belonged to you because you were ashamed of your own folly and weakness, but must go and ransack in my quarters to find your money. Let me go; I wish nothing more to do with you."

Light broke upon the bewildered Percy. Seabrooke was accusing him of searching for and taking the money he had confided to his care, but which he, Percy, certainly had no right to recover by such means.

"You say I took back my money without asking you for it, and hunted it out from your places?" he asked, incredulously, but fiercely.

"I do," answered Seabrooke, "and I've nothing more to say to you now or hereafter."

Percy contradicted him flatly, and in language which left no doubt as to his opinion of his veracity, and very hard words were interchanged. Both lost their temper, and Seabrooke his dignity—poor Percy had not much of the latter quality to lose—and the quarrel presently attracted the attention, not only of the other boys, but of one or two of the masters who happened to be within hearing.

Naturally this called forth inquiry, and it soon became known that Percy had entrusted to Seabrooke's keeping a large sum of money, lest he should himself be tempted to spend any portion of it, as it was to be reserved for a special purpose; that Seabrooke before going to the dinner on the previous evening had put it, as he supposed, in a secure place, and that this morning the money was gone, while he had discovered slight but unmistakable evidence that his quarters had been ransacked in search of it. He had, perhaps, not unnaturally, at once arrived at the conclusion that Percy himself had searched for and taken it, being determined to have it, and yet ashamed to demand its return. It was a grave accusation, and one which Percy denied in the most emphatic and indignant manner which convinced nearly every one who heard him of his innocence.

Seabrooke was not among these. He maintained that no one but Percy knew that he had taken the money in charge; no one but Percy had any object in finding it, and he appeared and professed himself perfectly outraged that any one "should have dared" to open his trunk, bureau and so forth. There could be no question of actual theft, since the money was Percy's own, to dispose of as he pleased, but the liberty was a great one, and it was a very mean way of regaining possession even of his own property, had he been guilty of it.

But Percy was popular, Seabrooke was not; and even the masters were inclined to believe that the latter must have been careless and forgetful and mislaid the money, while believing he had put it in the place he indicated, and presently—no one knew exactly how it started or could trace the rumor to its source—presently it began to be bruited about among the boys that Seabrooke was keeping it for his own use and had never intended to return it to Percy, and was now making him his scape-goat.

But Percy, even in the midst of his own wrath and indignation, generously combated this; he inclined to the first supposition that Seabrooke had mislaid or lost the note, and he even maintained that it would shortly be found.

But this did not make Seabrooke any more lenient in his judgment. He said little, but that little expressed the most dogged and obstinate belief in Percy's weakness of purpose, and in his search for and abstraction of his own property.

The situation was one hard to deal with, and Mr. Merton and the other tutors resolved to let the matter rest until the return of Dr. Leacraft, who was expected that very evening.

School closed the next day, and the various actors in this little drama were to scatter to their respective homes for the Easter holidays.

"What a miserable report we have to make to the doctor on his return!" said Mr. Merton. "When he has been through so much, too, and is just feeling a little relief from his anxiety. He will find that his boys—the majority at least—have not had much consideration for him in his trouble."

What would he have said had he known how much worse the record might have been—had all been revealed, had Seabrooke disclosed the drugging, the theft of his letter to his father, and the destruction, unintentional though it was, of the money?

Seabrooke went about the business of the day with all his accustomed regularity and precision, but with a sort of defiant and I-am-going-to-stick-to-it air about him which in itself incited the other boys to covert thrusts and innuendoes tending to throw distrust upon his version of the story and to make known their thorough sympathy with Percy, not only for his loss, but also for the aspersions cast upon him by the young pupil-teacher. Seabrooke professed, and perhaps with truth, not to care particularly for popularity or for what others said about him; but he found this hard to bear, more especially as he fully believed Percy to be guilty of the meanness he had ascribed to him.

But for some unknown reason Lewis Flagg, who was usually the ringleader in all such little amenities, held his peace and had nothing to say.

CHAPTER XII.

DISCOVERY.

If Dr. Leacraft expected to be received with much enthusiasm on his return that evening he was destined to disappointment. The boys cheered him on his arrival, it is true, and came about him with inquiries for his injured son and congratulations on his partial recovery; but there was a certain restraint in the manner of the majority which to his experienced eye and ear told that all things had not gone quite well.

And that it was something more than the by-gone offence of the expedition to Rice's was evident. Only one-half of the boys were implicated in that affair; they had already been punished by the restrictions which had been placed upon them, and were to be further disgraced by the public reprimand which he intended to give them on the dismissal of the school; and these culprits were probably dreading this or some other severe punishment which would be meted out to them by the report of their misconduct which would be sent home. But there was something here beyond all this; the boys were looking askance at one another, and as if there were some new revelation to be made.

Mr. Merton would have spared the doctor the recital of any further disturbance until the morning; but the principal, having observed all this, would not be put off; the time was short, and if the matter were a serious one which required investigation, he must have knowledge of it at once.

Serious, indeed, the doctor thought it when he heard the tale: the disappearance of a hundred-dollar note confided by one boy to another, and the question as to who was responsible for it.

But was it certain that this responsibility lay solely between these two boys?

This was an idea which now presented itself to the minds of the two gentlemen, as it had before this to the minds of the pupils. It had been started by Raymond Stewart, who had said:

"How do we know that some one else has not been meddling with that money? I do not see that it follows no one could touch it but Seabrooke or Percy."

"That would say that there was a thief among us," said another boy, indignantly.

"That's about it," answered Raymond.

The boys had looked from one to another almost in dismay. Whatever their faults and shortcomings—and some of these had been grave enough—such an idea, such an implication as this had never before presented itself to them—that there was a thief in their midst, that one of their number had been guilty of flagrant dishonesty, of an absolute theft, and that of a large sum.

"That's a nice thing for you to say," broke forth Malcolm Ainslie.
"Whom do you accuse?"

"I accuse no one," answered Raymond. "I only said such a thing might be."

But Percy and Seabrooke had both scouted the idea; no one, they both said, knew that the former had intrusted his money to Seabrooke; no one had been present at the time, and both declared that they had spoken of it to no one.

But the suspicion aroused by Raymond was not set at rest by this, and an uncomfortable atmosphere

had reigned ever since, and, as has been seen, was remarked by Dr. Leacraft as soon as he returned home.

Thursday morning, and the closing day arrived, and there was a general feeling of shame and annoyance that such a cloud should be resting upon the school as its members separated even for a few days. It seemed now as if nothing could "come out," as the boys said, there was so little time for any investigation, for the pupils, none of whom lived at more than a few hours distance from Sylvandale, were to leave by the afternoon trains.

The morning lessons were to continue as usual, but those for the after part of the day were to be dispensed with.

The matron did the boys' packing, so that there were no especial calls upon their time before leaving.

"Henderson, are you ill?" asked Dr. Leacraft, coming into the junior class-room about eleven o'clock, and noticing that Charlie Henderson, the youngest boy in the school and a pattern scholar, was deathly pale, and supporting his head upon his hand. The boy was subject to frightful headaches, which for the time unfitted him for all study or recitation; and Seabrooke, who was hearing the lesson in progress, had excused him from taking any part in it. These headaches were of few hours duration; but the boy needed absolute rest and quiet to enable him to conquer them.

As he lifted his heavy, suffering eyes to the doctor's face,
Seabrooke answered for him.

"Yes, sir, he has one of his headaches, and is afraid he will not be able to go this afternoon. I have excused him from recitation, and was going to ask if he may go to his room. He is not fit to be here."

"Certainly. Go at once, my child," said the doctor, laying his hand kindly on the boy's throbbing head. "You must have a sleep, and ease this poor head before afternoon. You will feel better by train time."

Charlie rose with a murmured word of thanks, every step and movement adding a fresh pang to his pain, and went slowly from the room and up to the dormitory devoted to the younger boys.

But there seemed small prospect of quiet here. The matron and three housemaids were in the room, half a dozen trunks were standing here and there, bureau drawers and closets were standing open, and a general appearance of disorder attendant upon the packing for half-a-dozen boys reigned throughout the apartment.

Charlie gave a little groan of despair as he stood at the open door and looked in.

"Oh, Master Henderson, my dear!" ejaculated the matron, as she caught sight of the pale, suffering young face, "you've never gone and got one of your headaches to-day of all days. Such a hubbub as there is here. You can't come in, my dear; you'll never get rest for your poor head. Come to the other dormitory; we're all done there, and it's as quiet as a nunnery, and one can get to sleep, and sleep you must have if you are going home this afternoon. Come now; you have five hours to get rid of that good-for-nothing headache."

And the voluble but kind-hearted woman led the way to the dormitory of the older boys, where all was quiet and in order, and installed her patient on Percy Neville's bed, covered him, gave him the medicine prescribed for his relief, and having made him as comfortable as circumstances would permit, left him to the coveted rest and quiet in the half-darkened room.

The healing sleep was not long in coming, and for three hours or more Charlie lay motionless and lost to all around him, Mrs. Moffat coming once or twice to look in upon him, and depart with a satisfied nod of her head, confident that he would wake sufficiently restored to undertake the journey home at the appointed hour.

It was with a grave face that the doctor rose at the close of the morning lessons to dismiss his charge for the Easter holidays. His customary leave-taking was one simply of good-will and kind wishes for the enjoyment of his pupils, and for their return at the commencement of another term; but this time there was much to be said that was not so agreeable. To the younger boys he addressed only a few commendatory words, praising them for their fair progress and general good conduct, and wishing them a very pleasant holiday.

To those of the senior department he then turned with stern looks and tones, saying he had thought it but right to inform their parents and guardians of their misconduct during his absence. He did not intend to leave punishment entirely to them, however, but on the return of the boys to school, further restrictions would be placed upon their liberty, and many of their past privileges would be taken from

them for the remainder of the school year. He spoke severely, not only of the want of principle shown by the culprits, but alluded also to the lack of feeling they had shown in so defying his express wishes and orders at a time of such distress and anxiety to himself, although he did not dwell much upon this. But to those among them who had any sense of honor left, there was an added shame when this was presented anew to them, and as Percy afterwards said, he did "feel uncommonly mean and sneaky."

He must speak of another and still more painful matter, the doctor continued. A matter so serious that he felt he must allude to it before they separated. A large sum of money was missing under very mysterious circumstances; he believed that there was no need to enter into particulars. He wished and was inclined to think that some forgetfulness and carelessness lay at the bottom of this. Here Seabrooke's hand, which lay upon his desk, clenched itself, and a dark scowl passed over his face, while Percy glanced over at him with suspicion and resentment written on every feature, and a battery of eyes turned in his direction, not one among them with friendly look for himself.

But the doctor said there might be even a worse interpretation put upon the disappearance of the money, an interpretation he was both to entertain, but which must occur to all, namely, that some one had succumbed to temptation, and had appropriated the missing sum, which one of their number had been so positive he left in a safe place. Was it possible that there was one among the circle who would do such a thing? If so, let him make confession and restitution before he left to-day, and although he could not be suffered to return to the school, he might at least be spared the shame of confronting his schoolmates after discovery. For he would leave no stone unturned, he said, emphatically, to unravel the mystery; and if nothing came to light before to-night, he should at once place the matter in competent hands for its solution.

A dead silence fell upon the boys as he concluded, and if they had been uneasy and inclined to look askance upon one another before, how was it with them now? So the higher powers shared the suspicions which, they scarcely knew how, had made themselves felt among them since yesterday morning.

What an uncomfortable puzzle it all was! and who was to read the answer to the riddle? Had Seabrooke lost the money? Had Percy been guilty of possessing himself of his own property by such unjustifiable means? Or was one of their number an actual thief?

In a few more words Dr. Leacraft then dismissed the school, and the boys were free for discussion of the matter among themselves.

It was easy for Seabrooke to see, as it had been from the first, in which direction the current of opinion tended, and not caring to talk further upon the subject, he withdrew to the shelter of his own alcove.

Charlie Henderson, in the solitary dormitory, lay quiet and undisturbed, until, having nearly slept off his headache, he woke with the delightful sense of relief and peace which comes after the cessation of severe pain. He lay still, however, feeling languid, and waiting till some one should come whom he could ask for the cup of strong coffee which was always needed to perfect his cure, and thinking happily of home and the pleasure he anticipated in the holidays just at hand.

At last Mrs. Moffat put her head into the room. "Ah, Master Henderson, my dear," she said, at once appreciating the change in the situation, "so you're better. That's a dear boy"—as though it were highly meritorious in Charlie to have allowed himself to feel better. "Well, now, you must have your cup of coffee to tone you up for your trip. You lie still, while I see about it. There's lots of time yet, and I'm not going to send you home faint and miserable to your mother, and have her say there's nobody at Sylvandale Academy to look after her head-ache-y boy."

And she was gone, while Charlie, nothing loth, obeyed orders and lay almost motionless.

Suddenly quick footsteps came along the hall, and the door of the room, which Mrs. Moffat had left ajar, was pushed open and a boy entered—one of the older boys—and Charlie knew that his presence here would be questioned, and that he must hasten to explain.

Who was it? There were boys and boys belonging to that dormitory, and Charlie felt that he would rather be found there by some than by others. It was for this reason that he had chosen the bed of the good-natured, easy-going Percy to rest upon; he would "raise no fuss," or make him feel himself an intruder.

It was Lewis Flagg. Certainly he was not the one by whom Charlie would choose to be faced, and seeing that he was not perceived, he hesitated whether he should speak and reveal his presence, or pretend to be still asleep and trust to silence and good fortune to remain undiscovered.

But before he had quite made up his mind which course to pursue the matter was decided for him, and he found that he had no need to betray himself.

Lewis was upon business which necessitated haste and secrecy; and knowing that all the other legitimate occupants of the dormitory were below stairs, he never gave a thought to the possibility that there might be some one else there, and believed himself quite alone. His hurried movements were very mysterious to the young spectator.

Lewis went to the alcove occupied by Seabrooke, where his trunk, like that of the other boys, stood packed and closed, but not locked or strapped lest there should be "some last things to put in." He stooped over the trunk, lifted the lid, and taking something from his pocket, thrust it down beneath the contents, hastily closed it again, and darted from the room. The whole performance took but a moment, but there was an unmistakable air of guilt and terror about Lewis which did not fail to make itself apparent even to the inexperienced eye of Charlie.

[Illustration: AN UNSUSPECTING WITNESS]

"I wonder what he was doing. He hates Seabrooke; so he wasn't giving him a pleasant surprise," said the little boy to himself. "He's a sneak, and I suspect he was doing something sneaky. I've a great mind to tell Seabrooke to look in his trunk before he locks it. Perhaps he has put in something to explode or do some harm to the things in Seabrook's trunk or to himself."

Charlie was a nervous child and rather imaginative, and was always conjuring up possibilities of disaster in his own mind. He did not make these public; he knew better than to do such a thing in a house full of schoolboys, but they existed all the same. He did not wish to "tell tales;" but he had not too much confidence in Lewis Flagg—it would be hard to find the boy in the school who had, especially among the younger ones—and he could not bear to think that he might have planned some scurvy trick on Seabrooke.

Charlie was a pattern scholar, a boy after Seabrooke's own heart, because of his sincere efforts to do right; and hence he had found favor in his eyes, and he had shown many little tokens of partiality toward the child which had won for him the younger boy's gratitude and affection.

He lay waiting for Mrs. Moffat and trying to make up his mind what he had better do, when Seabrooke himself entered the room and went directly to his alcove, in his turn unconscious of Charlie's presence.

He looked troubled and harassed, as he well might do, and sat down for a moment, leaning his head upon his hand, and seemingly in deep thought.

Should he tell him? Charlie asked himself.

Presently with a sigh and a despondent shake of the head, to which he would never have given vent had he known that any one was observing him, Seabrooke rose, and going to his trunk proceeded to lock it.

It was too much for Charlie.

"Seabrooke!" he said, in a low tone, and raising himself from his pillows.

Seabrooke looked up, startled at finding that he was not the sole occupant of the room.

"Charlie," he exclaimed, "what are you doing here?" Then with a flash of recollection, "Oh! I suppose they put you here to sleep off your headache."

"Yes," answered Charlie, "and—Seabrooke—"

"Well, what is it?" asked the other, as the boy hesitated.

"Won't you look in your trunk—carefully—before you lock it?" said
Charlie.

"Why?" asked Seabrooke, much surprised, and thinking for a moment that Charlie's headache must have produced something like delirium.

"Oh, because," said Charlie, thinking how he could best warn Seabrooke and yet not betray Flagg, "because—there's something in your trunk."

"Of course there is," said Seabrooke, "lots of things, I should say—pretty much all I possess is there."

And he wondered as he spoke if he should ever bring any of his possessions back there again, whether, with this cloud, this suspicion of a possible betrayal of his trust resting upon him, he should ever return to Sylvandale school.

"But—" stammered Charlie, "I mean—Seabrooke—somebody put something there. I—I saw him—but he did not see me here. He's playing you a trick, I know. Do look."

Seeing that the boy was quite himself and thoroughly in earnest,
Seabrooke turned to his trunk and began taking the clothes out,
Charlie sitting up and watching him anxiously, and wondering what
would be discovered.

"It's in the left-hand corner in front," he said; and then there was silence for a moment.

Seabrooke laid aside half-a-dozen articles, then suddenly started to his feet with an exclamation, holding in his hand a creased and crumpled envelope, which he hastily opened, and took from it—Percy's hundred-dollar note!

He turned deathly pale and for a moment stood gazing at it as if stupefied.

"What is it? Percy Neville's money?" asked Charlie, who, in common with every other boy in the school, knew the story of Percy's lost banknote.

"Yes," answered Seabrooke in a stern, cold tone, "did you say you saw some one put it there?"

"Yes," said Charlie, "but you must not ask me who it was, for I cannot tell."

"You *must* tell me," said Seabrooke, striding up to the bed, "you *must* tell me. Who was it?"

"I won't, I won't; I will not," said Charlie, firmly. "I told you because I thought you ought to know some one went to your trunk; but I *won't* tell who it was."

"Ah, I know," answered Seabrooke; "no need to look very far. It was Neville himself. Who would have believed it of him, weak, miserable coward that he is? He would have set some one to search my trunk, I suppose, that it might be found there and prove me a thief."

"Percy Neville! It was not Percy! Oh, no!" exclaimed Charlie; "you ought not to say it."

"Who then? Tell me at once," persisted Seabrooke, just as Mrs. Moffat returned with the coffee, to find her young patient flushed and distressed, with Seabrooke standing over him in rather a threatening manner.

"I won't," repeated Charlie, "but it wasn't Percy."

"Hi! what's the matter? what is this?" demanded Mrs. Moffat. "If Master Henderson's been breaking any rules, you'll please not nag him about it now, Mr. Seabrooke. You'll have him all worried into another headache, and he is not fairly over this one yet, and he'll not be fit for his journey home."

Seabrooke paid no more attention to her than if she had not spoken.

"Do you hear me, Henderson?" he asked. "I *will* know."

"I won't—" began Charlie again; but Mrs. Moffat interposed once more.

"Mr. Seabrooke," she said, actually pushing herself between the two boys, the tray with the coffee in her hand, "Mr. Seabrooke, Master Henderson is under my care so long as he is in here, and I will not have him worried in this way. Let him alone if you please."

Seabrooke was blind and deaf to all her interference.

"I will know," he repeated. "I will bring the doctor here if you do not tell. Who was it?"

Charlie's eyes turned involuntarily towards the corner of the room occupied by Lewis Flagg's bed and other belongings, and Seabrooke caught the look. Quick-sighted and quick-witted, he drew his own inferences and attacked the boy from another quarter.

"It was Flagg, then," he persisted.

The color flashed up over Charlie's pale face, but he only answered sharply:

"I tell you to let me alone. You're real mean, Seabrooke."

"So he is," said Mrs. Moffat, "and I wish the doctor would come. We'd see if he'd have this sick boy put about this way, Mr. Seabrooke. I tell you I have the care of him now, and I'll not have him plagued this way."

But Seabrooke was gone before she was half through with this speech, and poor Charlie was left to take his coffee in such peace as he might with the dread hanging over him of being reported as a tell-tale. Mrs. Moffat's sympathy and her almost abuse of Seabrooke did him little good; he was very sensitive to praise or blame, and could not bear the thought of incurring the ill-will of any one of the boys.

CHAPTER XIII.

ACCUSATION.

Quiet and self-contained and little given to impulse as he was, Seabrooke, when roused to anger or resentment, was a very lion in his wrath, and there was one thing which he could never tolerate or overlook, and that was any attempt to take an unfair advantage of him. He had been exasperated to a great degree by Flagg's endeavor to drug him on the night of the expedition to Rice's, and that with good reason; and now his suspicions, nay, more than suspicions aroused that he was trying to make it appear that he, Seabrooke, had wrongfully kept Percy's money and then pretended that the latter had taken it from him by stealth, enraged him beyond bounds.

Striding in among the group of boys who were still discussing the very question of the disappearance of the money which had been the main topic of interest ever since the loss was discovered, the bank-note in his hand, he advanced directly to Flagg, who was taking an active part in the conversation—that is, he had been doing so within the last few moments, since he had returned after a short absence from the school-room, looking, as more than one of the boys observed, "flushed and rather flurried."

Indeed one boy had remarked:

"You seem to be short of breath, Flaggy; you're purring like a steam-engine. What ails you?"

"Can't a fellow take a run around the house without anything being the matter with him?" asked Lewis, sharply, but with a little nervous trepidation in his tone and manner; but the subject was now dropped, and he had more than recovered his composure and was taking an apparently interested part in the renewed discussion over Percy's loss, when the enraged Seabrooke entered the room.

"You scoundrel!" he ejaculated between his set teeth, and with his eyes actually blazing, "you stole this, did you?"—flourishing the note before the now terrified Lewis, who, taken thus by surprise, had no time to collect his wits and assume an appearance of unconcern and innocence. "You stole this, and to make it appear that I was the thief—the thief!—you put it in my trunk. Don't deny it," as Lewis endeavored to speak, "don't dare to deny it.—You were *seen* to do it!"

No other thought entered the head of the terrified Lewis than that Seabrooke himself had seen him at his shameful work, and that he had chosen to confront and convict him with it here in the presence of the rest of the school. He would have denied it could he have found words in which to do it, had he had time to frame a denial, but he was so entirely off his guard, so confounded by Seabrooke's sudden accusation and this evidence of the dastardly deed he had performed that he was utterly overwhelmed, and stood speechless, and the picture of detected guilt.

The doctor happened to be in one of the adjoining recitation rooms in conference with some of the other teachers over this very matter, and the raised tones—so very unusual—of Seabrooke's angry voice arrested his attention and called him into the main schoolroom.

To him Seabrooke, without waiting to be questioned, made known his complaint, and again displayed the note in proof thereof, accusing Lewis Flagg of stealing it and then placing it in his trunk for the purpose of criminating him, hoping that it might be found there before school broke up.

In this he did Flagg some partial injustice. Lewis had searched for and taken the money with the object of playing an annoying trick upon Seabrooke and Percy, but proposing, after giving both "a good fright," to put it back where he had found it, or in some other place in Seabrooke's alcove where he might be supposed to have mislaid it.

But once in his possession, the note excited his cupidity and a strong desire to keep it. If it were but his, he could easily clear off sundry debts which he had contracted, especially the remainder of that to Rice, which he had only partially satisfied. On his return to school after the Easter holidays it might well appear that he had an unusual amount of funds; a boy's relations were apt to be generous at such times, and no one need ever know the extent of his riches.

So reasoned this unprincipled boy, and he had actually made up his mind to make no attempt to restore the money to a place where it might be found, but to retain it for himself, when the doctor's address and a dread that his crime might after all be detected, decided him to return to his first intentions.

There was little time to be lost now. Seizing the first opportunity of slipping away from his schoolmates, he rushed upstairs to the dormitory with the design of throwing the note under Seabrooke's bed or bureau, where it might be supposed to have fallen; but seeing the trunk standing there ready packed, the impulse had taken him to put it in that, and without reflecting—perhaps hardly caring—that this would place Seabrooke in a still more embarrassing position, he thrust the note within, as Charlie Henderson saw, and fled from the room. He was rid of it in any event, and he cared little what the consequences might be to any one else, especially Seabrooke.

And now he was confronted with the evidence of his misdeeds, and even when he began to recover himself a little, knew not what to say, what excuse to make. And here was Dr. Leacraft awaiting his answer to Seabrooke's accusations, and regarding him with stern and questioning eyes.

The doctor was a just man, however, and would condemn no culprit unheard, and he had no proof that Lewis Flagg was the culprit in the present case, other than Seabrooke's asseverations and the boy's own guilty appearance. As the latter stood hesitating for words which would not plunge him deeper, Dr. Leacraft turned to Seabrooke.

"*Who* saw Flagg do this thing?" he questioned. "Did you, Seabrooke?"

"No, sir," answered Seabrooke, who was becoming more calm; "I did not see him myself, but he was seen to do it."

"By whom?" persisted the doctor.

Seabrooke hesitated. He was beginning to realize that he was placing Charlie Henderson in rather an unpleasant position: that young involuntary detective might be scouted at by the boys for the part he had taken in bringing Flagg to justice, for "telling." He knew that there were those among the older scholars who would make the child's school-life a misery to him if they heard that he had informed, and he would not betray him to them.

"Could I see you a moment alone, sir?" he asked the doctor.

Dr. Leacraft assented, and retired with Seabrooke to one of the adjoining class-rooms, bidding every boy remain where he was till their return.

Alone with the doctor, Seabrooke told his story and besought him not to let it be known that Charlie had been the unsuspected observer of Flagg's actions.

"The boy is as honest as the day, doctor," said Seabrooke.

"I know it; above suspicion. A most honest and loyal little fellow," said the doctor. "His secret shall be kept, if possible."

Then he went up to see Charlie, and received from him the fullest confirmation of all that Seabrooke had told; and he assured the boy that his knowledge of the transaction should not be betrayed to the others.

Charlie himself had taken such precautions against "being found out" as he was able to do; he would not even drink his coffee until he had persuaded Mrs. Moffat to let him go to his own dormitory, lest any of the "big fellows" should find him in their quarters. He told Mrs. Moffat enough to let her understand that he had unwittingly seen something he was not intended to see, and she, knowing enough of boys in general and of that senior class in particular, to be sure that Charlie would not go scot free, if the truth were known, hastened to comply with his request. Charlie had faith enough in Seabrooke to believe that he would not betray him if it were possible not to do so, and as no boy save he and Flagg had been into the dormitory, he hoped that it would not be discovered that he had been there.

And it was so; when the boys came up to make the final preparations for leaving, Charlie was in his

own room, all tokens of his presence in that of the senior class removed by Mrs. Moffat's willing hands, and no one suspected that the boy had slept off his headache in any other than his usual place.

During the doctor's absence, and when he had time to collect his thoughts a little, Lewis had made up his mind as to the course he would pursue. He was in a bad position, there was no doubt of that; but he resolved to brave it out and to treat the whole affair as a huge joke. He might be punished; there was little doubt but that he would be, and probably his misconduct would be reported at home, but he would make the best he could out of a bad business. As he did not know who it was that had seen him in the dormitory, he did not dare to deny having been there; his suspicions turned toward Mrs. Moffat, and as she was an old and trusted member of the household, he knew very well that her word would be taken at any time against his own, which had not too much credit with either teacher or scholars.

He broke forth into a hoarse, forced laugh, looking around him with defiance and an assured contempt upon the circle of his schoolmates, who were, one and all, regarding him with suspicion and unconcealed scorn. The most careless and reckless among them were shocked at the enormity of the offence with which he stood charged, a theft of such magnitude, and then the scoundrelly attempt to make it appear that another had been guilty of it.

"What a row about a small matter!" he exclaimed. "The whole thing was a joke; but I never thought it would be so successful as this, putting the whole school in a fever. See here; I did take that bank-note, of course. I wanted to see Seabrooke and Neville in a war over it, and then I was going to put it in some place here it would be found. I was going to throw it under Seabrooke's bed or somewhere; but I saw his trunk standing there, and the chance was too good to be lost. I knew he would find it there, and send it to Percy as soon as he reached home. If it hadn't been for old Moffat it would all have worked right."

Utter silence met this tissue of impudence, defiance, truth and falsehood, and he saw plainly enough that he was believed to have committed the theft of Percy's money for theft itself, pure and simple, and that fear of detection only had induced him to make the effort at restoration.

"I say, Neville," he continued, "you know I did not mean to keep the money, don't you?"

But Percy only turned contemptuously away without any reply in words.
None were needed. Lewis was answered.

"I'm going to do my best not to be sent back here," said Lewis, striving to continue his bravado, although his heart was sinking as he began to realize more and more in what a predicament he had placed himself. "Such a set of muffs, teachers and scholars, I never met. No one can take a joke, or even see it."

"I think it likely your efforts will be crowned with success," said Raymond Stewart, himself a boy of not too much principle, but who, in common with the rest of the school, had been inexpressibly shocked and revolted by Lewis' conduct.

"You are dismissed," said Mr. Merton, appearing at the door. "Lewis
Flagg, you are to go to the doctor in his study."

What sentence was meted out to Lewis in that interview with the doctor the boys did not know until their return to school after the holidays, when he did not appear among them, and they were told on inquiry that he would not do so.

He endeavored to brazen it out with Dr. Leacraft as he had with the boys, insisting that the whole affair, the abstraction of the money and the placing it in Seabrooke's trunk, was "only a joke;" but the doctor altogether refused to look upon it in any other light than that of an unmitigated theft and an atrocious attempt to fasten it upon another when he feared detection for himself.

No protestations to the contrary served Lewis' turn, and from this day forth his evil influence was happily lost to the school.

And this was the story which Percy had to pour into the ears of his innocent young sister on his return home.

On the first opportunity which presented itself the morning after his arrival at his uncle's he told her all, extenuating nothing of his own misconduct and weakness in the beginning, and acknowledging that he had almost wilfully suffered himself to be led into disobedience and wrong, and richly deserved all the shame and trouble which had fallen upon him.

Lena was inexpressibly shocked by the account of this last wickedness of Flagg's, for she, in common

with Dr. Leacraft and every one else who heard the tale, gave him credit only for the deliberate theft of Percy's money and then of the effort to throw it upon Seabrooke, either as an act of revenge or else because he feared that it would be found in his possession.

He returned to her the hundred-dollar note which had such a story attached to it, and in his turn had to hear from Lena her belief that the second sum sent for his relief had come from Hannah, and that the old nurse had sacrificed the gold which she had destined for her own glorification to his rescue from his predicament.

She reproached him for having appealed to Hannah, a servant in his father's house, for aid; and in her turn had to hear his reproaches for believing that he would condescend to such a thing, and received an emphatic and solemn denial that he had been guilty of this, or that he had ever let Hannah know of the straits he was in. He had never, he asseverated, spoken or written to any one concerning this, save herself; if he had done so it would have been to his indulgent uncle, Colonel Rush, to whom he would have applied.

How then had Hannah become possessed of his secret, was the question which the brother and sister now asked of each other and of themselves. Here was a mystery, indeed; for that it had been Hannah who sent that second hundred dollars could not be doubted after Miss Trevor's revelations. And why should she have sent the money unless she had known that Percy was in sore need?

"Did you tell Hannah anything about it?" he asked.

"No!" answered Lena, indignantly. "How could I tell her such a thing?
And you know how you told me I must never, never tell."

"And you did not show her my letter?" asked the puzzled Percy, who was by no means pleased, as may be imagined, by the knowledge that one other, at least, must share the secret.

"No," repeated Lena, still more vexed that he should suppose her to be capable of such an evasion, which to her sense of uprightness would have been as bad as speaking a falsehood by word of mouth; "no, of course I did not, that would have been telling her, would it not? One can *do* a falsehood as well as tell it," and although she had intended no reflection upon her brother, no thrust at him, Percy was ashamed as he remembered how often, during the last few months, he had done this very thing; how he had shuffled and evaded, and thought it no great harm as long as he did not put his falsehood into actual words.

"Well, no one knows how thankful I am to you, Lena, dear," he said.
"What can I ever do for you?"

"Tell Uncle Horace. I wish, oh, I do *wish* you would tell him," said his sister.

"Tell Uncle Horace; no, never!" exclaimed Percy. "I couldn't. Think of that look in his eyes when he hears of anything he thinks shabby or—well—dishonorable. He'd be ready to put me out of his house if he heard about that letter, even though we didn't know what was in it. I couldn't, Lena; I couldn't."

"I think it would be better for you," said his sister, "for Aunt May knew about Hannah and Miss Trevor, and she is sure to have told him. They have said nothing about it to me; but I know Uncle Horace will ask you, and then you must confess. It will be best to tell him without waiting till you must; he will not think so badly of you."

But Percy could not be persuaded to do this; he lacked the moral courage to follow his sister's advice and to confess all to his uncle before he should be obliged to do so, hoping that after all she might be mistaken and that he should still escape that humiliation. Since Colonel Rush had not spoken at once upon the subject, Percy believed that he would not do so at all, either because he had no knowledge of these money transactions or because he thought the matter of no importance.

"Why should Uncle Horace worry himself about Hannah's money?" he said to his sister. "She is nothing to him, and what she chooses to do with it is no business of his. She is not his servant."

"No," said the sensible and more far-sighted Lena; "but she is in his house. And you are his nephew and under his care, and he must think it strange that a servant would send you so much money and in such a secret way, and he must know that something is wrong; he must suspect that you are in some very bad scrape."

But Percy was still immovable. Easily swayed as he was in general, he was not to be influenced in the only right direction now, and all Lena's arguments were thrown away.

"But I say, Lena," he said, with a sudden change of subject and with his usual, easy-going facility for

putting aside for the time being anything which troubled him, "I say, isn't it queer that the girl you are all trying to win this prize for should be the sister of Seabrooke? How things do come around, to be sure. I can tell you he's as uppish as the Grand Panjandrum himself about it, too; says his sister is not an object of charity, and her father and brother are able to look after her."

"Oh, did you tell him? How could you, Percy?" exclaimed Lena. "And now he'll tell her, and we meant it to be a surprise to her if any one gained it for her. What will the girls say, Maggie and Bessie, and the others who are trying for her!"

"I let it out without intending to," said Percy. "I was so taken by surprise myself when Seabrooke told me what he intended to do with that money, that I just let it out without thinking. But afterwards I told him it was a secret, and he said he wouldn't say anything about it. But he was awfully high and mighty, I can tell you. You won't make the thing go down with him. But who is likely to win it,—you won't, of course, whatever your chances may have been in the beginning—any one of your chums? Maggie Bradford or Bessie, or those?"

"I don't know," answered Lena. "Maggie would, of course, if it were for the best composition written by the class; but it is not for that, you know, but for the greatest general improvement in composition. But so many of the girls are interested about Gladys Seabrooke that I think almost any of our class would give it to her. But it somehow seems as if Maggie or Bessie *ought* to have the pleasure because we are the ones who found her out. The girls are all going to Miss Ashton's on Saturday morning, when they will be told; and if any one gains the prize who will give it to Gladys Seabrooke, it will be sent to her as an Easter present."

CHAPTER XIV.

WHO WINS.

A damper had been thrown upon Lena's satisfaction in the belief that Gladys Seabrooke would probably be the recipient of the gift of Mr. Ashton's trust, by the assurance of her brother Percy that Seabrooke would be high and mighty and oppose the acceptance of it. She did not reflect that, having a father and mother, it was not at all likely that her brother's fiat would decide the matter for Gladys either one way or the other.

Her first thought and wish was to confide this doubt to Maggie and Bessie when she should next see them; but she presently felt that she could not well do this without in some measure, at least, betraying the heedless Percy. She did not dare to speak of his connection with Seabrooke, lest she should draw suspicion upon him after her confidences to Bessie. So she must needs keep this little fretting worry to herself, too.

There was the question about Hannah, also: how the money was to be returned to her, in the uncertainty as to how much she knew, and how she had acquired any knowledge of Percy's predicament; for that she knew something of it Lena was convinced; and yet the child was equally sure that that letter had never been out of her own keeping. Percy had at once put into her hand the hundred-dollar note, telling her that she must find means of conveying it to the old nurse. Oh, what a puzzle and a tangle it all was!

Poor little Lena! Truly she was having a hard time with all the perplexities and anxieties which Percy's worse than folly had brought upon her.

But one source of worry, in fact two, were to be lifted before long.

Colonel Rush, having waited for what he considered a sufficient length of time for Percy to make a confession had he been disposed to do so, resolved to bring him to it whether he would or no. That Percy had been in some serious difficulty, that he was in some way heavily involved, was very evident; likewise that Hannah knew of this and had sacrificed her much prized savings to rescue him.

At present he—the colonel—stood in the relation of parent to Percy and master to Hannah; he therefore felt that it was both his right and his duty to make inquiries and put matters straight, so far as he could.

On Saturday morning, therefore, he called the boy into his library and asked him if there were

anything which he would like to tell him, and receive his counsel and perhaps help. He made no accusation; did not tell Percy that he knew he had been involved in some trouble which had brought about the necessity—real or fancied—for him to free himself by the payment of this—for a boy—large sum. He put his question and offer kindly and freely, but in a way which showed his nephew he was not to be trifled with.

And, indeed, his uncle was the last man in the world with whom Percy would have chosen to trifle. Not his father, not Dr. Leacraft, had half the influence over him that this hero-uncle had, the brave, distinguished soldier whose very name was a synonym for all that was honorable and daring. There was no one in the world whose good opinion could have influenced him so much; no one whose scorn and disapprobation he so dreaded, or from whose reproof he would have shrunk. He had shown this when he had pleaded with Lena not to betray him to their uncle, of all people. He would really rather have borne some severe punishment at the hands of his parents or teacher than he would one contemptuous word or look from him who was regarded by all his young relations and friends as a chevalier *sans peur et sans reproche*. No prevarication, no shuffling would do here; if he said anything, if he answered at all, it must be the truth and nothing but the truth.

He hesitated for a moment, not from any intention of refusing to give his uncle his confidence, or denying that he had been in trouble, but from a desire to frame his confession in the best manner possible; but nothing came to his aid other than the plain, unvarnished truth; nothing else, he felt, would serve his turn here with that steady, searching eye upon him; and in a moment he had taken his resolve, and the whole shameful tale was poured into Colonel Rush's ears.

Bad as it was, it was not as bad as Colonel Rush had feared. Rebellion against lawful authority, rank disobedience and deception were to be laid at Percy's door, not to speak of the pitiable weakness which had suffered him to be led into this wrong, and the enormity of his at least passive acquiescence when Flagg had stolen Seabrooke's letter; still worse his own destruction of it, almost involuntary though it was. What he had apprehended the colonel would hardly have confessed even to himself; but the truth was that he had suspected Percy of nothing less than the appropriation of some sum which he was compelled to replace or to face open disgrace.

And yet Colonel Rush was not a suspicious man or one ready to believe evil of others, but circumstances had looked very dark for Percy, and there had seemed but one interpretation to place upon them.

And now, by Percy's confession, one part of the mystery was solved; but there still remained that of Hannah's presumed knowledge that he was in trouble and had been in sore need of money. Assuredly, Hannah, devoted as she was to the interests of her nurslings, especially Percy, would never have thought of making this sacrifice had she not felt that there was some pressing necessity; but how in the world had the old nurse acquired this knowledge. The nephew was as much puzzled as the uncle, and denied, with an indignation which seemed rather out of place in the light of past occurrences, any imputation that he had asked her to assist him.

But now, Percy inquired, could the colonel have the hundred-dollar note exchanged for gold so that it might be restored to faithful Hannah in the form in which she had always kept it. It was easy enough to do this, the colonel said; but the trouble would be to make Hannah confess that she had sent it, still more so why she had sent it. Colonel Rush would not say so to the children, seeing that no such idea had occurred to them, but it was his own opinion that Hannah had in some way obtained unlawful possession of Percy's letter to Lena, had mastered its contents, and then taken steps for his relief which she believed could not be discovered.

Of the kindly advice and admonition given to Percy by his uncle there is no need to speak further; but it resulted in making Percy feel that he would do anything rather than again run the risk of forfeiting the good opinion which he now valued more than ever.

Meanwhile, during the time that Percy was closeted with his uncle in the library, that portion of the members of the "Cheeryble Sisters' Club" which constituted the choice band of "Inseparables," namely Maggie and Bessie Bradford, Belle Powers, Lily Norris, and Fanny Leroy, having joined forces on their way to Miss Ashton's, had called in to see Lena. This had been done at the suggestion of the ever considerate Maggie, who, although naturally heedless about the little everyday business of life, never forgot to do "nice things" for others. When she was much younger, extreme carelessness had been her besetting fault, and, as is the manner of this "little fox," had created much trouble for herself and for others; but having become convinced that it was her duty to cure herself of this, she had set to work to do it in such earnest that that which had been a burden and a care to her was fast becoming a settled habit, and it was but seldom now that any act or word of heedlessness could be laid to her charge, while her ever obliging disposition and loving heart prompted many a deed of kindness which she never failed to carry out if it were in her power to do so.

"But we have to stop as we come back, to tell her that you have the prize," said Bessie.

"We will stop again and tell her who has gained it as we come back," answered Maggie. "But I think she will like it if we stop now, so that she will know we are thinking about her and are so sorry that she cannot be with us. But, Bessie, I think you are quite mistaken in believing so surely that I will have the prize. I know quite well that there are two or three who have improved in composition more than I have."

Bessie made no reply in words, but shook her head as if unconvinced. With Lena Neville and Gracie Howard out of the lists, she found it quite impossible to believe that any one but her own Maggie could be the successful competitor.

But all agreed that it would be well to call in and see Lena for a moment and let her be sure that she was not forgotten.

"And," said Maggie, "there is the doctor's carriage at the door. We will wait till he comes downstairs and ask him how soon Lena will be able to go about and have a little excitement, so that we can arrange about the fair. It is just a good chance for us. Then we will tell Lena what he says if he is encouraging."

Maggie and Bessie were almost as much at home in Colonel Rush's house as they were in their own, and had they chosen to go in and out twenty times a day, they would always have been welcome; and the young friends who accompanied them were about as much at their ease, although not one among the quintette would ever have been obtrusive or troublesome.

The doctor, who knew each one of them, being, as it happened, family physician to their respective households, was just about taking leave and was standing in the hall talking to Mrs. Rush.

"Hallo!" he said, his kindly face beaming upon the smiling flock who trooped in when Starr opened the door for them. "Hallo! what a bevy of birdlings! But how comes it that you are not at Miss Ashton's? I have just left my Laura there, and she is in a state of frantic expectation over this composition prize the finest authoress among you is to gain this morning. Are none of you interested?"

"Oh, yes, sir, all of us," answered Lily Norris, always ready to be spokeswoman; "we are going to Miss Ashton's in a few moments. But we are not to be there until twelve o'clock, and it is not that yet. And if the finest authoress is to have the prize, it will be Maggie's."

"So Laura seems to think," said Dr. Middleton, and shy Maggie, not caring to put forth in his presence any further disclaimer to the still undecided honors which her sister and friends seemed determined to put upon her head, smiled doubtfully.

"Doctor," she said, "would you mind telling me how soon you think
Lena will be able to bear a little excitement?"

The doctor looked grave.

"My child," he said, "I fear Lena is under more excitement now than is good for her." Then turning to Mrs. Rush, he added, "There is little use in expecting her to make rapid progress while she is fretting herself, as she is evidently doing, over some real or imaginary evil. Do you think it possible," an idea occurring to him, "that she is troubled about losing the chance to win this prize?"

"I scarcely think so," said Mrs. Rush. "She was even more than anxious for it at one time; but the principal object for which she wanted it is gained now, and she is not the child to fret herself over a disappointed ambition."

"Well," said the doctor, "find out the trouble if you can. You cure the mental ill and I will answer for the physical. But what is this excitement you are speaking of, Maggie?"

"We are going to have a fair, Doctor," answered Maggie. "We wanted to have it at Easter, but put it off because Lena is so lame and not strong enough, and we would like to know how soon she will be well enough."

The doctor thought a moment.

"Perhaps," he said, presently, "if she were interested in this fair it might do her good and take her mind from whatever is troubling her. Try it, Maggie; set the time for your fair at no distant date, and see what it will do for her. Good-morning, Mrs. Rush. Good-by, my Cheerybles." And the busy physician departed on his rounds.

"I believe it is the prize," said Lily, as the whole flock, bidden to do so by Mrs. Rush, mounted the stairs to Lena's room. "I know that Lena was perfectly crazy to have that prize so she could spite her father and mother—and I would be, too, if I were she—and I am sure she feels very badly about it."

"Why, Lily!" said Maggie.

"Well," said Lily, "I'm sure it's perfectly natural if she does—*such* a father and mother—specially mother. She's the kind that always think they're right, and she turned up her nose at Miss Ashton, and then she had to find out what a splendid teacher she is, and Lena improved so much in composition and everything else before she was burned that I expect she could have taken the prize even before Maggie. She just wanted her mother to *know* that she couldn't do a better thing than to leave her with Miss Ashton to the end of her days. And if you mean, Maggie, that I am not respectful in my speaking of Mrs. Neville, I know I am not, and I don't mean to be. Such an unmothery mother don't deserve any respect, and I'm not going to give it to her."

"Hush!" said Maggie, as they reached the door of Lena's room.

Lily's strong impression that Lena was unhappy because of her inability to compete for the prize was strengthened when she saw her, and the other children were inclined to agree with her, for Lena seemed so little disposed to talk upon the subject that they were all convinced that it was a disagreeable one to her. The only voluntary allusion she made to it was when Maggie bade her good-by with the promise of a return after the matter had been decided; then she drew her down to her and whispered, "I hope you will have it, Maggie, I hope you will."

Maggie smoothed her cheek, smiled, and said:

"Thank you, dear; but I would rather have you well so that we may have our fair. The doctor says he thinks you will soon be well enough to come to it, and we are only waiting for that now."

Then the little party left with a renewed promise to return and let her know how the day had turned, and took their way to Miss Ashton's.

All the "Cheeryble Sisters," save Lena Neville and Gracie Howard, were present, each one full of eager expectancy, although there was scarcely a doubt in any mind who would be the winner.

It had been impossible to induce Gracie to take any part or to show any interest in the competition, and she had resolutely refused to come with the rest of her classmates this morning, and there was no obligation upon her to do so, as it was now holiday time and this was something outside of the regular school duties.

Mr. Ashton, fond as he was of giving prizes and of stimulating the emulation of his niece's pupils, was content to bring matters to a speedy conclusion when the time arrived, and never detained the little girls long or kept them in suspense by tiresome speeches.

So now in a few words he praised them for their earnest and faithful efforts; said that he had been treated to a perusal of many of the compositions written during the last term in order that he might himself have an opportunity of judging whether Miss Ashton's verdict were just, and that he had been both surprised and gratified to observe the improvement made by almost every member of the class.

"But," he said in conclusion, "in comparing the compositions written at the commencement of the term of trial and those last submitted to Miss Ashton, I had, from my own unbiassed judgment, and before I had learned the choice of your teacher, decided that the one best entitled to the prize and the bestowal of this art education is Miss Bessie Bradford."

"Excuse me, sir; you mean *Maggie* Bradford," said Bessie, in her own quiet, demure little way, still unable to shake off her conviction that Maggie and no one but Maggie must be the winner, and believing that Mr. Ashton had merely mistaken the name of the sisters.

"No," said Mr. Ashton, smiling at her, "while giving all due credit to your sister Maggie's compositions, which I have read with much pleasure, I still repeat that no little girl in the class has made such manifest improvement as yourself, and to you both your teacher and myself award the prize."

"Thank you, sir," said Bessie, simply, but with a sparkle in her eye and a flush of pleased surprise rising to her cheek, "thank you very much. But, Miss Ashton"—turning to her teacher, "do you not think that if Lena had been able to try with the rest of us all the time, she would have been the one to gain this prize?"

Miss Ashton smiled kindly at her.

"Well, yes, Bessie," she said, with some seeming reluctance; "since you ask me so plainly, I must say that had Lena been able to continue in competition with the rest, I think she would have distanced every one. I never saw such rapid improvement as she was making; her whole heart seemed to be in it. My uncle was astonished at her progress in that short time."

"Then," said Bessie, rising, "I think she ought to have the prize. Please excuse me, sir,"—quaintly —"for saying *ought* to you and Miss Ashton, but it was not Lena's fault that she could not go on trying with the rest of us, but only because she was so very brave and unselfish in the fire. And if she improved so much in that time, she would have improved a great deal more; and I think the prize ought to be given to her. I am very glad you liked my compositions, sir, but it would be a great deal more prize for me if Lena had it. Please let her, Mr. Ashton. She has a very good and excellent reason, too, for wanting it so much; it is so that her father and mother will think Miss Ashton the best teacher that ever was, and let her stay with her a very long time."

In her earnestness to carry her point she had forgotten that she was saying so much; and she now stood looking from Mr. Ashton to his niece, quite unembarrassed, but evidently set in this purpose.

Mr. Ashton looked at her, then turned to his niece; there was a moment's whispered conversation between them, and then the gentleman addressed himself to the class.

"What do you all say?" he asked. "Do you all agree that since Lena Neville has been providentially prevented from continuing her efforts, and since she made so much improvement while she was able to enter the lists, that Bessie shall be permitted to resign this reward to her, and that she shall be the one to name the candidate for my trust?"

"Yes, sir; yes, sir," came without one dissenting voice from the young group.

"Then you shall have the pleasure of telling this to Lena, Bessie," said Mr. Ashton. "You have certainly fairly earned that right."

"And," said Bessie, looking round upon her classmates, "if everybody will be so kind as not to tell Lena that she was not chosen first. It would be quite true, would it not, to say that she had done so well at the first that we all thought it fair for her to have it?"

"It shall be as you say," said Mr. Ashton; then continued, "we all bind ourselves, do we not, to do as Bessie wishes and to keep this little transaction a secret among ourselves, making no mention to Lena Neville that the prize was not awarded to her in the first instance?"

"Unless she asks any questions; but I do not think she will," said conscientious Bessie.

Miss Ashton came over to her with her eyes very suspiciously shining, and stooping down kissed Bessie, saying, "You blessed child!" while Maggie, always readily moved to tears or smiles, as befitted the occasion, put her arms about Bessie's neck, and grasping her teacher's skirts with the other hand and laying her head against her, began to cry softly.

But sentiment and Lily Norris could not long exist in the same atmosphere, and she now exclaimed:

"How I wish we were all boys just for ten minutes, so we could give three cheers and a tiger for Bessie and three more for Lena. I suppose it wouldn't do, would it, Miss Ashton?"

"Hardly for little girls," said Miss Ashton, although she herself looked very much as if she were ready to lead a round of applause.

"Well, we can clap, anyway," said Lily, "that's girly enough," and she forthwith set the example, which was speedily followed by the rest, Mr. Ashton himself joining in from his post at his niece's desk.

"I'd like to give thirty-three groans for Mrs. Neville," said Lily, in an undertone, "but I suppose we couldn't."

There was little doubt that the whole class were even better pleased to have the decision given in favor of Lena than they had been for Bessie, favorite though she was, so strongly had their sympathies been aroused for the former.

Imagine the surprise and delight of Lena when the news was brought to her by her jubilant little friends. She could hardly believe it, hardly believe that in spite of her enforced absence from school, in spite of her inability to hand in her compositions for so many weeks, she had been the one to receive this much coveted opportunity, and that she was not only free to bestow it upon her own little country-woman, but that her own credit would redound to that of Miss Ashton.

Of how Gladys received the gift—for her parents set aside all Harley's objections to her doing so—of how she became warm friends with nearly all of our "Cheeryble Sisters," and of what came of that may be read later on in "Maggie Bradford's Fair."

End of Project Gutenberg's Bessie Bradford's Prize, by Joanna H. Mathews

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