

THE FAMILY AT MISRULE

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE FAMILY AT MISRULE

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THE FAMILY AT MISRULE.

BY
ETHEL TURNER,
AUTHOR OF

"SEVEN LITTLE AUSTRALIANS," "THE STORY OF A BABY," ETC

"Ah that spring should vanish with the Rose!
That youth's sweet-scented manuscript should close!"
THE RUBÁIYAT OF OMAR KHAYYÁM.

"To youth the greatest reverence is due."
JUVENAL.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY A. J. JOHNSON.

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TO
CHARLES COPE,
MY STEPFATHER AND FRIEND

E. S. T.,
LINDFIELD, SYDNEY.

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THE FAMILY AT MISRULE.

CHAPTER I. PICKING UP THREADS.

"Should auld acquaintance be forgot?"

There was discord at Misrule.

Nell, in some mysterious way, had let down a muslin frock of last season till it reached her ankles.

And Meg was doing her best to put her foot down upon it.

In a metaphorical sense, of course. Meg Woolcot at twenty-one was far too lady-like to resort to a personal struggle with her young sister.

But her eyes were distressed.

"You can't say I don't look nice," Nell said. "Why, even Martha said, 'La, Miss Nell!' and held her head on one side with a pleased look for two minutes."

"But you're such a child, Nellie," objected Meg. "you look like playing at being grown up."

"Fifteen's very old, *I* think," said Miss Nell, walking up and down just for the simple pleasure of hearing the frou-frou of muslin frills near her shoes.

"Ah well, I do think I look nice with my hair done up, and you can't have it up with short frocks."

"Then the moral is easy of deduction," said Meg drily.

"Oh, bother morals!" was Nell's easy answer.

She tripped down the verandah steps with a glance or two over her shoulder at the set of the back of her dress, and she crossed the lawn to the crazy-looking summer-house.

"Oh dear!" sighed Meg.

She leaned her face on her hands, and stared sadly after the crisp, retreating frills and the shimmer of golden hair "done up." This was one of the days when

Meg's desires to be a model eldest sister were in the ascendancy, hence the very feminine exclamation.

She had not altered very much in all these live long years—a little taller perhaps, a little more womanly, but the eyes still had their child-like, straightforward look, and the powdering of freckles was there yet, albeit fainter in colouring.

She still made resolutions—and broke them. She still wrote verses—and burnt them. To-day she was darning socks, Pip's and Bunty's. That was because she had just made a fresh resolve to do her duty in her state of life.

At other times she left them all to the fag end of the week, and great was the cobbling thereof to satisfy the demands of "Clean socks, Meg, and look sharp."

Besides darning, Meg had promised to take care of the children for the afternoon, as Esther had gone out.

Who were the children? you will ask, thinking five years has taken that title away from several of our young Australians.

The General is six now, and answers to the name of Peter on the occasions that Pip does not call him Jumbo, and Bunty, Billy. Nell, who is inclining to elegant manners, ventures occasionally in company to address him as Rupert; but he generally winks or says "Beg pardon?" in a vacant kind of way.

Baby also has become "Poppet," and handed down her name of long standing to a rightful claimant who disjoined the General's nose nearly three years ago and made our number up to seven again.

Just a wee, chubby morsel of a girl it is, with sunshiny eyes and sunshiny hair and a ceaseless supply of sunshiny smiles.

Even her tears are sunshiny; they are so short-lived that the smiles shine through and make them things of beauty.

The boys generally call her "The Scrap," though she is as big as most three-year-olds. She was christened Esther.

And Poppet is still a child,—to be nine is scarcely to have reached years of discretion.

She has lost her chubbiness, and developed abnormally long, thin legs and arms, a surprising capacity for mischief, and the tenderest little heart in the world.

So Meg's hands were fairly well filled for the afternoon, to keep these three young ones in check, darn the socks, and superintend kitchen arrangements, which meant Martha Tomlinson and the cook.

She had not bargained for the tussle with Nell too.

That young person was at a difficult age just now: too old—in her own eyes, at any rate—to romp with Bunty and Poppet; too young to take a place beside Meg and pay visits with Esther,—she hung between, and had just compromised matters by letting down her frocks, as years ago Meg had done in the privacy of her bedroom.

Her early promise of good looks was more than fulfilled, and in this long, pale blue muslin, and "picture" hat, cornflower-trimmed, she looked a fresh enough young beauty to be queen of a season. The golden hair had deepened, and was twisted up in the careful, careless way fashion dictated. The complexion was wonderfully pure and bright for Australia, and the eyes were just as dewy and soft and sweetly lashed as ever.

But not yet sixteen! Was ever such an impossible age for grown-up rights? Just because she was tall and gracefully built was no reason why she should consider herself fit to be "out," Meg contended—especially, she added, with a touch of sisterly sarcasm, as she had a weakness for spelling "believe" and "receive" in unorthodox ways, and was still floundering wretchedly through her first French author—*Le Chien du Capitaine*.

Poppet's legs dashed across the gravel path under the window; Peter's copper-toed boots in hot pursuit shone for a second and vanished.

"Where's Baby, I wonder?" Meg said to herself.

The child had been playing with a chair a little time back, dragging it up and down the verandah and bumping it about noisily; now all was silent. She went to the foot of the stairs, one of Bunty's socks more "holey" than righteous drawn over her hand.

"What you doing, Essie?" she called.

"Nosing, Mig," said a little sweet voice from a bedroom,— "nosing at all."

"Now, Essie!"—Meg's voice took a stern note,— "tell me what you are doing!"

"Nosing," said the little voice; "I'se velly dood."

[image]

"I'SE VELLY DOOD."

"Quite sure, Essie?"

"Twite; I isn't dettin' wet a bit, Miggie."

Up the stairs Meg ran at a swift pace; that last speech was eminently Baby's, and betokened many things.

"Oh, you wicked child!" she cried, and drove an unsummoned smile away from her mouth corners.

The big water-jug was on the floor near the washstand, and small Essie with slow and deep enjoyment was standing with one wee leg in the jug and the other on the oilcloth. The state of the lace sock and little red shoe visible betrayed the fact that the operation had been reversed more than once.

This was an odd little characteristic of Essie's, and no amount of scolding and even shaking could break her of it. Innumerable times she had been found at this work of iniquity, dipping one leg after the other in any water-jugs she found on the floor. And did Martha, in washing floors, leave her bucket of dirty water one moment unguarded, Essie would creep up and pop in one little leg while she stood her ground with the other.

Meg dried her, scolding hard all the time. "All your shoes are spoiled, Baby, you naughty girl; what *am* I to do to you?"

"Velly solly," said Baby cheerfully.

She squeezed a tear out of her smiling eyes when Meg bade her look at the ruin of her pretty red shoes.

"And you told me a story, Essie; you said you were good, and were not getting wet."

Meg held the little offender away from her, and looked upon her with stern reproach.

"But on'y my legs was dettin' wet—not me," explained Essie, with a sob in her voice and a dimple at the corner of her mouth.

There was nothing of course to be done but put the water-jug into its basin, and carry the small sinner downstairs in dry socks and ankle-strap slippers that showed signs of having been wet through at some time or other.

Bunty was lying on his back on the dining-room couch, which Meg had left strewn with footwear waiting to be paired and rolled up.

"Oh, John!" she said vexedly, seeing her work scattered about the floor.

"John" took no notice. I should tell you, perhaps, that, since starting to school, Bunty's baptismal name had been called into requisition by authorities who objected to nicknames, and his family fell into the way of using it occasionally too.

He was a big, awkward lad, tall for his thirteen years, and very loosely built. Nell used to say complainingly that he always looked as if he needed tightening up. His clothes never fitted him, or seemed part of him, like other boys' clothes. His coats generally looked big and baggy, while his trousers had a way of creeping up his ankles and showing a piece of loose sock.

In the matter of collars he was hopeless. He had a daily allowance of one clean one, but, even if you met him quite early in the morning, there would be nothing but a limp, crooked piece of linen of doubtful hue visible. He had the face of a boy at war with the world. His eyes were sullen, brooding—his mouth obstinate. Every one knew he was the black sheep. He knew it himself, and resented it in silence.

Poppet understood him a little—no one else. He was at perpetual enmity with his father, who had no patience with him at all. Esther excused him by

saying he was at the hobbledehoy stage, and would grow up all right; but she was always too busy to help him to grow. Meg's hands were full with Pip; and Nell, after a try or two to win his confidence, had pronounced him a larrikin, undeserving of sisters at all.

So Poppet undertook him. She was a faithful little soul, and in some strange way just fitted into him, despite his awkward angles.

Sometimes he would tell her things, and go to a great deal of trouble to do something she particularly wanted; but then again he would bully her unmercifully, and make her life not worth living.

"Why don't you play cricket, or do something, John?" Meg said, snipping off an end of cotton very energetically. "I hate to see a great boy like you sprawling on a sofa doing nothing."

"Do you?" said John.

"What made you so late home from school? It's nearly teatime. I hope it wasn't detention again."

"It was," said John.

"Oh, Bunty, that means Saturday taken again, doesn't it?"

"It does." John rolled over, and lay on his other side, his eyes shut.

"Bunty, why *don't* you try?" Meg said; "you are always in scrapes for something. Pip never got in half so many, and yet *he* wasn't a model boy. Will you promise me to try next week?"

There was a grunt from the sofa cushion that might be interpreted at will as negative or affirmative.

Nell came into the room, her hat swung over her arm.

"Get up, John," she said; "what a horrid boy you are! Look at your great muddy boots on the sofa! Meg, I don't know how you could sit there and see him. Why, if we sat down, we'd get our dresses all spoiled."

"Good job too," said John, not moving a hand.

Nellie regarded him with frankest disgust. "What a collar!" she said, a world of emphasis on the "what." "I declare the street newsboys and match-sellers look more gentlemanly than you do."

The tea-bell rang upstairs; John sat up instantly.

"I hope you saved me more pudding to-day, Meg," he said. "I never saw such a stingy bit as you kept yesterday."

Nell's scarlet lips formed themselves into something very like "pig" as she turned on her heel to leave the room. Then she said "Clumsy wretch!" with startling suddenness. John had set his "great muddy boot" down on one of her pretty flounces, and a sound of sundering stitches smote the air.

"Beg pardon," said John, with a fiendish light of triumph in his eyes. Then he went upstairs two steps at a time to discuss his warmed-up dinner while the

others had tea.

CHAPTER II. SCHOOL TROUBLES.

"A heart at leisure from itself
To soothe and sympathise."

Poppet and Peter were discussing many things in general, and the mystery of life in particular. They were sitting crouched up together in an old tank that had been cast out in the first paddock because it leaked. It was after tea, and Poppet had a little dead chicken in her hand that she had picked up in the garden.

"Ith got wheelth inthide it, and when they thop ith deaded," Peter was saying,— "thust like my thteam engine, thath what tith."

"I think being alive is very funny," Poppet said, looking earnestly at the little lifeless body. "All those chickies was eggs, and then sud'nly they begin running about and enjoying themselves, and *then* sud'nly they tumble down dead, and even the doctor can't make them run again."

"Yeth," said Peter, his eyes very thoughtful as he tried to grasp great things. "Prapth you might tumble down like that, Poppet; all *your* wheelth might thtop."

"Or yours," urged Poppet. Death was in her hand. She did not like to feel that ever her active little body could lie like this fluffy, silent one, and so made the likelihood more general.

"Yeth," said Peter; "and *oneth*, Poppet, I nearly *wath* deaded, and Judy thaved me."

"*You* don't remember," Poppet said, in a voice of great scorn. "You was only a little, tiny baby, just beginning to walk, Peter. But I was there, and remember *everything*."

"You wath athleep, Poppet," Peter objected,—Poppet's air of superiority irritated him. "Meg told me about it when I had the meathleth, and the thaid that you wath athleep, tho there!"

"At any rate, Peter, I think you are old enough to stop lispng," Poppet said severely, finding herself worsted. "You are six now, and only babies of ten months lisp. *I* never lisped at all."

Peter went red in the face.

"I don't lithp; you're a thtory-teller, Poppet Woolcot!" he said, drawing in his tongue with a great effort at straight pronunciation.

Poppet jeered unkindly, then she caught sight of Bunty strolling aimlessly about the garden, and she squeezed herself out of the tank and stood upright.

"Don't go," said Peter. "Leth play Zoo, Poppet, and you can be the lion thith time, and I'll feed you!"

But not even this inducement had any effect.

"I want to talk to Bunty," the little girl said, looking across with a half-troubled light in her eyes to where Bunty's old cap was visible. "I can play with you when he's at school. You can go and have a game with Baby."

She went away, leaving him disconsolate, and crushed herself through a broken paling into the garden.

She would like to have gone up to Bunty and slipped her arm through his and asked him what had made him so exceptionally glum and silent these last few days.

But she knew him better than that. She was very wise for her nine years.

She fell to weeding her garden with great industry while he was walking on the path near it. Then when he rambled farther away, she hovered about here and there, now plucking a flower, now giving chase to a great praying mantis. She was within a few feet of him all the time.

"What *are* you buzznaccing about like this for?" he said at last irritably, when her short holland frock appeared at every path he turned down. He threw himself down on the grass, and pulled his cap over his eyes.

"Flibberty-Gibbet had a tic in his head this morning," said the little girl, sitting down beside him Turk fashion.

"Well, *I* don't care," Bunty said, with almost a groan.

A look of anger crept up into the little sister's, earnest eyes.

"I 'spect it's that old Burnham again," she said wrathfully. "What's he been doing *this* time?"

Bunty groaned again.

"Was it your Greek?" she said, edging nearer. "Howid stuff! As if you could be expected to get it right *always*!"

There was another smothered sound from beneath the cap.

"Was it that nasty algebra?" said the little, encouraging voice. It was so tender and anxious and loving that the boy uncovered his eyes a little.

"I'm in the *beastliest* row, Poppet," he said.

Poppet's little, fair face was ashine with sympathy.

"I'd like to *hammer* that Mr. Burnham," she said. "How did it happen, Bunty?"

Bunty sat up and sighed. After all, it would be a relief to tell some one; and

who better than the faithful Poppet?

"Well, you know Bully Hawkins?" he said.

"Oh yes," said the little girl; and she did, excellently—by hearsay.

"Well, on Monday he was on the cricket pitch practising, and Tom Jackson was bowling him—he'd made him. And when I went down—I was crossing it to go up to Bruce—he jumped on me, and said I was to backstop. I said I wasn't going to—why should I go after his blooming balls?—and he said he'd punch my head if I didn't. And I said, 'Yes, you do,' and walked on to Bruce. We were going to play marbles. And he came after me, and hit me over the head and boxed my ears and twisted my arms."

"Bully!" said Poppet, with gleaming eyes. "What did you do, Bunty? did you knock him down? I hope you made his nose bleed,—I'd—I'd have *flattened* him!"

Bunty gave her a look of scorn.

"He's sixteen, and the size of a prize-fighter!" he said. "I'd have been half killed. No; Mr. Burnham was just a little way off, and I let out a yell to him, and he came up and I told of him."

"Bunty!" said Poppet. The word came out like the report of a pistol, and her red lips shut again very tightly to prevent any more following.

[image]

"MR. BURNHAM CAME UP AND I TOLD OF HIM."

This touch of cowardice, this failure to grasp simple honour in Bunty's character, was a perpetual grief and amazement to her little fearless soul. But he would brook no advice nor reproach from her, as she knew full well, and that is why her lips had closed with a snap after that one word.

But he had seen the look of horror in her eyes.

"D'ye think I'm going to be pummelled just as that brute likes?" he demanded angrily. "He's always bullying the fellows in our form, and it'll do him good to get a taste of what he gives us. Mr. Burnham said he hated a bully, and he just walked him up to the schoolroom and gave him six."

Still Poppet was silent; her face was flushed a little, and she was pulling up long pieces of grass with feverish diligence. In her quick little way she saw it all, and felt acutely just how the boys would look upon Bunty's behaviour.

"What an idiot you are, Poppet!" he said irritably, as she did not speak; "as though a bit of a girl like you knows what it is at a boys' school. I'm sorry I told you—I—I won't tell you the rest."

Poppet choked something down in her throat.

"Do tell me, Bunty," she said; "I didn't mean to be howid. Go on—I only couldn't help wishing you could have foughted him instead of telling, because—well, I espect he'll be worse to you than ever now, and the other fellows too."

"That's it," Bunty said, with a groan. "Oh, but that's not half of it yet, Poppet. I almost wish I was dead."

Something like a tear forced itself beneath his eyelids and trickled down his cheeks. Poppet's heart expanded and grew pitiful again instantly. His face was close to her knee, and wore so miserable an expression that in a sudden little burst of love she put down her lips and kissed him half-a-dozen times.

He sat up instantly and looked ashamed.

"How often am I to tell you I hate mugging?" he said gruffly. "If you go on like this, I won't tell you."

"I beg your pardon," Poppet said very humbly; "really, I won't again, Bunty. Do go on."

"Well, after that, I went round the side of the school—you know that path, near the master's windows. Well, I'd nothing much to do, and the bell hadn't gone, and I was just chucking my cricket ball up and down; there was a tree, and I tried to make it go up in a straight line just as high, and the next minute I heard a crash, and it had gone through Mr. Hollington's window."

"Good gracious!" Poppet said, with widening eyes; then she gave a little joyful jump. "I've got thirteen shillings, Bunty, from the pound Mr. Hassal gave me; I'll give it to you to get it mended with. Oh, it won't be such a very bad row; you can 'splain it all to Mr. Hollington."

"That's not all," Bunty said. "Thirteen shillings! You might as well say ha'pennies. I stood there for a bit and no one came, and at last I went in and looked about, and what do you think?—no one had heard!"

"Oh!" breathed Poppet. She scented the old trouble again.

"But you see it was such an awful crash. I knew it was more than the window. And every one was out in the playground,—even Mr. Burnham had just gone out again for something, and Mr. Hollington had gone home early. So I first went quietly upstairs, and no one was about, so I went into his room to get the ball, because my name was on it. And there were two glass cases on top of one another under the window with eggs and specimens and things in, and they were all smashed."

Poppet drew a long breath that ended in a whistle. She was wishing she had not bought that set of gardening tools that cost six shillings, and that shillingworth of burnt almonds—perhaps a sovereign—

"It wasn't school-time," Bunty was whispering now, "and no one had seen—not a soul, Poppet. Poppet, it was an accident; why should I go and tell of myself?"

Why, I might have been expelled; and think what the governor would say. So——”

”Yes,” said Poppet steadily, ”go on, Bunty.”

He had paused, and was digging up the earth with his broken pocket-knife.

”So—go on.”

”So, when we were all in afternoon school, Mr. Burnham came in and asked who did it.”

”Yes, Bunty—*dear*.” A red colour had crept up into the little girl’s cheeks, her eyes were full of painful anxiety. ”You said you had, Bunty—didn’t you, Bunty dear? Oh, Bunty, of *course* you said you had.”

”No, I didn’t,” burst out her brother. ”How could I after that, you idiot you? What is the good telling you things? Why I didn’t know what would have happened. When he asked us separately I just said ’No’ in a hurry, and then I couldn’t say ’Yes’ after, could I?”

Again Poppet was silent, again there was the look of amaze and grief in her wide, clear eyes. Bunty pulled his old cap over his face again—he hated himself, and most of all he hated to meet the honest, sorrowful eyes of his little sister.

”Couldn’t you tell now, Bunty?” she said softly. ”Go to-night—I’ll come with you to the gate—oh, do, Bunty dear. Mr. Burnham is not vewy howid perhaps, and canings don’t hurt vewy much—let’s go to-night, and by to-morrow it’ll all be over.”

”It’s no good.” A sob came from under the cap. ”Oh, Poppet, it’ll be awful to-morrow! Oh, *Poppet!* Some one had seen, after all. Just as I left school Hawkins came up to me. He hadn’t been there when Burnham asked us, and didn’t hear anything till after school, and he said he saw me coming out of Hollington’s room, and creeping down the passage with a cricket ball in my hand, and he went in to report it to Burnham just as I came home, to pay me out for getting him a swishing.”

Poppet was crying, though she hardly knew it. Such a terrible scrape, and such a lie at the back of it—what could be the end of it?

”Oh, Bunty!” she said, and put her face right down in the long grass. The earth and the tears got mixed, and smirched the clearness of her skin—there was a wet, black smudge all down her poor little nose.

”Poppet!” cried Meg’s voice, preceding her down the path in the dusk. ”Are you really sitting on the grass again when I’ve told you so often how wet the dew makes it? John, how can you let her, when you know how she coughs! Go to bed at once, Poppet, it’s after eight; and you haven’t touched your home-lessons, John—really it’s one person’s work to look after you—and where is that coat with the buttons off?”

”On my bed,” ”John” said sulkily.

”I wish you’d hang it up—what’s the use of pegs? Poppet, go in when I tell

you—don't be naughty. Now, John, go and start your lessons. You'd better do them in your bedroom, you make such a litter downstairs."

Meg turned to go back, Poppet's reluctant hand held fast.

"Can't I stay five minutes, *please*, Meg?" the little girl said, looking up beseechingly.

Even in the fading light Meg saw the sweet brimming eyes and quivering little lips.

"John!" she said angrily, "you've been bullying the poor little thing again; I simply *won't* have it—I shall speak to father."

"Oh, shut up!" said John; and he moved away wearily up to the house.

CHAPTER III. A PASSAGE AT ARMS.

"Oh the day when thou goest a-wooing,
Philip, my king."

Meg was a little "put out," as it is popularly called, this evening,—she was not generally so short with the young ones. The good fit had worn away during the endless process of darning, and she had jumped up at last, stuffed all the work into the gaping stocking-bag, and said to herself that eldest sisters were mistaken and wrongful institutions.

But that did not give Baby Essie her tea, nor yet put her lively little ladyship to bed; and since Esther was out, there was no one else to undertake it.

And when that was done Pip came in and asked her in his off-hand manner to "just put a stitch in that football blazer."

The stitch meant a hundred or two, for it was slit from top to bottom.

And then Esther came home—a quieter Esther, an Esther of less brilliant colouring than you used to know, for there are not many "fast colours" beneath Australian skies—and with her the Captain, grown more short-tempered with the lapse of years, and an income that did not grow with his family. And again it was "Meg."

The seltzogene was empty. The Captain asked some one to tell him what was the use of having a grown-up daughter—he could not answer the question himself.

The lamb was a shade too much cooked, and the Golden Pudding a shade too little. He wanted to know whether Meg considered it below her to superintend domestic matters. In his young days girls, etc., etc. She went from the dinner-table at the end of the meal with hot cheeks.

"I never chose to be eldest—I was made so; and I don't see I should be scapegoat for everything!" she said, sitting down on the arm of the lounge on which lay six feet of the superior sex in the shape of Pip.

There was a wrathful look in her blue eyes, and she had ruffled her fair hair back in a way she always did in moments of annoyance.

"Why don't you make that conceited little chit help?" Pip said between puffs at his cigar.

"Nellie!" ejaculated Meg in surprise.

"Yes, Nellie," said Pip. He looked across to where she was making a picture beautiful to the most critical eye in a hammock a yard or two distant. "Is her only mission in life going to be looking pretty?"

"Oh," Meg said, "she's too young, of course, Pip. Why, she's only fifteen, though she is so tall! Oh, of course it can't be helped—only it's annoying. But what have you got your best trousers on for, Pip, again, and that blue tie? You had them last night and the night before!"

Pip's handsome face coloured slowly.

"You've got a fair amount of cheek of your own, Meg," he said, collecting the cigar ash in a little heap very carefully, and then blowing it away with equal industry. "I wonder when you'll learn to mind your own business. I should imagine I'm old enough to choose my own clothes."

"Only she's a horrid, vulgar girl, that's all," Meg said slowly, and colouring on her own account. "Pip, I don't know how you can, really I don't—a common little dressmaker. Oh yes, we know all about it; Peter saw you last night, and Poppet the night before."

"Peter be—Poppet be— What the deuce do you mean spying after me?" stormed Pip, sitting upright and looking wrathfully at his sister. "If I choose to take a walk with a pretty girl, is it any concern of yours?"

[image]

"PRETTY!" SAID NELL—'PRETTY! WHY, SHE BLACKENS HER EYEBROWS, I'M CERTAIN.'"

"Pretty!" said Nell, who had come up at his raised voice,— "pretty! Why, she blackens her eyebrows, I'm certain; and you should have seen her hat last

Sunday—a green bird, some blue, lumpy plush, and a bunch of pink chiffon.”

”Upon my word,” said Pip,—he was white with anger, and his eyes blazed,—”upon my word, I’ve got two nice sisters. Trust a girl for running down another pretty one. You’re jealous, that’s what it is, because you know you can’t hold a candle to her.”

”Her father sells kerosene and butter—he’s a *grocer!*” Nellie said, with a fine swerve of her delicate lips. ”Upon *my* word, Pip, I should think, with all the pretty girls there are about here, you might fall in love with a lady.”

”She *is* a lady,” Pip contended hotly. ”She works with her needle, perhaps—she’s not been brought up in selfish idleness like you girls—but her manners are a long sight better than yours, and she’d blush to say small-minded things like you do.”

It occurred to Meg that it *was* small-minded, and she said no more.

But there was nothing Nellie enjoyed more than a sparring match with her eldest brother when the advantage was on her side, and had he not called her a conceited chit?

”There’s one thing—you’d get your groceries at a reduction,” she said meditatively. ”I think their sardines are only 5-½*d.* a tin; they’d let *you* have them for 5*d.* perhaps, considering all you’ve spent in chocolates and eight-button gloves. Meg, I *did* think that packet of lovely gloves in his bedroom was for his dear little sisters, until—”

”Until you forfeited them by your abominable behaviour!” Philip cried je-suitically.

But Nellie gave him a pitying glance. ”Until I saw the size was too utterly impossible for the hands of ladies,—o-o-h, Pip, don’t, you hurt me—ah-h-h, you’re bruising my arm—stop it, Pip!”

Pip was twisting her soft, muslin-covered arms back in the torturous way boys learn at school, and in a minute she was compelled to call for mercy.

”Down on your knees!” he cried, forcing her down into that humble position. ”Now, apologise for all the caddish things you’ve said about Miss Jones; begin at once,—now, one, two, three—say, ’I apologise.’”

”Never!” screamed Nell, struggling desperately; ”I’ll die first,—o-o-h, ah-h-h, oh—’I—I—I apologise’—you donkey!”

”More than that,—’I should be glad to be half as beautiful and good and lady-like.’”

”B-beautiful and good and l-l-lady-like,” repeated Nell, with a gasp and a cry between each word. ”Oh, Meg, make him stop!”

”I only said those caddish things because I was jealous of her superiority’—hurry up, now!” A scientific turn accompanied his sentence.

”C-caddish things because I was jealous—superiority,—oh, Pip! Meg!

somebody, quick—he's half killing me!" Tears of pain and mortification had started to her eyes.

"Let her go, Pip," Meg said; "you really hurt." She pulled at his arm, and he released his victim, who fell in a heap on the floor, and said he was "a h-h-horrid w-wretch, and she w-wished she had no brothers."

Pip picked up his hat and settled his pale blue tie, which had become somewhat disarranged.

"Good-night; I hope you'll learn and inwardly digest your lesson, my child," he said, going out upon the gravel.

But Nellie sprang to her feet, and called after him all down the path till he reached the gate, "Candles, sardines, needles and pins, size nine gloves! ask her what she blacks her eyebrows with!"

Meg was looking troubled. She was sitting on the lounge he had quitted, and her fair brows were knitted beneath the soft, straying hair.

"Nell dear, it *is* vulgar," she said, "and it *is* small. I don't know where the distinction of ladies comes in if we say things like that. Perhaps the little dress-maker really wouldn't."

"But we are ladies," Miss Elinor said, her small head in the air,—"nothing can alter that. Our father is a gentleman, our mother was a lady—we are ladies."

"Not if we act like servant girls," Meg said quietly. "If you found a bit of glass under all the conditions you'd expect to find a diamond, and yet it didn't shine like a diamond, then it wouldn't be a diamond, would it?"

"Now don't get elder-sistery and moralous," said Nell; albeit she was a trifle ashamed, for she prided herself certainly upon being a little lady to her boot toes. "Meg, I thought of doing up that white crepon Esther gave me into a kind of evening dress, just for little evenings, you know, at the Baileys or Courtneys, or anywhere, or when we have people here. Would you make the body as a blouse with big frills over the shoulders, or with a yoke and gathered into the waist? The blouse way would be easier, for there's no lining, you know."

"Oh, the blouse, I think," Meg said, half abstractedly. "Do you know if Pop-pet has gone to bed, Nell? I don't think I saw her come in, and her cough was bad last night."

"I don't know. Meg, I'll give you half-a-crown for that silver belt of yours; I've got a little money left in my allowance yet, and you never wear it. Half-a-crown would buy you a new book, or one of those burnt straw sailor-hats, and the belt would look lovely with the white dress." The younger girl looked persuasively at the elder.

"But I gave seven-and-sixpence for it," Meg objected, "and it's nearly new."

"But you never wear it—what's the good of a thing you don't wear?" contended Nellie, who had set her heart upon it. "If you think it's too little, say two

shillings and that light blue blouse of mine that you like.”

Meg put the blouse on mentally.

”Well, I like myself in pale blue,” she said; ”yes, I’ll do that—only I hope it’s not torn or anything. Oh! and Nell, I think you might go and see if Poppet is in the garden; I’ve done ever so much to-day, and you’ve only been reading.”

But Nellie was comfortably in the hammock again among the cushions.

”Oh, Poppet never does anything *I* tell her,” she said; ”you’d better get her yourself—all the children mind you more than me, you have so much more patience, Megsie.”

So it was Meg who had disturbed the important *tête-à-tête* between Bunty and his little sister; Meg who had separated them abruptly, almost unkindly, at a crisis of great moment; and Meg who had seen the little girl actually into bed, and administered a dose of eucalyptus against the cough.

But it was also Meg who went down in the drawing-room presently, and played Mendelssohn’s tender, exquisite Love Song, and a rippling, laughing little bit of Grieg, and a Sonata of Beethoven’s, to a father half asleep on the sofa and a young man very wide awake on a neighbouring chair.

And it was Poppet who made hay, and crept along the passage in her little nightgown to the room where Bunty was sitting with his head on his arms and misery in his eyes.

And it was Poppet who, after torrents of abuse and vituperation from the unhappy lad, succeeded in extracting a promise that he should own up everything bravely in the morning, and not shirk his punishment whatever it was.

CHAPTER IV. A SUMMER’S DAY.

”Happy in this, she is not yet so old
But she may learn; happier than this,
She is not bred so dull but she can learn.”

The next day was exceedingly hot, one of those moist, breathless days that make February the most unpleasant month in the year to Sydney folks.

Every one in the house felt utterly limp and cross and miserable, and daily duties were performed in as slipshod and languid a manner as possible. The cook

had made a great pan of quince jam, and brought it into the breakfast-room on a tray for Esther to tie down. And Esther was sitting in the rocking-chair trying to make up her mind to do it, and wondering whether it would be easier to use string or paste. Small Esther was making a terrible noise. She owned dolls and bricks, little tea-services, and baby furniture—all the toys that well-regulated little girls are supposed to love; she generally tired of them, however, after a few minutes' play.

At present she had made a tram of six heavy leather chairs, with the arm-chair for "motor," and her little sweet face was scarlet and wet with the exertion of dragging them into place.

In addition to this she had taken the fire-irons out of the fender, and was rowing, or in some way propelling the train forward—to her own satisfaction, at any rate—by brandishing the tongs wildly about while she stood in the motor and shouted and cried, "Gee up!"

"Essie," big Esther said at last, "you must be quiet. Poor mamma's head aches. Where's your doll? That's not a pretty game."

"All bwoked," said Essie; "gee up, old twain." Bang, bang, clatter, clatter.

"Essie, put those things away at once." Esther noticed the poker for the first time. "You naughty girl, you are scratching the chairs dreadfully."

"But I can't make ze twain puff-puff wifout," objected the engine-driver, "an' we has to go to Bwisbane; det up wif you." She leaned over the tall back of her locomotive, and made vigorous hits at the legs of it.

So vigorous indeed that the chair went over with a crash, precipitating Essie and the poker and tongs and shovel in four different directions.

"Oh dear," said Esther, and sighed before she attempted to go to the rescue. Essie was always tumbling from somewhere or other and never got much hurt, and really it was terribly hot.

"Oo-oo-oh!" said a very small voice. It quavered for a minute. If the anxiously examined little fat knees had been scratched, it would have broken into a despairing yell, but they were whole, and the motor had misbehaved itself.

"Beast!" she said, picking herself up in a great hurry,— "howid old pig!" Then she seized the poker and beat the prostrate chair with all her small, angered strength.

"Essie," big Esther said languidly—she had found with thankfulness she need not move from the chair,— "Essie, I shall whip you, if you use naughty words like that."

"But I was zust dettin' to Bwisbane—so it *is* a pig," Essie maintained. Then she climbed up again, and the journey proceeded.

In the nursery Meg was supposed to be giving lessons to Peter and Poppet, and superintending the more advanced studies of Nellie; for the last nursery gov-

erness had left suddenly, and the Captain had professed himself unable to afford another until the next quarter.

Meg used to provide herself with a book during these daily struggles, to be indulged in at times when her supervision was not required. It had been an "improving" book for the last month, for she had lately been finding out how wofully ignorant she was when she talked to the young man who had listened to her playing last night. To-day it was Browning, because he had looked horrified to find she never read any of his poems, on the plea that he was acknowledged to be difficult to understand.

It was a pity she chose "Filippo Baldinucci on the Privilege of Burial" for her first essay, especially as it was such a hot day; but she had determined to read, dauntlessly, the first poem the book opened at.

"Do this sum, Poppet," she said, setting a multiplication with eight figures in each line—"dear, *what* a greasy slate; and Peter, if you drop any blots on your copy, you will have to write it again this afternoon."

Peter was sucking a little lump of ice he had stolen out of the ice-chest. Poppet asked him for a bit to clean her slate with, but he considered this such waste of precious material that he swallowed it in a hurry and choked. Poppet asked if she might go and wet her sponge; but Meg said no, it always took a quarter of an hour to do that simple act, if she escaped from the room. So Peter offered to breathe on it for her.

"Both of us will," said Poppet,—*"you on the top half, and me on the bottom."*

Meg was taking a cursory glance at "Filippo," and groaning mentally; she did not hear the arrangement for the slate-cleaning until the heads bumped violently and the two began to quarrel.

"You licked it with your tongue," Poppet said.

"I never—I wath only breathing with my liph on it," declared Peter.

"I saw the end of your tongue hanging out," Poppet maintained.

"You're a thtory-teller, Poppet." Peter's face began to get red. "I wath only breathing, tho there."

"Peter, go and sit at the other end of the table. Poppet, if you put out your tongue at Peter again, I shall make you stand in the corner." Meg put a pen in the Browning to keep it open, and went over to Nell at the window to see how "Le Chien du Capitaine" was progressing.

"Oh, Nell!" she said.

The French dictionary lay face downwards on the broad window-sill; "Le Chien" was face upward on Nell's knee, but on the top of it was "Not Wisely, but too Well."

"Oh!" said Nell, with a gasp, her eyes misty, her cheeks flushed,—*"oh, it's no use scolding, Meg,—I absolutely must finish this; I'm just where Kate is—Oh,*

Meg, you *are* horrid!"

For Meg had taken forcible possession of the dark green book, and had picked up the dictionary.

"You know you are not to read in the morning," she said; "and I don't think you ought to read a love story like this till you're eighteen at least. Really, Nellie, it's no use me pretending to overlook you; you've done one page of 'The Dog' in three mornings. I'll have to tell father I must give up the pretence of teaching."

"Here, give it to me," Nellie said, sighing wistfully; "it ought to be called 'The Pig; I think, it's so detestable. Put 'Not Wisely' on the table, Miggie, so I can see the title and get occasional refreshment."

Then Meg returned to the "Privilege of Burial." Her first thought, when she had read the piece through, was that Browning was not a true poet, however great a man he might be; and her second that Allan Courtney must be exceedingly clever to be able to enjoy such reading; her third was sorrow at the poor brains she felt she must possess not to be able to enjoy it too.

She tried another at random—"Popularity." It was rather better she decided, though she had no very clear idea of the meaning; and oh! that terrible last verse,—was it an enigma, or could clever people see the sense instantly?—

"Hobbs hints blue—straight he turtle eats:
Nobbs prints blue—claret crowns his cup
Nokes outdares Stokes in azure feats,—
Both gorge. Who fished the murex up?
What porridge had John Keats?"

The deep sigh that accompanied the third vain reading of it, disturbed Peter in his occupation of putting flies in the ink, fishing them out, and letting them crawl over to Poppet.

Poppet at her side of the table was similarly occupied, only she had captured a March-fly, and it made beautifully clear tracks right across to Peter.

"Is your sum finished, Poppet?" Meg said abstractedly, pondering even as she spoke, what Keats, who was a god to her, had to do with porridge.

Poppet put her hand over the March-fly and confessed it was not quite.

"How many rows have you done?"

The answer came in a whisper, "Not quite one."

"I shall keep you in to do it then after four," Meg said in her sternest voice; "and, *Peter*, look at your copy."

In the excitement of getting the half-drowned flies safely across Peter had made a landing-place of his copy-book, and great was the inkiness of it.

"Oh, bleth it!" he said ruefully.

[image]

"PETER, LOOK AT YOUR COPY."

Poppet's head was within an inch of her slate. She was working now at a startling pace, and counting on her fingers in a loud whisper. What would Bunty say if he came home, and she was not there to ask how he had got on, and sympathise with the red marks that were sure to be on his hands?

Nellie had translated five lines, and was occupied in a vain search for the dictionary meaning of *pourra*.

"I believe it's 'pour,' and 'ra' is a misprint that's got tacked on," she said, "or else this beautiful dictionary has left it out, there are ever so many words I can't find, Meg."

"Oh," said Meg, her patience flying away on sudden wings, "what is the use of anything? I won't teach you any more, any of you. Peter wrote far better a month ago than he does now; Poppet's taken an hour to do a row of multiplication by six, and you are looking in the dictionary for *pourra*. It's simply wasting all my time to sit here."

The problem, "who fished the murex up?" had not improved my eldest heroine's temper. Her cheeks were pink, and her eyes sparkled, she threw out her hands in a little dramatic way. "You can go, Peter, you can go and make mud pies of the universe, if you like; Poppet, you can go too, tear your dress, and climb as many trees as you please; Nellie, you can sit in front of the looking-glass the rest of the day and read every novel in the house,—why should I care? I won't teach any more."

She flung herself down on the old horse-hair sofa, opened her Browning, and turned her face to the wall.

And they all went, not at first, but presently and by degrees.

"The thaid we could," whispered Peter.

"Did she *mean* it?" Poppet said doubtfully.

"Of courth," said Peter; "I'm going, at any rate. The thaid I wath to; I'm not going to dithobey her," and he slipped out on tip-toe. Poppet worked to the end of the line by seven, then she remembered she had forgotten to "carry" all the way, and she grew afraid that Peter would get to the birds' eggs she was putting in compartments for Bunty.

So she also, after a glance or two at her sister's back hair, slipped off her chair and stole softly away.

And Nellie drew "Not Wisely" to her own end of the table with the aid of a long ruler; then she followed the example of her iniquitous juniors and departed noiselessly.

It was nearly an hour before Meg turned round again. She had lost herself in some wonderful poems now,—*"The Flight of the Duchess," "By the Fireside,"* and some of the shorter love pieces; she began to see possibilities of beauty and enjoyment, and felt glad with a great gladness that she was able to appreciate them even in a slight degree.

Then the silence struck her. Surely if Poppet were doing her sum, her pencil would be squeaking; and surely if Peter were engaged as he should be on his copy, he would be breathing laboriously and giving occasional little impatient grunts to testify to each fresh blot.

She looked round, and saw the deserted room.

"Took me at my word!" she said aloud. "They might have known I didn't mean it, young scamps,—Nellie too."

Then she smiled indulgently. The exquisite tenderness and the strength of the love pieces had softened and braced her at the same time.

"They're very young," she said, as she went out after them, "and—really it's very hot."

This was all in the morning. At night there was another breeze.

Bunty did not eat his pudding. That of itself was phenomenal, for it was brown with sultanas and had citron peel at wide intervals; generally he managed three servings, and, even then, said they might have made it in a bigger basin. But to-night he said "No pudding" in a sullen voice, and kicked the legs of his chair monotonously with his boot heels.

"You might have the common politeness to say thank you, I think," said Nellie, who was officiating at nursery tea in Meg's absence. "What a boor you are getting, John."

"Oh, go and hang yourself," he returned. He pushed his chair back from the table, and went out of the room with lowering brows.

Poppet slipped down from her chair.

"Sit down instantly, Poppet; do you think I'm going to allow you to behave like this?" Nellie cried. "If John has no more manners than a larrikin, you are not to follow his example. Sit down, I tell you, Poppet; *do* you hear me?"

"Can't you see how white he is?" said the little girl, her lips trembling. "Nellie, I can't stay—no, I don't want pudding." She darted across the room and down the passage after him.

The boys' bedrooms opened on to a long landing with a high staircase window at the end that looked straight out to the river and the great stretch of gum trees on the Crown lands.

Bunty was standing staring out, his hands thrust in his pockets; the setting sun was on the stained window-panes, and his face looked ghastly in the red light.

"Was it very bad?" said the little, tender voice at his elbow.

He turned round, and looked at his young sister for a minute in silence.

"Look here, Poppet," he said, and his voice sounded strange and strangled; "I know I tell lies and do mean things—I can't help it sometimes, I think I was made so; but I haven't done this new thing they say I have—Poppet, I swear I haven't."

"I know you haven't," the loving voice said; "what is it, Bunty?"

He gave her a fleeting, grateful glance. "I can't tell you, old girl—you'll know soon enough,—every one thinks I have; it's no good me saying anything nothing's any good in the world." He leaned his forehead on the cold window-pane and choked something down in his throat. "To-morrow, Poppet, they'll say all sorts of things about me; but don't you believe them, old girl—will you?—whatever they say, Poppet—promise me."

"I pwomise you, Bunty, faithf'ly," the little girl said, an almost solemn light in her eyes. She could never remember Bunty quite like this before. There was a despairing note in his voice, and really the red sunset light made his face look dreadful.

"Give us a kiss, Poppet," he whispered, and put his face down on her little, rough, curly head.

The child burst into tears of excitement and fright—everything seemed so strange and unreal. Bunty had never asked her for a kiss before in his life. She clung to him sobbing, with her small, thin arms around his neck and her cheek against his. Both his arms were round her, he had lifted her up to him right off the ground, and his cheeks were almost as wet as hers.

There was a step, and he set her down again and turned away.

"Where are you going?" she asked half fearfully.

"To bed," he said gruffly. "My head aches. Good-night."

CHAPTER V.

BETWEEN A DREAM AND A DREAM.

"It isn't the thing you do, dear,
It's the thing you leave undone,

Which gives you a bit of heartache
 At the setting of the sun—
 The loving touch of the hand, dear,
 The gentle and winsome tone,
 That you had no time nor thought for,
 With troubles enough of your own.”

Such a troubled night poor little Poppet had. Twice she woke up with a stifled scream, and lay awake afterwards hot and trembling in the dark. The third time she slept, she dreamed Bunty had thrown a stone at the schoolmaster’s house, which was all built of glass; she heard the crashing and splintering of it as it came down in a heap, forms, blackboards, boys, and masters, all flying in different directions. Then a great voice that sounded like thunder asked if John Woolcot had done this, and all the world seemed listening for the answer. And Bunty was standing near a great red window, with a frightened look on his face, and he said, “No, I never.” Then there was a loud shouting and hissing, and a dozen hands caught hold of the boy and hurried him away.

“What are they going to do with him?” some one asked of a giant who was sitting peeling a cricket-ball as if it were an orange. And the giant, who had Bully Hawkins’ face, laughed, and said, “They’re putting him in the guillotine; listen to that snap—his head has just fallen off; I’m going to have it for a ball because he wouldn’t scout!”

The snap that woke the poor dreaming child was the banging of the bedroom door.

Nell had just come in, gone to the glass, given her hair a few pats and light touches, and hurriedly slipped on her best bronze shoes,—it was nine o’clock, and some late visitors had come—men with gold buttons.

“Oh-h-h!” said the little sobbing figure, sitting up in bed. “Oh-h-h—oh-h—oh, *Nellie!*”

“Don’t be silly, Poppet; go to sleep at once,”—the elder sister gave her a hasty pat. “Lie down, and don’t be naughty; you’ve been eating apples again late, I expect, and it’s made you dream,—there, I must go.”

The child clung to her.

“Bunty!” she said,—“is he dead? did they take his head?—oh, Bunty!”

“You silly little thing, don’t I tell you you’ve been dreaming!” *Nellie* laid her down impatiently and tucked the clothes round her. “There, go to sleep; I have to go down, there are visitors. I’ll leave the candle if you like.”

Poppet put her head under the clothes and sobbed hysterically; the little, narrow bed with its spring mattress was shaking.

"Oh!" said Nellie,—"oh dear, this is tiresome! Poppet, do you want anything? Would you like a drink?—oh, I'm in such a hurry,—what is it, Poppet? What's the use of being silly, now? When a dream's gone, it's gone. Stop crying at once, or I shall be very angry, and go and leave you in the dark!"

The bed shook even more violently.

"M-M-Meg!" was the word that came with a choking sound from under the counterpane,—"oh, M-M-Meg!"

"All right, I'll send her if you'll be good,—not for a minute or two, because she's talking to some gentlemen, but as soon as I can whisper to her. Here, drink this water before I go, and stop sobbing. You're too big a girl to go on like this, Poppet."

Nellie's voice had a stern note in it,—she thought kindness would make her cry more, and there really was not time to argue with her.

[image]

*"MEG CAUGHT A GLIMPSE OF SOMETHING WHITE OUTSIDE
BUNTY'S DOOR."*

Five, six, seven minutes slipped away after she had gone; then Meg came running lightly upstairs and into the room the child shared with Nellie.

"She's too excitable—I'll have to make her go to bed earlier," she thought, as she crossed over to the tossed bed. "Nightmare—poor little mite!"

But there was only a pillow and a tossed heap of clothes—the bed was empty!

"She's gone down for more light and company. How unkind of Nellie!" she said aloud, starting off in quest of her. She looked in the different bedrooms as she passed, then in the nursery, which was brightly lighted but deserted.

The boys' landing was in darkness; but at the end of it she caught a glimpse of something white outside Bunty's door.

"Poppet!" she cried, hurrying down. "Oh, Poppet, nothing on your feet, and only your nightgown!"

She picked her up in her arms, nine years old though she was.

But the child was nearly beside herself, and struggled back to the ground, beating with her small hands against the lower panels of the door.

"Bunty!" she said, "Bunty! Bunty! Can't you hear me, Bunty? Oh, Bunty!"

"John!" Meg called sharply, "answer at once!"

"What?" said Bunty's voice in its gruffest tone. "For goodness' sake leave me alone! What on earth do you want? Don't be an idiot, Poppet."

The very gruffness and crossness of the reply reassured the child—it was so unmistakably Buntyish. Her sobs grew less and less wild—she even permitted Meg to lift her up in her arms again.

”Good-night, Bunty,” she said in a small voice with a pitiful hiccough at the end.

”Oh, good-night,” he said.

And then Meg carried her off.

Such a tender, gentle, soothing Meg she was, even though some one was waiting impatiently in the drawing-room and the evening was almost over.

She took the child into her own room, and put her into her own bed with the pink rosebud hangings and pale pink mosquito nets that Poppet had always thought the prettiest things in the world.

And she bathed her face with lavender-water, and sprinkled the same refreshing stuff on the white, frilled pillows, and talked to her in a pleasant, matter-of-fact way that dispelled the horrors of the night entirely.

The little girl told her dream. She longed to pour all Bunty’s troubles into this dear, big sister’s ear! But that of course was forbidden.

One thing she did venture to say, as she lay cuddled up with her face luxuriously against Meg’s soft breast.

”Dear Megsie, couldn’t you be sweet and dear to Bunty too? Poor Bunty, everybody gets on to him.”

”My pet, he won’t let people be nice to him,” said Meg in a troubled way.

”I don’t mean kiss him or anything,” the little girl said; ”only don’t call him ’John’—it’s such an ugly name; and don’t keep saying ’Don’t!’; and don’t let Nellie keep telling him he’s dirty and clumsy,—please, dearest Megsie!”

Meg kissed her silently.

What a wise little child it was! What a dear little child! And oh, what a poor little child, for it had never in its life known a mother!

Her thoughts leapt back across the years to that dear, fading memory of her mother. She saw the bedroom, with the bright lights that seemed strangely painful in such a place.

”I want to see them all, John, please,” the voice from the pillows had said when the Captain moved away to turn the gas down; ”it can’t hurt me now.”

And they had gathered up close to the white pillows that gleamed with the loose, bright hair—all the little, frightened children,—herself, hardly thirteen; Pip in a sailor suit and his eyes red; little dear Judy with wild, bright eyes and trembling lips; Nellie with a headless doll clasped in her arms; Bunty in a holland pinafore stained with jam.

Nobody heeded the tiny baby that lay just in the hollow of mother’s arm,—what was a baby, even one almost new to them all, when mother was dying?

But the next day, when all was over, and every one was tired of crying and feeling the world had stopped for them for ever, the strange nurse brought in the little lonely baby and gave it to Meg to nurse, because she was the eldest.

"You'll have to be its mother now, little miss," she said, as she laid it in all its long, many clothes in Meg's frightened arms.

Its mother!

The scene came vividly before Meg's eyes to-night, as she sat with the poor child close in her arms.

She bent her head in an agony of shame and sorrow.

How she had failed! how she had neglected, scolded, grown impatient with, laughed at, her little trust! Loved her, of course; but life was such a confusing, busy, quarrelling, pleasure-seeking kind of thing at Misrule, and she had forgotten so often, and been so taken up with her own affairs, that she had not had time to "be a mother" to her little sister.

"Oh, Poppet!" she said, in a voice full of passionate regret; and Poppet slipped her dear, thin little arms around her neck and clung closer, as if she almost knew what the trouble was.

But presently the child fell asleep, and Meg stayed there, motionless, on the bed edge, looking down at the small, flushed cheeks, where the black lashes lay still heavy and wet.

There was a strange look of Judy about the little face to-night, and altogether it made Meg forget the visitors downstairs, Alan, Nell's impatience, everything but the little dead mother and the knowledge that her place was not well filled. She thought of Bunty, sullen, hard, untruthful, and growing more so every day—Bunty, whose nature no one but Poppet had a key to, and even hers would not always turn.

If the little mother had lived, he would have been very different. Poor lad! perhaps he was unhappy too—he had been even more gloomy and silent than usual these last few days; she would go to him now, and try to get into his confidence by degrees.

She slipped Poppet's little warm hand out of her own and put it softly on the pillow.

"Well, this *is* too bad of you," said Nellie, putting her head into the door. "You've no regard for appearances, really, Meg. It's an hour since you left the room, and I've been making excuses for you all the time. Why don't you come down? There's only Esther and me to entertain them all, and Alan Courtney's been looking at the photograph album for half an hour, and not spoken a word. You are too bad. Sitting here with Poppet all this time—she's asleep too. Talk about spoiling the children!"

Meg got up, her eyelashes wet, her face very sweet in its new gravity.

"I sha'n't come down again," she said in a low tone. "Tell them Poppet was not well, and I had to stay with her; indeed, I cannot come, Nellie."

Nellie glanced at her impatiently; she did not understand the strange, moved look on her sister's face—it had been unclouded and laughing an hour ago; how could she guess she had been holding hands with the dead all this little while?

Besides, her conscience reproached her about poor little Poppet, and it made her feel irritable.

"I never saw any one like you for moods, Meg," she said crossly. "A minute ago you were laughing and talking to Alan Courtney, and now you're looking like a funeral hearse; and I think it's very rude not to come down and say good-night. They asked me to sing the 'Venetian Boat Song' too, and you know I can't play my own accompaniment."

"Dear Nell, another night," Meg whispered; "and hush, you will disturb Poppet. Go down again yourself now, or Esther will be vexed. Wish them good-night for me; I have to speak to Jo—Bunty."

Nellie's face still looked vexed. She had practised her somewhat difficult song, and was ambitious to sing it since they all pressed her so.

"I can see Alan thinks it strange of you vanishing like that," she said grumbly. "He told me to be sure to make you come down again."

Then Meg blushed—a beautiful, warm, tender blush that crept right up to the little straying curls on her forehead. They had been talking about books, she and Alan, before she came upstairs; and in a sudden fit of petulance with herself she had said she was "a stupid, ignorant thing, and would not talk to him about books again, because she knew he was laughing at her for knowing so little."

And oh! what was it his eyes had said when they flashed that one quick, eager look into hers? what was it that softly breathed "Meg" had meant?

Nellie had whispered in her ear the next second, "Poppet's crying herself nearly into a fit for you; can you go to her for a minute?"

It seemed almost a week ago now since she had gone. In some indefinable way she seemed to have grown older in that one hour, to have got away from all these things that had engrossed her before.

"Come on; why *shouldn't* you?" Nell said persuasively, quick to take advantage of that sudden blush.

Just a moment Meg hesitated,—it would be very sweet to go down to the room again and lose this heavy-heartedness in "the delight of happy laughter, the delight of low replies."

But poor, misunderstood Bunty whom they all "got on to"—her neglected duty! Had she any right to be enjoying herself just now, any right to chase away these new feelings?

She turned away with a sudden lifting of head.

"No, I am not coming; say good-night for me."

"Stay away then," said Nellie in exasperation. So Meg went down the landing once more to the boys' end.

"Bunty," she said, knocking softly, "I want to come in; may I?"

There was an impatient grunt inside.

"What on earth do you want? Can't you give a fellow a bit of peace? What are you after now? Yes, I've put my dirty socks in the linen basket."

"It isn't that, Bunty; I only want to talk to you for a little." Meg's voice was very even and patient.

But "Blow being talked to!" was Bunty's grateful and polite reply. He was weary of sisterly "talkings."

"I'm not going to lecture you or anything like that, Bunty. I *wish* you'd open the door. What have you fastened yourself in for?" Meg beat a little tattoo on the wood and rattled the handle.

"What a nuisance you are, Meg; why on earth can't you go away and let a fellow be quiet? I'm not going to open the door, so there." His voice sounded from the bed across the room; he had not even attempted to come near the door.

"Oh, very well," said Meg, seeing it was useless, to-night, at least, with that barrier of pine between them.

"Good-night, old fellow. I don't see why you should be so grumpy with me."

"I'll talk to him to-morrow," she said, as she went downstairs with a free heart to the drawing-room again.

But, alas! to-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow!

CHAPTER VI

TO-MORROW.

"What's done we partly may compute,
But know not what's resisted."

They did not find it out till nearly nine o'clock.

Bunty was frequently late for his breakfast, so no one remarked upon his absence this particular morning. Only Meg kept his coffee hot, and sent his chop

back to the kitchen to be put in the oven—an unusual piece of consideration, for she used to say he deserved everything to be cold and greasy if he got up so late.

But Nellie, who was cutting the sandwiches as usual for his school lunch, cried out for him. "I can't find John's lunch serviette anywhere," she said, putting in a generous supply of fat beef. "I ask him every day to leave it out of his bag. What a tiresome boy he is! I won't give him another one this morning; he had one yesterday."

"Poppet, go and tell John he'll be late for school," Meg said. "Tell him it's a quarter to nine—he won't have time to eat his breakfast." Poppet departed, her own bright merry self again; the events of last night had vanished from her with her dreams.

But she came back with a half-startled face. "He's not there, Meg; his hat's gone too, and his school-bag. I 'spect he got something in the pantry and went early; perhaps there is something on at school; and—and—I think he must have made his bed himself, because—it—it's made."

She looked half pitifully, half eagerly at Meg, as if asking for a denial of her horrible suspicions. "Come and look," she said.

Meg got up and followed her; Nellie laid down the breadknife and went too,—it was beyond credence that Bunty should be up early and make his own bed. Peter and Essie brought up the rear, of course.

"It—it's very strange," Meg said, her face quite pale as she looked round the room. The bed had evidently not been slept in, for no boy could have made it look as neat as it did; it was just as Martha had left it yesterday morning. There was a suit missing—not his best one, but the one he wore alternate weeks at school—a couple of shirts too, and some socks and collars. Nellie darted to his little red post-office money-box; it had been prised open—he had lost the key long since—and was empty.

"He had two and fourpenth ha'penny in it," said Peter, "cauth I athked him one day."

"He's run away," said Nellie. "Oh, the bad, wicked boy!"

"Hush," said Meg. She feared for the effect the blow would have on Poppet, and caught the child's hand and drew her to her side.

"Run away!" repeated Poppet.

Every vestige of colour had dropped out of her face; it wore a strained, unchildlike look, and her eyes were heavy.

Meg drew her closer still and stroked her hair.

"Perhaps it's a mistake, dear. Oh, he's only gone to school, or camping, or something, and didn't tell us; there's no need to trouble," she said. But she felt terribly uneasy.

Poppet did not look up. She was thinking of the red-stained window and

the kiss last night—thinking of the school troubles, and the boy's strange behaviour, and hints at worse.

There was a loud, angry voice calling from the nursery, and every one trooped back in amaze. What was the Captain doing in their own special room at breakfast-time?

Esther was there, too, with horrified eyes, and Pip with a look of fierce disgust on his face.

How red their father's face was! how his moustache bristled! Peter shrank close up behind Meg, and wondered if it was about yesterday's lessons.

"Father," Meg said, white to the lips, "what *is* the matter? Esther, can't you speak? Oh, Pip, what is it?"

"Matter!" shouted her father; "I'm disgraced—we're all disgraced. Where is he? Heavens! I'll cut the skin off his back! Peter, get my horsewhip; he's no son of mine! I'll turn him off—I'll have him locked up. Where is he? where is the young thief? Only let me get hold of him. Bring him here at once, Pip. Where's that horsewhip, Peter?"

"He's run away, we think," Nellie said in a trembling voice; and there was a great silence for two minutes, broken only by a very deep breath from Poppet. Then Meg's voice was heard.

"What has he done?" she said, "because—because—oh, indeed, I believe we have all been misunderstanding the poor boy."

"Misunderstanding!" echoed her father, with almost a snort of anger. "Read that, miss, and don't talk nonsense!"

[image]

"READ THAT, MISS, AND DON'T TALK NONSENSE!"

He passed her a letter that had just been brought him, and Meg read it and grew pale; Nellie read it and crimsoned; Poppet picked it up in her little shaking hands and looked piteously from one to the other,—that black, thick writing—oh, what was it all about?

Meg told her afterwards, for it was no use trying to put the child off, and indeed it seemed she knew more than they did.

The letter was from the head master. It stated everything that Bunty had confessed to Poppet about the broken window and glass cases, about the lie he had told when taxed with it. But then the terrible part came. On the desk five sovereigns were lying in a little heap when the master was called out of the room; it was one of the boys' fees, and the master was in the act of entering the amount

in the book when he was sent for. He was detained a quarter of an hour, and when he returned the window and the glass cases were broken, and the money had gone!

Now there was no one on the top floor at all during the time, it seemed—that was the mystery that had puzzled every one. But then it came out that Hawkins, who was waiting in Mr. Burnham's own room for his caning, had seen John Woolcot come creeping down the stairs just after the crash, with a white face and the cricket-ball in his hand. Woolcot, too, when he found his lie of no avail, had confessed to the smashing, but denied having taken the money. The head master regretted having to perform such a painful duty as communicating the intelligence to his father; but there seemed no doubt that the boy had committed the theft, and under the circumstances perhaps it would be wiser if he were removed from the school.

No wonder the Captain raved and stormed! no wonder Esther and the elder girls looked pale and horrified, and Pip disgusted beyond words! He was guilty—there was no doubt of it in their minds. The fact of his running away was sufficient proof of it; and they all remembered his strange behaviour yesterday. It was in vain poor little Poppet protested again and again and again that "he didn't do it—oh, indeed he didn't do it. Yes, he had broken the glass; and yes, he had told a lie; but oh, indeed he had not stolen."

"How do you know, miss?" her father said sharply; "what proof have you that he didn't?"

"He told me he didn't," said the poor little mite. "Oh, he *said* he didn't,—oh, why won't you believe it? Meg, I tell you he *said* he didn't."

But even Meg could not believe, so lightly was Bunty's word held amongst them.

For the first day the Captain was too angry even to attempt to find traces of his son. He declared he would never own him again, never have him inside his doors.

But afterwards, of course, he saw this was impossible, and he put the matter in the hands of the police, gave them a full description of the lad's personal appearance, and offered a reward for finding him.

To the head master of the school he sent a curt note stating the boy had run away, so he could make no inquiries, and enclosing a cheque for five pounds to make up for what was lost. Of course the cheque was a tacit acknowledgment of his guilt.

A week slipped away without any clue being found. Then a detective brought news.

A boy answering to the written description had gone on board a vessel to San Francisco as cabin boy the very day in question. There seemed no doubt as to

his identity. The Captain said it was the best thing that could have happened. It was a rough ship, and the boy would have exceedingly hard work and discipline—it might be the making of him. He sent a cable to reach the captain in America, when the boat arrived, to ask him to see the lad was brought safely back in the same capacity.

And then everything at Misrule resumed its ordinary course. Bunty was safe, though they could not hear of him or see him for four or five months; it was no use being unsettled any longer.

But Poppet made a small discovery one day. She found her little money-box empty under her own bed, with a bit of dirty paper stuck in the slit. "I'll pay you back," it said in Bunty's straggling hand; "you said you'd lend me the thirteen shillings. I have to go, Poppet; it's no good stopping here—no one believes you. Don't forget what you promised. You can have my tortoise for your own. It's in the old bucket under the house. Don't forget to feed it; it likes bits of meat as well as bread. I'd like to say good-bye, but you always cry and make a fuss, and I have to go. You're the only one worth anything anywhere. Oh, and don't forget to change its water often,—well water has more insects in than tap."

"Don't forget what you promised," repeated Nell, as she read the almost undecipherable epistle in her turn. "What did you promise, Poppet?"

"That I would believe him," the little girl said, with a sweet, steadfast look in her eyes.

CHAPTER VII.

A LITTLE MAID-ERRANT.

"There's nothing on earth half so holy
As the innocent heart of a child."

It was in the midst of morning lessons soon after at the Beltham Grammar School that an odd thing happened.

It was very hot; not a breath of wind came in at the open doors and windows—nothing but the blazing sunlight that lay in hot patches on the floor, and slowly baked blackboards and slates and desks. It was a very long room, this "Great Hall," as they called it; half-a-dozen classes were at work in it, with as many masters; and at the end, on a little, raised platform, sat Mr. Burnham in

front of his desk. He was looking through the Euclid exercises of the fourth form, and his brow kept criss-crossing with lines of annoyance at any noise,—the hot, slumbrous air was quite enough to bear, without the occasional down-crashing of a pile of slates or the upsetting of a form.

Then came the loud note of the locust—the whir-r-r, and pen-inimitable sound of its wings, inside the room, not out. Who had dared to bring one of the prohibited creatures into school, after the endless penalties that had been imposed for the offence? Mr. Burnham scored a red line through one of the exercises and stood up in his place, a heavy frown on his face.

And at the same moment a very small shadow fell just inside the entrance door at the far end of the room, and a very small knock sounded there. Nobody said "Come in," though a hundred and fifty pairs of eyes went in the direction with the swiftness natural to gratitude for any break in the monotony of morning school. Then there stepped over the threshold a little, slight girl,—a little girl with a very short, holland frock, a great sun-hat, and no gloves; a little girl with a white, small face, great frightened eyes shining strangely, and soft lips very tightly closed. Up the long, long room she went, both little hands held tightly together in front of her. No one could tell from the way she walked how her poor little knees were shaking and her poor little heart was beating.

For a minute Mr. Burnham's frown did not disappear—not till he noticed how white her face was; he told himself he had never seen a child's face so white in all his life.

"What is it, little girl?" he said, and really thought he made his voice quite gentle and encouraging, though to Poppet it sounded terrible.

"I——" she said—"you——" Something rose in her throat that would not be strangled away, her face grew even whiter, and her lips, white too, twitched a little, but the words would not come.

He took her hand, the little trembling, shut, brown hand, and held it between his own.

"There is nothing to be afraid of, my child; tell me what it is you want"; he drew her closer to the desk, and sat down. He seemed less formidable in that position than towering above her—his eyes looked strangely kind; could it really be the terrible Mr. Burnham she had heard so much about? The hand he held fluttered a minute, then her lips moved again:

"Bunty didn't do it," she said in a whisper.

"Eh? what?" he said, mystified.

"He didn't do it—Bunty didn't do it—oh, indeed."

"But who is Bunty? and who are you, my little maid?" Mr. Burnham said, with a smile that lit up his thoughtful eyes.

"He's my brother," she said in a voice that had gained a little strength.

[image]

”BUNTY DIDN’T DO IT,’ SHE SAID IN A WHISPER.”

Then it struck her Bunty was not so called at school.

”His name’s John Woolcot,” she added, with downcast eyes; ”I’m Poppet.”

Then Mr. Burnham remembered everything, and his eyes grew stern as he thought of the boy there had been so much trouble with; but they softened as they fell again on the little, white, eager face.

”And his little sister is taking up his cudgels; thankless work, I’m afraid—eh?” he said quizzically.

Poppet was calm now,—the worst part of the ordeal was over, and she had actually gained the dread head master’s ear; she must make the most of her time.

”Won’t you believe him?” she said; ”indeed he didn’t do it—oh, indeed.”

”What?” he asked,—”break the window—tell a lie—anything? Why, my little child, he owned to it.”

”Yes,” said Poppet, ”he bwoke the glass, I know; and yes, he did tell one story.” Her face fell after the last sentence, and a little red crept into her cheek. ”But he didn’t take the money—oh no, no!—oh, Bunty wouldn’t be a thief—oh, not for anything and anything—oh, indeed.”

The boys were staring at the little, white-faced girl at the head master’s desk, though they could not hear what was being said.

”Would you like to come and talk to me privately?” Mr. Burnham said.

And ”Oh-h-h!” was Poppet’s only answer; but the gratitude in her eyes was so intense, he guessed a little what the ordeal had been to her.

Away down the long room she went again, only this time her hand was being held in a firm, kindly grasp.

”Oh!” she said again, when near the door a great, slouching fellow with a big head moved to help another boy with a blackboard.

”What?” said Mr. Burnham, when they were outside; he had noticed her intense interest.

”Was that Bull-dog Hawkins—the fellow that told?” she said.

He smiled somewhat; Hawkins was not a favourite of his, and the fitting name sounded odd on the little girl’s lips.

”His name is Hawkins,” he said; ”and yes, he gave the information; but that has nothing to do with it, my child. Now, tell me what it is you have to say.”

He had taken her into a little room the walls of which were lined with books; he drew up a chair for himself, and one for her, but she preferred standing

against his knee.

Almost she convinced him, so great was the belief in her shining eyes, so utterly unshaken her trust. She told him everything, and he listened patiently and attentively even to the smallest detail, asking a question here and there, but for the most part letting her tell her story in her own way.

When she told of the kiss by the staircase window, she broke down a little; but he slipped his arm round her waist, and she shed her tears on his coat sleeve,—how Bunty would have stared! She showed the dirty scrap of paper, and he read it thoughtfully.

"If only he had never told a lie before," he said, "then perhaps—"

Oh, if only she could have flung back her head and said, "He has never told a lie in his life, sir; never—never!"

Shame at not being able to do so made the dear, curly head droop a little, and two more tears forced their way from under her eyelids and fell sadly down her cheek.

"I'm sure he never will again!" she said, with sorrowful hopefulness. "But, oh, sir, he couldn't be a thief! Oh, how *could* he?"

"Well, I don't see how he could be altogether bad with such a little sister," he said slowly. "What sort of a boy is he at home? Is he good to you?"

"Oh yes," said Poppet,— "oh yes, indeed!"

And it is a fact that not a single act that disproved this came to the little girl's mind. She remembered nothing but the times he had been good to her.

"Twice I was sent to bed without tea, and he brought me all his pudding in some newspaper," she said eagerly; "and when I had difeeria, and they wouldn't let him in, he used to climb up the creeper when no one was in the room and smile at me through the window. An' another time I was ill he sat on the mat outside the door all night; Meg found him in the morning asleep with his head on the oilcloth. An' when it was my birthday—I was nine—and he had no money, so he sold his guinea-pigs to one of the fellows—and he liked them better than anything he'd got—and he went and bought me a doll's pwambulator, 'cause Peter smashed mine with filling it with stones. Oh, and lots and lots and lots of things! He was *vevy* good to me—oh, indeed!"

Such a flushed, little, eager face it was now—such a fluent little tongue that told of Bunty's goodness! The child's beautiful trust, affection, and courage had quite touched the head master's heart.

He took a bunch of keys from his pocket.

"You are a dear, brave, little girl, Poppet," he said. "By the way, haven't you a prettier name than that?"

"Oh, it's Winifred, of course, really," said Poppet.

"Something in a name," he said, half to himself. Then aloud:

"Well, Winifred, then, just because you have believed in your brother and done this for him, I am going to reward you in the way I know will gladden you most."

He unlocked a tin box on the table, and counted out five sovereigns, while the surprise in Poppet's eyes deepened every minute.

"Have you a purse?" he asked.

"No," she said in a very low tone. It made her feel fit to cry to think he should give her money, even such a large, beautiful amount, for doing this.

"Because I want you to give this to Captain Woolcot," he continued, "and tell him I have had reason to doubt whether John was guilty, and until I am perfectly sure it is not fair to the lad to take it."

How Poppet's eyes shone, albeit the tears were not dry! how her lips smiled and quivered! and how the glad, warm colour rushed all over her little, sweet face! Not a word of thanks she said, and he would not have had it; only she clung very tightly to his arm for a minute, and hid her face. When he saw it, he felt he had had more than thanks.

And that was not all he did. He took her back with him to the schoolroom, and walked up to the raised platform, and held her hand all the time.

"Boys," he said, in his clear, far-carrying voice, "I have reason to believe that John Woolcot is not guilty of the theft that you have all heard of. I wish you all to give him the benefit of the doubt, since he is not here to clear himself. For my part, I believe him innocent."

How the boys cheered! It was not that Bunty was a special favourite, though he had his own friends; but they felt it was expected of them, and it was another break in the monotony to be able to do so. Besides, they felt a vague pity and admiration for the little girl standing there, with such a smiling, tear-wet face.

After that Mr. Burnham took her all the way home to Misrule himself. Meg and Nellie went into the drawing-room to see him, and Poppet slipped away. He told them what the child had done, praised her high courage and simple faith. "If," he said, as he took his leave an hour later,—"if all my boys had such sisters as little Poppet is, my school would be a better place, and later, the world."

CHAPTER VIII.

ONE PARTICULAR EVENING.

"O world, as God has made it! All is beauty,
And knowing this is love, and love is duty."

It was Peter who first noticed Meg's face one particular evening. He and Poppet were doing, or making a pretence of doing, preparation for the next day, and Nellie was reading a novel in the only armchair the nursery held.

Meg came in at nine o'clock—nearly an hour past the usual time to send the little ones to bed. "Thust look at Meg'th fathe!" Peter said, and rounded his eyes at her. Of course every one looked instantly.

It was like a blush rose. A delicate, exquisite flush had crept over it, her eyes were soft and dewy, her lips unsteady.

"Peter dear, come to bed; now, Poppet," she said; and even in her voice there was a new note.

Nellie laid down her book and looked at her sister in surprise. She had only just discovered she was beautiful. Hitherto it had seemed to be tacitly allowed that she herself had monopolised the good looks of the family; so to discover this sudden beauty in Meg rather amazed her.

She looked to see if it had anything to do with her dress; no, she had worn it scores of times before. It was a muslin, pale blue, rather old-fashioned in make, for the body fitted plainly with the exception of a slight gathering at the neck. The skirt was very long, and ended in a crossway frill at the hem,—how graceful it made her look! In her waistband she had stuck some cornflowers vividly blue.

And her hair! Nellie devoted a surprisingly long time daily to the erection of an elaborate coiffeur on her own beautiful head; but surely Meg's had a grace of its own, from its very simplicity. It was drawn back loosely that it might wave and curl as it pleased, and then was twisted into a shining knot halfway down her head.

And that exquisite pink in her cheeks!

"Oh, Meg!" Nellie said, half guessing, half shy.

"Dear Peter—oh, Poppet, do come!" Meg entreated. The pink had deepened, her eyes had grown distressful. Both children rose and followed her without a word; they had the native delicacy that every unspoiled child possesses.

But Nellie had lost interest in her book,—what was a fictitious tale of love, when she might hear of one in real life within these very walls?

She went downstairs and into the drawing-room. "Who's in the study, Esther? I can hear voices," she said sharply.

Esther was reading, lying on the sofa, her dark, beautiful head against the yellow, frilled cushions. She turned a leaf before she replied.

"Oh, only father and Alan Courtney," she said, with a studiously matter-of-

fact air.

"I *thought* so!" Nell exclaimed, with a deep breath; then she sat down at the foot of the sofa and looked at Esther.

"Well?" Esther said, feeling the gaze before she reached the end of the next page; then she smiled.

"Is he really asking father?" Nell asked breathlessly.

"I'm not at the keyhole," Esther replied.

"And I wish I was," Nell said with fervour.

Then they looked at each other again, and again Esther smiled. "How pretty she looked to-night!" she said meditatively.

"Very, very," Nell answered eagerly; "why, I couldn't help staring at her."

"I'm very fond of Alan myself; he's a thoroughly good fellow. I think they are excellently suited," the young stepmother said.

Nellie was silent a minute. "I wish he looked older," she said; "thirty is the proper age for a man, *I* think. And I'd rather he had a long, fair moustache; his eyes are not bad; but I wish he wouldn't rumple his hair up straight when he gets excited."

Esther smiled indulgently at Nellie's idea of a hero.

"As long as he makes her happy," she said, "I'll forgive him for being clean-shaved. Why are you looking at me like that, Nell?"

"I was thinking how very pretty you are yet, Esther," was the girl's answer, spoken thoughtfully. Esther's beauty did strike her on occasion, and to-night, with the dark, bright face and rich, crinkly hair in relief against the cushions, it was especially noticeable.

"Yet," repeated Esther, "I'm not very old, Nell, am I? Twenty-five is not very old." Her eyes looked wistfully at the very young lovely face of her second stepdaughter.

"Oh no, dear—oh no, Esther," said Nell, quick to notice the wistfulness; "why, of course it is very young; only—oh, *Essie!*"

"What?" said Esther in surprise.

"How *could* you marry father?" She crept up closer, and put her shining head down beside the dark one. "Of course I don't want to hurt your feelings, but really he is so very middle-aged and ordinary; were you really in *love*, *Essie?*"

But Esther was spared the embarrassing answer by the entrance of the Captain and Alan.

You all saw Alan last five years ago, when he used to go on the river boat every morning to his lectures at the university. His face is even more earnest and grave than before; life is a serious business to this young doctor, and the only relaxations he allows himself are football and Meg.

His eyes are grey, deeply set; his patients and Meg think them beautiful.

His dark hair has a wave in it, and is on end, for of course he has been somewhat excited.

The Captain does not look unamiable.

Alan has only just begun to practise, certainly; but then he has three hundred a year of his own, and his prospects are spoken of as brilliant. Still, he has the air of having grudgingly conferred a favour, and he goes out to smoke his cigar and think it over.

"All well?" ask Esther's arched eyebrows. And "All is well" Alan answers with a grave, pleasant smile.

"Dear boy, I *am* so glad," she says. There is a moisture in her dark eyes as she gives him her hand, for Meg is very dear to her.

[image]

*"HE BENDS HIS TALL, BOYISH-LOOKING HEAD SUDDENLY,
AND KISSES THE HAND HE HOLDS."*

He looks at her in silence for a minute; then he bends his tall, boyish-looking head suddenly, and kisses the hand he holds.

"I am glad too," Nellie whispers, with something like a sob in her throat; she too holds out her hand.

"Dear little Nell!" he says; and such a happy light is in the eyes that look down at her that she quite forgives his lack of good looks. "Dear little Nell!"

He does not kiss *her* hand—it is too little and childish, he considers; but he stoops and takes a first brotherly kiss from the soft cheek nearest to him, and though she blushes a little, she is impressed with the dignity that attaches to a future brother-in-law.

Then he goes. Meg has refused to be visible again to-night to him, and Nellie flies up the staircase.

"*Dear Meg,*" she pleads at the door—it is locked, and doesn't open for a minute.

But the tone turns the key, and the sisters are in each other's arms.

Just the room you might expect Meg to have. It is fresh, simple, and daintily pretty. The floor is covered with white China matting; the bed hangings have loose pink roses on a white ground; the pillows have hem-stitched frills. There is a bookcase on one wall, in which the poets preponderate; the dressing-table is strewn with the pretty odds and ends girls delight in; there is a writing-table that looks as if it is used often; and in the window stands a deep wicker chair with rose-pink cushions double frilled.

On the walls there are some water-colours of Meg's own, pretty in colouring, but shaky as to perspective. Two lines she has illuminated herself,—

”Lord, help us this and every day
To live more nearly as we pray.”

The gold letters are a little uneven, perhaps; but she wears them in her heart besides, so it does not matter. There is an engraving in an oak and gold frame—”Songs of Love”; Meg loves the exquisite face of the singer, and the back of the sweet little child. There is a long photo-frame with a balcony rail: here is Essie all dimpled with her sauciest smile; Poppet and Peter's heads close together like two little bright-eyed birds; Nell, a little self-conscious with the camera so close; Esther looking absurdly girlish; Pip in his cap and gown when they were delightfully new. Bunty always refused to put on an engaging smile and submit himself to the photographer, so he is not represented.

And over the mantelpiece, in an ivory frame, is an old, fading likeness of a little thin girl with a bright face and mischievous eyes, and rough, curly hair—Judy at ten.

It had taken all the time you have been looking at the room for the girls to kiss each other and say little half-laughing, half-crying words. Then Nellie forced Meg into the wicker chair, and knelt down herself, with her arms round her sister's waist.

”You darling,” she said. ”Oh, Meg, how glad I am! Dear, dear Meg, I do hope you'll be happy—impossibly happy.”

It was the first connected sentence either of them had spoken.

”I couldn't be happier,” was Meg's whisper.

”But always, always, dear—even when your hair is white, and there are wrinkles here and here and here.” She touched the smooth cheeks and brow with tender fingers.

There was a little silence fraught with love, the two bright heads leaning together; then Meg spoke, shyly, hesitatingly:

”Alan—Nell dear—you do—like him?”

”Oh, he's well enough—oh yes, I'm very fond of Alan,” said Nell. ”Of course I don't consider him half good enough, though, for you.”

”Oh, Nellie!” Meg looked quite distressed. ”Why, it is the other way, of course. He is so clever—oh! you don't know how clever; and I am such a stupid thing.”

”Very stupid,” assented Nellie; but her smile differed.

”And he is always thinking of plans to do good to the lower classes. Nell, you cannot think how miserable some of them are; though they don't half realise

it, they get so dulled and weary. Oh, Nellie dear, I *do* think he is the very best man in the world." The young, sweet face was half hidden behind the deep cushion frill.

"Well, you are the very best woman," Nell said very tenderly, and meant it indeed.

Pretty giddy little butterfly, that she was just now, she often paused in her flights to wish she could grow just as sweet and good and true and unselfish as Meg without any trouble.

"The *very* best woman," she repeated; but Meg's soft hand closed her lips and stayed there.

"If you *knew* how I'm always failing," she said, with a deep sigh.

"But the trying is everything," Nell said.

Then there were more tender words and wishes, and Nellie went to bed, stealing on tip-toe down the passage, for time had flown on noiseless wings and the household was asleep. And Meg took down the ivory frame, and put her lips to the laughing child-face.

"Oh, Judy," she said, "I wish you knew. Dear little Judy, I *wonder* if you know?"

CHAPTER IX. THAT MISCHIEVOUS CUPID.

"For boys say, Love me or I die."

University examinations are not things to be postponed with polite little notes like inconvenient balls or picnics. And, given the early days of December, and a young man who steadfastly refused to acknowledge this fact, what use was it even to trouble to scan the lists?

Of course Philip was plucked.

In October he had brought down his father's wrath upon him by failing to get through in a class examination; and any one who had had experience of the Captain's would have thought that would have been quite enough to make him take a good place at the end of his second year.

But, as I said, his name was conspicuous by its absence.

"Oh, Philip!" Nell said, an accent of reproach on the first syllable; "and even

that stupid Burton boy is through."

"Oh, Pip!" said Meg. "What *will* father say?"

It was the day the lists were out at the university, and Philip had just communicated the agreeable intelligence to his sisters in the midst of his third pipe after dinner.

And the strange part was, he did not seem to care twopence—the orthodox measure of indifference.

He lolled back on the lounge, and made fantastic figures with the smoke from his pipe; he did not even seem to hear what the girls were saying.

And when he came out of his father's study, after a *mauvais quart d'heure* of unusual elasticity, there was not a trace of repentance on his face, nothing but obstinacy in his eyes, and lips all pursed up for a careless whistle when the distance from the room should be respectable enough.

But later on in the evening Meg caught a glimpse of his face when he thought he was quite unobserved, and its restless, unhappy look gave her a curious feeling of surprise and anxiety.

She remembered all at once that she had quite forgotten of late to take an interest in this eldest brother of hers.

The "time o' day" that it was just now in her life made it excusable, perhaps. She had a latchkey to a little heaven of her own, where she might retreat whenever earth grew troublous or commonplace; sometimes she stayed there too long and grew forgetful. And though she had taken Poppet as her special charge, and formed endless resolutions as to her future treatment of poor, prodigal Bunty, she had let Pip slip away.

He was from home so much was the excuse she made to herself now—at lectures most of the day, and no one knew where in the evening; how could she be all she should to him? She had kept a sisterly eye on his clothes, darned all manner of sweet little dreams into the heels and toes of his socks, and even embroidered him a 'varsity cap so that he should not be jealous of the one she had worked for Alan.

But there she had stopped, and it struck her suddenly to-night that this big, tall fellow with the manly shoulders and boyish, unhappy face was almost as a stranger to her.

Where had all his fun, his schoolboy teasings, his high spirits and absurdities, gone to? Surely it was only yesterday he used to pull their hair and slaughter their dolls and come for three servings of pudding!

She gazed at him with great earnestness as he sat motionless at the table, looking, not at the book before him, but straight opposite at the wall where Poppet had spilt the ink; and it came to her with a strange pang of pain that Pip, dear old madcap, merry Pip, was a man.

All the young light had gone from his eyes; they were graver, sterner than the boy's eyes, and yet full of a troubled unrest. Then his mouth was firmer, and it was not only the soft, dark line of an incipient moustache that made it seem so; the careless laughter lines around it no longer showed, his very lips seemed to have grown straighter.

But even as Meg watched, all her heart in her eyes, those same lips unclosed, and a half tremulous curve of pain appeared at each corner and made them look very boyish again. He put up his hand and pushed his crisp hair away from his forehead with a weary gesture. She could look no longer.

She went up to the table and slipped an arm round his shoulder.

"Dear old fellow," she said; "oh, I am so sorry about the exam."

"The exam.!" he repeated. "Oh, you needn't bother, old girl; I don't care. What's an exam. fifty years hence?"

His lips were under his own control again.

The girl's arm went from his shoulder to his neck. "Dear Pip, I wish you'd tell me things sometimes; don't shunt me altogether because I'm only your sister. Pip, couldn't you tell me? I know you're in trouble; couldn't I help a bit? Dear old fellow, there's nothing I wouldn't do." Such an earnest, loving voice it was.

But he freed his neck, and put her away almost roughly.

"Help me!" he said bitterly; "you're the last in the world who would. Yes, I'm in trouble, perhaps; but it's a trouble you girls and Esther would do your best to increase."

Meg's eyes filled, but she would not be repulsed. "Try me," she said. "Is it gambling, Pip? Are you in need of money? Is it debts? Have you done anything you daren't tell father?" She put her arm round his shoulder again; but he stood up hastily and pushed her aside.

"It's nothing you can help, Meg. No, it's none of those things. As to telling you, I'd sooner cut my tongue out! There, I didn't mean to hurt you," for Meg's lips had trembled; "but oh, it would be impossible for you to understand. Why, you'd be the first to be against me." He went over to the door, and picked up his straw hat from the side-table on the way.

Meg followed him. "Sha'n't you ever tell me?" she said. "Not to-night, perhaps, as you don't want to, but another time Pip; indeed, you shouldn't be disappointed in me. Just promise you'll tell me another time."

"You'll know before the month's out," he said, and laughed half wildly as he closed the door behind him.

As a matter of fact, a trivial accident happened, and she knew before the next day was out.

They were having afternoon tea down near the river, and it being Sunday afternoon and pleasantly cool, the Captain had strolled down with Esther, and

was seated on the grass leisurely examining some letters that had come by the Saturday afternoon's post and been laid aside. There was a bill amongst them that he had had no part in making, a tailor's bill, with what seemed to him superfluous blazers, flannels, and such things, down. On ordinary occasions he would only have grumbled moderately and as a matter of duty, for Pip was not particularly extravagant. But to-day, with his son's recent failure fresh in his mind, he felt he could be explosive with perfect justice. So he despatched Peter up to the house to request Pip's immediate presence. Pip was on the point of going out, and came with a half-aggrieved, half-aggressive look on his face.

But before there was time for even the preliminaries of warfare, Essie created a diversion by tumbling out of the moored boat in which she and Poppet were sitting into the deep, clear water of the river.

Pip's coat was off before any one had even time to scream, he flung it into Meg's lap right over the teacups, and was swimming out to the little dark bobbing head in less time than it takes to write it.

Nellie and Poppet had screamed, a strange, strangled cry had broken from Esther's lips, and the Captain had put his arm round her and said, "Don't be foolish, she's quite safe," in a sharp voice; but his face was white under its bronze,—this little saucy-faced baby daughter of his had crept closer to his heart than any of his other children.

Of course she was quite safe. Here was Pip scrambling up the bank again, and holding her up in his arms, a little dripping figure in a white frock and pinafore, one foot quite bare, the other with only the sock on.

Such gurgling little sobs of fright and relief she gave, such leaps and shudders of joy and terror, as they carried her up to the house wrapped in her father's coat.

But now she was safe and unhurt Meg did not follow the rest of the family into the bedroom with her. Instead she went into her own, and sank down on the ottoman at the bed foot, white to the lips and trembling like an old, old woman,—not on Essie's account, the danger had been so short-lived, but in that breathless moment something terrible had come to her knowledge.

[image]

"A LITTLE DRIPPING FIGURE IN A WHITE FROCK AND PINAFORE."

I told you Pip had thrown his coat to her over the tea-things; it had fallen on her lap with a jerk, and the contents of one pocket had been precipitated on

to the tray.

A tobacco pouch, a fountain pen, and a pipe she had replaced hastily. A letter had fallen face upwards—even in the confusion she had seen it was addressed to "Miss Mabelle Jones," in her brother's bold writing.

But the thing that had taken all the colour and life from her face, she had not put back in the pocket at all, when Pip had taken the coat. She held it at the present time in her tightly shut, trembling hand, and every minute the horror in her eyes deepened. Then she said, "Pip!" in a low, wailing voice, and opened her hand and looked again at the thing.

The tissue paper was still there, and on its whiteness, shining bravely up into the wild eyes above it, lay a little gold wedding-ring.

There was a step outside her door—Pip's step; he had been to his room to change to dry things, and was coming back. For a minute he stopped, and Meg went paler than ever; then he went on, along the passage and down the staircase.

She could hear him in the lower hall,—could he be going out again? She started to her feet as the door banged, and went hastily over to the window. No; he had his old tennis cap on, and was going very slowly across the grass towards the river, his eyes searching the ground. He had evidently missed it already, and surmised it had fallen from the pocket, either as he carried his coat to the house or when he flung it to Meg. She gave him just time to get down to the water, and then, with the small, terrible thing tightly held in her hand, she went almost blindly down the stairs and over the grass after him.

He was kneeling down just beside the tea-things, groping about in the long grass.

"Have you lost anything?" Meg asked, in a voice that seemed to have no connection with herself, so faint and far away it sounded.

"Er—only the stem of my pipe," Pip said, a dull flush on his forehead.

He overturned a cup, spilt the milk into the biscuit barrel, and said something under his breath.

"Is this what you have lost, Pip?"

Meg's voice came in almost a whisper, with a note of great yearning in it,—oh, if only he would laugh, and give a ridiculously simple explanation of it all! She hardly dared to look at his face for fear of what she should find there; her hand, outstretched to him with the gold circle on its palm, trembled like a leaf.

The scarlet leaped up into his face as if he had been a girl; his very brow and neck and ears were deeply dyed. He snatched the ring from the little soft palm, and held it in his own closed hand; his eyes were like coals on fire.

But Meg faced him quietly; all her courage gathered in her hands now the need had come.

"You were going to marry the little dressmaker, Philip," she said.

He told her a lie, two or three lies; then he abused her violently for her interference and prying; then, kneeling as he was, he put both his arms round her waist and prayed her, if she had any love for him, not to try to ruin the happiness of his life.

Oh the young, wild, passionate face, the imploring words! It almost broke Meg's heart to see him. Such a boy again,—oh, surely not a man now,—not twenty yet, and so headstrong. She felt years and years older than he—felt almost as if she were his mother, and he a child begging to play with the fire.

Strange wisdom came to her. She neither railed nor mocked, reproached nor wept. "And after you are married, what then, Pip?" she said, her voice quite even. "Fifty pounds a year won't go very far; and I suppose father will stop even that."

He flung back his head with its crisp waves and curls, the light came into his eyes.

"I can work," he said, and smiled proudly.

Meg looked merely thoughtful.

"Of course you can," she said; "but of course you will get a bare nothing at first. And, Pip, excuse me saying it, aren't you rather selfish? *You* might be able to rough it; but wouldn't it be very hard on her? Dear Pip, haven't you too much pride to ask any woman in the world to be your wife, and not have a penny to offer her or a house to take her to?"

This was a new view of the case to Pip. It had certainly not occurred to him it was hard on her; all the sacrifice had seemed on his side, and he had rejoiced to make it.

"She doesn't mind; she knows I'd have to begin from the beginning," he said, half sulkily.

"But wouldn't she rather wait? There is every chance of a bright future before you, as you know, Pip, with all the influence father has. Pip, I am sure she would rather wait and come to you when you are able to take her proudly before every one, than marry you now and make you sink into a fifth-rate clerk for the rest of your life."

She held her head on one side argumentatively; the colour was beginning to creep back into her cheeks.

As for Pip, he was both surprised and sobered at her moderation. She had not said a word against the girl he loved, she had not been contemptuous; she was only laying before him, clearly and rationally, what he had seen and refused to see himself.

The conversation spread itself out over hours; dusk was beginning to fall before they turned to go in again. It would take half this book to narrate everything that was said, but in the end the victory was to Meg.

When it came to the crisis she had been very firm.

Unless he would promise her, before God and before heaven, before their dead mother and all he held holy, not to marry the girl secretly, she should immediately inform his father, who, until he was of age, could make the thing impossible.

If, on the other hand, he would go back to his old life and work with all his will, as it was only right and just he should do, and if at the end of two years he was just as much in love with her as ever, and if there was nothing against her but her lowly position, then she, Meg, would withdraw her opposition, and even do all she could to help him forward. She felt safe.

"Think how much better you will know each other by then," she said cheerfully, as they walked back to the house, both feeling they had been near a volcano's edge. "Why, how long have you known her, Pip?"

And his answer was the least bit shamefaced.

"Three months—nearly four, at least."

He had the unpleasant feeling of having been conquered; but deep in his secret heart there was relief; that it had been taken out of his hands. He had known he was making shipwreck of his life, known he was bringing bitter trouble upon his family by this hot haste; but Mabel (with two l's and an e) had been so insistent about an immediate marriage, and he so deeply in love and fearful of losing her, that he had felt the world was well lost.

And what Meg said was very true. It would be more manly of him to work first, and take a wife when he had something to keep her on.

His Spanish castles raised themselves rapidly against the early evening sky. He would work for two or three years as never man worked yet, and marry "Mabelle" at the end of that time; then he would take her to England that she might grow a little more educated and polished (oh, Pip, Pip!), and then bring her back and present her proudly to Esther and his father and sisters.

His face looked quite young and bright again by the time they reached the front door.

"You're a well-meaning little thing, Meg," he said, and kissed her patronisingly; it was not in nature that he should feel quite proper gratitude.

Meg drew a series of long breaths of relief as she took off her hat upstairs and smoothed her hair for tea.

"Oh, *who* would have brothers?" she asked her image in the glass; but it

only looked back at her and smiled mournfully.

CHAPTER X. NEEDLES AND PINS.

"Something attempted, something done."

Snip, snip. Bits of silesia and common red cashmere worked their way to the edge of the table, and from there dropped to the floor where there was a glorious litter. Buzz, buzz, bang against the window-panes went the body and wings of a great "meat" fly. Whirr, whirr, the sewing-machine fled frantically over the silesia in the places where the scissors had gone snip, snip. From the trees across the road came the maddening sound of many locusts; the great fly on the hot window-glass was half killing itself in the effort to outdo them in noise.

"What ever was she?" sighed Miss Mabelle Jones.

She got up from the machine with a length of grey webbing in her hand, and looked absently about for a few minutes. She had written the measurement of a customer's waist on the back of a card of buttons, she remembered; but the question was, where were the buttons?

"If only he had money of his own now," she said aloud, which had no apparent connection with waist measurements, but showed that dressmakers' thoughts occasionally run on other things besides gatherings, crossway flounces, and boned bodices. Then she found the card in the leaves of the *Young Ladies' Journal*; and the comment, "Thirty-five inches, fat old thing," had a connection.

She held the webbing against the tape measure, and cut it off at thirty-five with quite a vicious little snip.

"Stuck up things," she muttered. "I wouldn't be seen in the plain, common dresses they wear for anything—no style at all. Why, Miss Woolcot's at church on Sunday was just fourpence-ha'penny print, and nothing else."

Then she gasped, and put down the underskirt she was making in a great hurry. Just outside the window stood Miss Woolcot herself, looking half-hesitatingly at the fly-spotted card that said "Miss Mabelle Jones, Costumiere and Modiste." The next minute the knocker sounded.

The father of Miss Mabelle Jones, as mentioned before, earned an honest livelihood by vending tea and sugar, wax candles, and such—not to speak of sar-

dines. There were great white letters on his window that asked, for the benefit of humanity, "Who brought down Sydney prices?" and vivid red ones that answered boldly and with generous flourishes, "Why, Thomas Jones of course, the People's Friend. One pound of fine white sugar given away with every pound of tea."

The shop was at the corner. The little side-door and window had been given to Miss Jones when she had set up for herself and lengthened her baptismal name by two letters.

Good Mrs. Jones was cutting up carrots for haricot mutton in the back kitchen, when her daughter burst in upon her.

"Go and let that young lady in; say I'll be down presently—say I'm engaged for a bit," she said, pulling off as she spoke the housewifely apron that protected the front of her mother's dress.

But "Bless us, girl" was Mrs. Jones's rather aggrieved reply; "you always see folks in that dress, and you always let 'em in yourself. This 'arryco won't be fit for pa if I go and leave it."

"It isn't ordinary folks—it's a real swell; it's—it's his sister, the eldest one," said Miss Jones, in great agitation. "There, she's knocked again; oh, for goodness' sake be quick, ma! The room's all in a mess too."

Mrs. Jones with a sigh set aside her toothsome "'arryco" and proceeded to the door.

"Can I see Miss Jones?" asked the pale young lady on the doorstep.

And "She'll be down presently; she's cleanin' herself," answered Mrs. Jones, leading the way into Mabelle's room, and moving a heap of work off a chair.

"Sit down, miss, and I'll go and 'urry her up. You can be lookin' at the fashun plates; they're the latest styles in London"; and she kindly put a heap of coloured supplements, depicting ladies' fearfully and wonderfully arrayed, at Meg's elbow.

It was more than a quarter of an hour before Miss Jones made her appearance, and oh, what a change was there!

She wore a "costume" of bright terra-cotta poplin, with insertion bands of black lace over pink ribbon at intervals up the skirt and round the body.

The sleeves were enormous—gigot shape; there were numberless gold and silver bangles at her wrists, several brooches at her neck, and a gold-headed pin was stuck through her hair. She had white canvas shoes with tan bands.

That she was pretty there was no doubt. She had a bright complexion, scarlet lips, and large heavily lashed brown eyes, very soft and beautiful; her hair, which was much frizzed, was black and silky.

"I regret that circumstances over which I had no control compelled me to keep you waiting so long; but I was engaged with some one who was in a great

hurry," she said, which sounded very well, for she had composed it while she curled her hair.

Only she accented the second half of "circumstances," and deprived her poor little last word of its rightful "h."

"I have plenty of time," Meg said. "It does not matter at all." Then she paused, and in the little space of clock-ticking Miss Jones examined her.

Meg's dress was one of the despised prints—a tiny blue spot on a white ground, very clean and fresh. There was a band of blue belting at her waist, and one on her sailor-hat. Her shoes were very neat, black with shining toe-caps; her gloves fitted without a crease, and were beyond reproach.

No jewellery at all, as Miss Jones noted, but a little gold-bar brooch fastening her spotless collar. A lady every inch, though the dress was home-made and had cost under five shillings.

In a vague, slow way Miss Jones felt the difference and was dissatisfied. She almost wished she had not put on her best dress, as it was only early morning.

"You want to see me; is it about a dress?" she asked; for Meg had half unconsciously picked up one of the magazines and opened it at "The Latest in Skirts."

"No," said Meg. "It is about my brother Philip I have come." She put the paper down; and Miss Jones, somewhat overawed by the quiet dignity of her manner, had small idea of the way her heart was beating.

"By an accident it came to my knowledge that you and my brother were thinking of an immediate marriage," Meg said; "and I came to have a quiet talk to you, Miss Jones, because I felt sure you could not know quite all the unhappiness such a course would bring."

Miss Jones's fine eyelashes were lying on her cheek; her face glowed a little with sudden colour. Pip had not been to see her the night before, as Meg knew; he had had an engagement that she took care he should not break, and now this early morning visit anticipated him.

"He told you?" she asked in a low tone.

"Yes, when I had found out everything," Meg answered. Then she leaned a little more towards the pretty dressmaker.

"Miss Jones, he is such a boy, poor Philip. Since you love him so much, how can you bear to spoil his future?"

[image]

"MISS JONES, HE IS SUCH A BOY, POOR PHILIP."

Miss Jones lifted her eyes and bridled a little.

"Of course, I knew you wouldn't think me good enough," she said.

"But," said Meg simply, "how could I think so? I do not know you. What I mean is, marriage with any one till he is older would be ruin to him. Surely you must see the unhappiness it would bring upon you both. In the first place, what could you live upon?"

Miss Jones was silent a minute.

"He could work like other people, I suppose," she answered; "he said he could, and I wouldn't mind going on sewing too for a bit."

"Oh, he would be willing to work, I know," Meg said; "but what could he do? It is harder in the present state of things for sons of gentlemen to find anything to do than labouring men. And he is not half educated yet. Now, in a few years he will be, I trust, in very different circumstances, and able to support a wife in comfort."

"I don't mind being rather poor," Miss Jones replied; "and I'm not going to give him up just because you don't think me fine enough for you."

Meg looked at her steadily. "Of course," she said, "now I have found it out, there is no possibility of a marriage for two years. My brother is not of age, and my father naturally will forbid it."

Then she softened again, for the girl's eyes had an unhappy look in them. "I expect I seem severe to you, Miss Jones; but, indeed, all I am thinking of is my brother's happiness. If I thought it would truly be for his good, I would not say a word. And you—you love him too—won't you show your love by not standing in his light?"

"You seem to think it's as easy to give him up as drop your 'andkerchief," said Miss Jones, in a voice that shook a little. "If you'd a young man, how d'you think you'd feel if any one came to you and said as you couldn't make him happy because you wasn't as fine as him?"

"If I had a lover," Meg said softly, "I would not bring unhappiness upon him for all the world. If I had a lover, and thought my love could only do him harm, I would never see him again."

"Oh-h-h," said Miss Jones,—"oh-h dear!"

Some tears gathered on her black lashes, and slipped slowly down her cheeks. They were clear tears too, and the lashes had not changed colour. Meg remembered Nellie's accusation and blushed.

"W-what is it you want me to do?" the young dressmaker said. "Oh-h, you are cruel."

Meg felt she was, but kept telling herself she must save Pip. Still, the girl's tears and large, beautiful eyes touched her tender heart. She put out her hand impulsively and took the one with needle-marked fingers; she held it in hers

while she talked to her gently and wisely and firmly. She spoke of Pip's extreme youth, of his penniless condition, his dependence on the Captain. "My father is a hard man, and a poor man. I don't think he would ever forgive or recognise my brother again as long as he lived," she said. "Then again, Philip has been used to comfort and certain luxuries all his life—to mixing in good society. He would be miserable, and make you miserable too, to go to such utterly changed conditions. Not one unequal marriage in fifty is happy—it is almost impossible they should be; and think how young he is."

"I 'adn't quite made up my mind," Miss Jones said, feeling she needed some justification. "Yes, I know he'd got the ring—he bought it as soon as I said yes; and at first I thought as it would be nice to be married straight off, but often when he wasn't here I used to think as I wouldn't after all."

"That was very wise of you," said Meg fervently, "very good of you. Oh, I knew I should only have to represent things to you a little for you to see how unwise it would be."

Miss Jones looked a little gratified, though still somewhat mournful. She felt very much like one of the heroines in her favourite *Bow Bells* or *Family Nov-ellettes*, sacrificing herself in this noble manner for the good of her lover. But secretly, like Pip, she too felt a trifle relieved.

All her life she had been used to poverty. Things had been a little more "genteel" with them since she had been earning money of her own; but still there was the never-ending struggle of trying to make sixpence buy a shilling's worth. And, from all accounts, it would only be intensified by marriage with this handsome youth she had been so taken with lately. She thought of a certain faithful ironmonger whose heart had been half broken lately by her coldness to him. He was spoken of already as a "solid" man—a shilling need only do its legitimate work if she yielded to his entreaties and married him. Perhaps, after all, it was unwise for a girl in her position to think of a "gentleman born"; and yet Pip's way of speaking, his nice linen cuffs and gold links, his well-cut serge suits, had been a great happiness to her.

"Well?" said Meg softly, breaking in at length upon her train of thought.

"Oh, I s'pose I'll give him up," she answered, somewhat ungraciously.

"How good you are!" Meg said.

"Of course it's 'ard and all that; but I don't want to make him un'appy and his family set against him—I'd rather sacrifice myself." Miss Jones cast down her lashes and looked heroic. "I suppose, though, I'll have a fine piece of work with him when he comes."

Meg had no doubt of it.

"But you will be very firm, won't you?" she said anxiously. "Remember, you have promised me to leave him quite free—to refuse to be even engaged for

at least two years."

"Oh, I'll manage him, someway; but I quite expect he will want to shoot either himself or me," was the dressmaker's answer, spoken with a certain melancholy enjoyment.

Then Meg shook hands with her warmly, affectionately even—she felt she almost loved her—and took her departure.

"But Pip will never forgive me," she said to herself, as she walked home again. "Oh, never, never, never!"

CHAPTER XI.

A DAY IN SYDNEY.

"To Mr. O'Malley in foreign parts."

Once a month Martha Tomlinson had a day's holiday. She generally chose Wednesdays, because, she used to say, if there was any luck flying about in a week, that was the day on which it fell to earth. She certainly had illustrations for her theory that Poppet at least used to think were wonderful. For instance, one Wednesday she had picked up a sixpence with a horseshoe on the side the Queen's head is generally seen—the omen had struck her as almost good enough to be married on. Another time the young man she "went walking with" had been within an ace of buying a pee-wit hat that was cheap certainly, but was moth-eaten in a place or two. If, now, she had gone on Thursday, it would have been too late to prevent it, and Tuesday it would have been too soon. It was a clear case of luck, there was no doubt.

One time, indeed, she had been tempted to take a Thursday instead, as the weather looked threatening on the Wednesday; but after a little deliberation, she thought it would be better to keep to her rule. And on the Thursday she had almost gone there was a collision between the river boat and one going to Balmain,—no one hurt certainly, but then, as she very truly remarked, there might have been. There had never been a collision in the memory of any of the family, for she questioned each and all, on a Wednesday.

The man in corduroy trousers still came to see her, and they still only talked of their marriage as the "far-off divine event" of their lives; in all probability they would be talking of it just the same ten years hence. They were not like the

usual happy-go-lucky, improvident Australians of their class, who married first, and wondered where the bread and meat were coming from second.

Malcolm was a Scotchman, and was saving up to buy a house of his own—he did not believe in lining landlords' pockets with his earnings. It would, with the strip of land he wanted, be four hundred odd pounds, and he had already saved £75. Martha had £15 in the bank, but then hers would have to go in furniture and clothing. Pip calculated that Malcolm would be seventy-two, and Martha a gay young thing of sixty-nine, by the time the house was built and furnished; but Martha was more hopeful, and did not leave such a margin for the "strikes" Malcolm seemed to revel in.

Now this particular Wednesday, Martha had asked, as a great favour, that Poppet might go with her to town. The little girl was her favourite among all the children, and her warm heart quite ached to see the child moping as she had done since Bunty's disappearance. Every day, while the nursery tea-things were being washed up, Poppet used to stand beside her, with big mournful eyes, wondering "if just this minute Bunty was climbing a mast; if he was very tired of salt meat and weevily biscuits; if his feet got very cold swilling the decks down; if—if—if—"

Martha's brother had been a sailor, so Martha knew more about life on board ship than any one else in the house; hence her great attraction.

Esther, after a consultation with Meg, gave permission; the child was fretting herself thin and pale, and any change did her good.

Of course when Poppet was dressed and standing on the verandah, engaged in the vexatious task of pulling her gloves over her little brown hands, Peter wanted to come too.

"You're a thneak, Poppet, going and having pleathure, and me thtuck here doing nothing," he said. "I'm coming too."

"In that dirty old suit, and mud on the end of your nose?" said Poppet, with the virtuous tone a spotless white frock, whole stockings, and clean boots made justifiable.

"Of courth I can wath my noth, and the thuit ithn't dirty if you bruth it." He took out a crumpled ball of handkerchief, dipped one corner in the goldfish bowl inside the hall door, and polished his small nose with great energy. "There, ith it off?"

Martha came out, resplendent in a green cashmere made in the very latest style, a green hat with pink ostrich feathers, and a green parasol.

Peter looked impressed, and said nothing more about accompanying them; Poppet was nobody, of course, even though her new boots had twelve buttons against his own six; but even his young soul felt the impossibility of a sailor suit no longer new being seen within a yard of that magnificent new costume of

Martha's.

He contented himself with looking after them enviously as they went down the drive, and kicking the verandah post with his small strong boots.

"Tthuck up thingth!" he muttered, turning away to look for means of amusement. "I'll thutht pay that Poppet out."

Martha had ideas of her own as to the proper way a holiday should be spent, and had determined Poppet should have a day she would long remember. One thing only Poppet asked for, and that was that they should walk about Circular Quay for a little time and look at the great ships, and especially any that were bound for America.

In her pocket the little girl had a blotted note she had written some days ago. On the envelope, in very bad, unsteady writing, there was this strange address:—

"TO BUNTY IN AMERICA.

"On the ship *Isabela* plese will the capten give this to Bunty."

There was a pencil mark through Bunty, and John Woolcot was written in brackets.

Inside the envelope was much paper and many smudges made by the tears that fell all the time the pen went slowly along the lines.

"Oh Bunty do come home, Bunty dere there is nothing to be fritened of. Mr. Barnham doesn't beleeve you took it and the boys chered you like anything and Meg is going to be nice always the tortus is very well and I give it beefstake every day I can get any you would be serprised to see what it can eat. Oh Bunty do be quick home oh you mite have told me you were going Bunty I'd have come with you or anything do you have to go up the masts. I'm so fritened you'll fall overbord I've put 10 pense in here so you can buy things when you're on shore I wish I had more Martha says the biskits are full of weevuls. Dere Bunty oh do come home quick quick oh Bunty if only you'll come I'll always do things for you and never grumbil whatever it is I know I used to be horid and grumbling before but just you see do you have to swil the deks with no boots. Martha says so. Oh dere Bunty DO come home. I've beleeved you all the time Bunty dere of corse.

"Your loving sister, "POPPET.

"P.S.—Be sure to come quick."

For a long time the little girl could think of no possible way of getting this letter to her brother. Meg had said the post-office would be no use, for in all probability the boat bearing it would pass in mid ocean the one bringing Bunty back.

But it had struck Poppet lately that if only she could give it to the captain of some other boat going to America, he would know just where the boat was and be able to send it on.

That was the hope that was making her eyes grow full of light as the river boat got nearer and nearer to Sydney, and hundreds of tall masts and interlacing yards stood against the blue of the sky or the brown-grey of the great warehouses.

How beautiful the harbour looked to-day! There was a cool breeze blowing, and it ruffled the waters into a million little broken waves that leaped and danced in the clear morning sunshine.

Up near the Quay there was all the picturesque untidiness and bustle of busy shipping; but out farther the sun and the waves and the drifting clouds had it their own way, and made a hundred shifting pictures. Sometimes a white sail glittered in the sun, then a brown one would make a spot of warm colour. The great boats to Manly left long majestic trails of white foam behind them, and little skiffs got into the wash and rocked joyously.

On the North Shore the many buildings showed white and clean in the sunlight; farther to the left the houses were fewer, and beautiful gardens stretched down to the water's edge. Still farther away, across the white-tipped waves, were shores with backgrounds of thickly-growing gums; and higher, the soft blue line of hills.

Poppet's very heart was in her eyes as the boat stopped at the Erskine Street Wharf and the gangway was put down. She pinched Martha's arm gently and whispered to her not to forget.

Martha spoke to a sailor who was sitting smoking on an inverted cask.

She "supposed the boats to America went from the Quay, didn't they now?—or was it from Woolloomooloo?"

But he "supposed there were boats and boats to America. There was sich as the *Mariposa*, which carried swells and was a fine boat; and sich as the *Jenny Lind*, which took oil and was not a fine boat!"

"Do you know the *Isabella*?" said Poppet's little eager voice.

"Captain Brown?—well, I reckon I do, little miss," he said, and chewed a bit of tobacco thoughtfully. "Bloomin' old tub! I was on her five year."

Poppet nearly fell upon him,—she could not wait while he said all he knew about it in his slow roundabout way.

"Is he a cruel man? don't they have vegetables to eat? do the little boys have to go up the masts? are there weevils in the biscuits? oh! and won't he let them have their boots on when they swill the decks?"

But it turned out that the *Isabella* he was on was a schooner plying between Melbourne and the South Sea Islands. He rather fancied there was a brig of the same name that went to San Francisco or Boston, or "one of those places."

Poppet's face had fallen again.

"Do you know of *any* boats that go to America?" she said in a forlorn tone. "Oh, do please try and think if you know of *any*."

Martha explained rapidly, *sotto voce*: "The young lady's brother had run away, and was on that boat; she was fretting her little heart out to get a letter to him; couldn't he pacify her some way? she herself knew it was impossible."

The sailor looked kindly at the little sweet face under its broad-brimmed hat.

"I have a mate on the *Jenny Lind*, little miss,—how'd it be if I gave him the letter? He's a good-hearted chap, and would try his best; he'd be sure to know where the *Isabella* is, and could easy send it."

"That would be best, Miss Poppet dear," said Martha; "give it to this nice kind man and he'll send it."

"Is he going to America soon? Do you think he would see the *Isabella*?" the little sad voice said.

And the sailor's answer was certainly very reassuring: the *Jenny Lind* sailed in two days, and was sure to meet the *Isabella*, in which case the letter would be delivered into Bunty's hands.

Poppet handed over her letter with a sigh of relief; she had hardly dared to hope a boat would leave so soon.

Martha thanked the man, opened her green parasol, and walked on. Poppet lingered half a minute.

"If you should happen to meet him anywhere," she said hurriedly,—"you might, you know, as you're a sailor too: he's a tallish little boy, with brown eyes, and his hair's rather rough,—you won't forget, will you?"

"Not I," he said warmly, shaking the small hand she held out,—"a tallish little boy with brown eyes,—oh! I'd easy know him."

Then she caught up Martha, who was beckoning impatiently, and felt a load was off her mind.

Such a morning they had! They went to the waxworks in George Street first, and saw bush-rangers, an aboriginal murderer, and other pleasing characters, with life-like eyelashes and surprisingly beautiful complexions. Then they climbed all the way to the top of the Town Hall—Martha knew the caretaker—and had the pleasure of seeing the city in miniature far below. The Cathedral being next door came in for a turn, but seemed rather flat after the waxworks. After that they went through the five arcades systematically, flattening their noses at each interesting window, and telling each other what they would buy if they had

the money.

[image]

"THEY WENT TO THE WAXWORKS IN GEORGE STREET FIRST."

It was twelve o'clock when they had finished with the Strand, and they were to meet Malcolm, who was going to take them somewhere to lunch, at half-past one.

"There's just time for the Botanicking Gardens," said Martha, wiping her heated face and setting her splendid hat straight at one of the narrow slits of mirror in the arcade.

So away they posted, up King Street, down Macquarie Street, and away down the broad, beautiful, shady walk in the Domain.

There was not time to "do" the Gardens thoroughly, so they only walked rapidly up some of the paths, paused for a moment to look at the blue harbour beyond the low sea wall, and then walked three times solemnly and backwards around the wishing-tree near the entrance gates.

"What did you wish, Martha?" Poppet said, as they walked up again towards the statue of Captain Cook, where they were to meet Malcolm. "I hope you wished about Bunty."

But Martha had been selfish enough to desire fervently that Malcolm should never go on strike again.

"Oh, you never get your wish if you tell what it is," she said evasively.

"Don't you?" said Poppet anxiously. "Oh dear, and I was nearly telling mine. You can't guess in the slightest, Martha, can you? You have no idea, have you, Martha?"

"Not the slightest," said Martha of the warm heart,— "not the least little bit, Miss Poppet."

"And you always get your wish, Martha?"

"Oh, of course."

Years after, Poppet's faith in that wonderful wishing-tree was unshaken.

CHAPTER XII.

THREE COURSES, ONE SHILLING.

”Yesterday’s errors let yesterday cover;
 Yesterday’s wounds which smarted and bled
 Are healed with the healing which night has shed.”

Poppet had been for lunch with Esther or Meg to the Fresh Food and Ice Company, Quong Tart’s, and such places on various occasions. But the restaurant to which Malcolm and Martha took her was quite a new experience. She did not know the name of the street it was in, but it was not very far from the Quay, and there was a rather mixed, if interesting, assembly of diners. Not that it was a particularly low-class place; it had a very good name for the excellency of its food and its moderate prices, and its patrons comprised poor clerks who minded fashion less than a good dinner,—tradesmen, sailors, and occasional wharf labourers. Martha had asked Malcolm whether, as she had Poppet with her, they had better go to some place higher up town. Malcolm, who dined there regularly, seemed to see no reason why he should change his custom for a little slip of a girl under ten.

As for Poppet, it was all one with her where she went, and while Martha and Malcolm were studying the bill of fare, she fell to watching some sailors at an adjoining table with the deepest interest.

”Now, Miss Poppet,” said Martha, ”what will you have? Me and Malcolm have fixed on sucking pig, sweet potatoes and baked pumpkin, but I think you’d better have something plainer; there’s roast mutton, or corned beef, or beefsteak pie.”

”Why,” said Poppet, ”we have *those* things at home. No, I’ll have sucking pig too, please, Martha; I like tasting new things.”

”Did you ever!” remarked Martha, looking troubled; ”it might make you ill, Miss Poppet dear. Have corned beef like a good little girl.”

But Poppet could be firm on occasion. She did not dine at a restaurant every day, and when she did she had no intention of confining herself to ordinary things.

”Sucking pig for two,” said Malcolm to the waiter, and paused for Poppet’s order.

”For three,” said Poppet, softly but firmly. While he had gone to execute the order, she occupied herself with considering what pudding she would have. There were five or six down on the list: plum duff, apple pie and custard, treacle rolypoly, stewed pears, and macaroni and cheese. She was wavering between macaroni and plum duff, when the waiter returned with the three great steaming plates of sucking pig and vegetables.

Malcolm and Martha were soon busily occupied, both considering it would

be sheer wilful waste, after paying a shilling each, to leave an atom on their plates; but Poppet found a very little satisfying, and fell to watching the sailors again.

She heard them give their orders—five of them, each a different meat and different vegetables; she wondered how the waiter could keep it all in his head, and watched quite anxiously when he returned with the tray to see if he made any mistake.

Just behind the screen where they filled the trays somebody stood handing plate after plate to the one busy waiter. Presently, as the place filled more and more she heard him say he must have some one to help at once, a number of people were waiting.

A boy in a long white apron stepped out from the screen, a tray with three corned beefs, two sucking pigs, and a roast mutton in his hand.

"Miss Poppet, dear, do eat up your potato," said Martha, pausing with a knifeload midway between her plate and mouth. But Poppet's face was deadly pale, and in her eyes was a look of strange wildness.

"She's ill," said Martha; "I knew she oughtn't to have it." She looked at Malcolm in a helpless way for a second, and then pushed back her chair to go round to the child.

But Poppet flung up her arms, and with a wild, piercing shriek darted from her place and flew across the room.

There was a crash of crockery, one of those slow, piece-after-piece crashes, when you wonder if there can be anything left to be broken, angry words from the waiter and manager, confusion and laughter on the part of the diners, blankest amazement on the faces of Martha and Malcolm, and in the midst a small girl in a white frock and big hat clinging frantically to "a tallish little boy with brown eyes and dark, rough hair,"—a shabby, white-faced boy in a waiter's apron.

"Oh-h-h-h!" she sobbed, "oh-h-h! oh-h-h-h! *Bunty!*" She laughed and sobbed and laughed again.

This extraordinary scene went on for two or three minutes; then the manager recovered his wits and began to storm, and Martha, still wearing an expression of stupefaction, made her way to the group.

Malcolm, after an expressive shoulder shrug, returned to his sucking pig, which he was enjoying immensely.

[image]

"POPPET FLUNG UP HER ARMS, AND WITH A WILD, PIERCING SHRIEK FLEW ACROSS THE ROOM."

"There's nothing them kids *could* do as 'ud surprise me," he said, as he took a fresh supply of mustard and settled down again.

He had known the family for seven years, so the remark was not unjustifiable. Martha had withdrawn to a back room with the manager. She explained that his young waiter was the son of a gentleman; she gave him Captain Woolcot's address that he might be reimbursed for the breakages.

"But 'owever he got 'ere, so help me, I can't imagine," she said. "Why, he's in America." She put out her hand to touch the lad and feel if he were real flesh and blood, the evidence of her senses could not be accredited. "It's really you, is it?" she said slowly.

But Bunty did not answer; he seemed half stupefied, and was standing perfectly still, while Poppet sobbed and asked questions and clung to him.

Such a tall, gaunt boy he had grown. His face was thin and sharp, there was a look of silent suffering in his eyes and round his lips, his clothes hung loosely on him, and were threadbare to the last degree.

"Get your hat and come with us, Master John," she said, a touch of her old sharpness in her manner to him. "Don't take on so, Miss Poppet. Hush! every one is looking at you; be quiet now, an we'll go to the Gardens, or somewhere where we can talk, and then we'll go home."

"I can't go home," Bunty said faintly.

He wondered if those five terrible months behind him were a dream; or if little trembling Poppet, who was holding him so tightly, was a vision his disordered imagination had called up.

"Oh, I can't go home, of course," he said, and pushed his thick hair back in a tired kind of way. "Hush, Poppet; go home with Martha like a good girl, and, on no account, say you've seen me. Promise me——"

He did not wait for an answer, however, but made fresh confusion by fainting dead away on the floor at Martha's feet.

The manager of the restaurant felt himself a very ill-used man that such things should happen at his busiest time; but he was not inhuman, and the boy's deathly face and the little girl's exceeding distress touched him. Besides, Malcolm was his most regular customer; it would be unwise to offend him. So he helped to lift the boy into an inner room, gave Martha brandy and water, and recommended burnt feathers.

"I'll go and send a tellygrum for the Captain," Malcolm said, picking up his hat. He too felt ill-used, for there were some choice morsels still on his plate, and there was no knowing when he would get his pudding.

But Poppet caught his coat sleeve.

"Not father, on *any* account," she said. "Esther, or Meg, or even Pip—but oh, not father!"

"No, you'd better not fetch the Captain," Martha said. "Oh no, he wouldn't do at all. Better telegraph for Miss Meg—she's got a head on her. The missus is ill with a headache, so it's no good fetching her—yes, send for Miss Meg."

It was between half-past one and two when all this happened; at five Bunty was half-sitting, half-lying on the old, springless sofa in the nursery. Poppet had squeezed herself on the half-inch of space he had left, and was gazing at him, a look of great content and unspeakable love on her little face; and Meg on the low rocking-chair beside them was holding a hand of each.

The others had been turned out. Bunty lay with his face to the wall and his lips shut in a dogged kind of way when they had all crowded round asking questions; and at last Meg, seeing he was totally unfit for any excitement or distress, persuaded them to leave him to Poppet and herself till he was stronger.

And when the room was quiet, and Meg rocking softly to and fro, and Poppet occasionally rubbing her smooth little cheek against his old coat, he told them everything of his own accord.

He had not been to America at all, he had never even heard of a boat called the *Isabella*; it must have been some other boy the police had heard of, and a chance resemblance that made them connect the two.

He had been in or near Sydney all the time, living he hardly knew how. The first month he had done odd jobs, fetched and carried for a grocer in Botany. Then he had managed to get a place on a rough farm in the Lane Cove district, where he was paid four shillings a week and given board and lodging—of a kind. But there had been a long spell of rainy weather and rough westerly winds, and he had been in wet things sometimes from morning to night.

"And it gave me fever—rheumatic—pretty badly," he said; "so they shipped me down to the hospital here in Sydney."

Poppet buried her nose in the sofa cushion, and Meg gave an exclamation of horror.

"And you didn't tell the people who you were, and send for us?" she said, wondering if this could be the same boy who, when he was small, required the sympathies of the house if he scratched his knees.

"How could I?" was Bunty's low reply, "when you didn't know about *that!*" Meg held his hand closer.

"Didn't the people at the hospital ask who you were?" she said.

"I told them I hadn't any home, and my name was John Thomson," he answered. "Of course they thought I was nothing but a farm boy. Well, I was there a long time—about two months, I think; it seemed like years."

Meg's face was pale, and her eyes full of hot tears.

She pictured the poor lad lying in that hospital bed week after week, strange faces all around him, strange hands ministering to him,—weak, racked with pain,

and yet with almost incredible strength of mind persevering in his determination not to let his family know anything.

"How could you *help* sending for us?" she said, in a low tone.

He moved his head a little restlessly.

"I knew you were all sick of me, and ashamed of me. I know I'm not like the rest of you, and I kept saying I'd get well and work hard and do something to make you respect me before I came back."

Respect him! In Poppet's eyes Nelson was less of a hero, Gordon had infinitely less claim to glory.

"Two or three times I nearly told the nurse," he continued, half-shamefacedly; "the pain was pretty bad, I couldn't go to sleep for it, and I thought I'd like Poppet to come,"—he gave her hand a rough squeeze,—"but then I used to stuff the blanket in my mouth and bite it, and it kept me from telling her. I used to have to shut my eyes so I shouldn't see her coming to my end of the ward; I used to get so frightened I'd say it without meaning to."

"And then," said Meg—the narration was almost too painful—"what did you do then—when you got better?"

The rest of the story he hurried over; it made him shudder a little to think of it all, now he was lying in this dear old room with two faces full of love close to him.

He had not been strong enough for any regular work after he came from the hospital. He had twelve shillings of his wages left, and this kept him for a fortnight, with the help of what he received for an odd job or two. The last week had been the worst of all. On Saturday he had elevenpence only left; he lived on it that day, Sunday, and Monday, sleeping in the Domain at night. On Tuesday he had in the course of his wanderings come to Malcolm's favourite restaurant, and lingered around it, trying to feed his poor hungry body with the appetising smells that issued from the door. At last he could bear it no longer; he went in and asked if they wanted a boy to wash up or wait, offering to do so in return for food and a bed at night. They had been very pushed for help, for one of the waiters had fallen ill, and they told him he could try it for a day or two. All Tuesday he worked hard there, washing up, peeling potatoes, running errands; the meals seemed more than ample repayment to him in his half-starved state.

On Wednesday the absent waiter had sent word to say he would be at his duties the following day. Just as Bunty was lading his tray to carry it round he dropped a couple of tumblers,—he had broken two or three things the previous day,—and the manager in annoyance told him he could stay the rest of the day but need not come back to-morrow. Sick at heart at the thought of the streets again, the poor boy had picked up his tray and gone out into the big room with it.

And the next minute there came that wild, glad shriek, and Poppet had flung herself upon him half mad with joy.

Just as the tale ended Nellie burst into the room. She went straight over to the sofa and fell down on her knees beside it.

"Oh, how can you ever forgive us, Bunty!" she said, tears brimming over in her eyes. "Oh, Bunty, I shall never forgive myself, never!"

Esther had followed, her face' shining with gladness. "Mr. Burnham is here," she said, "and——"

"Bunty never did it, 'twath Bully Hawkinth!" burst out Peter, pushing Nellie aside, and actually trying to kiss his injured brother in his excitement.

Bunty rose to his feet, pale, trembling.

"What is it, Esther?" he said. "Nellie—tell me!"

"Only it *was* young Hawkins after all who took the money," said Esther, in tones that trembled with gladness for the news, and grief for the poor boy's unmerited sufferings. "He broke his collar bone at football yesterday, and he thought at first he was going to die; he confessed it to his mother, and made her send word to school. Mr. Burnham has come straight here with the news, and says he can never forgive himself for all you have suffered over it."

"Oh, Bunty! how hateful we were not to believe you," said Nellie, wiping her eyes; "we don't deserve for you to speak to us."

But Bunty put his poor rough head down on the cushions again, and great hard sobs broke from him, sobs that he was bitterly ashamed of, but that he had absolutely no strength to restrain.

No one would ever know quite how wretched this thing had made him. However warm the welcome home had been, there would always have been that cloud.

The relief was almost too much for him in his weak state.

At night, when Meg was tucking Poppet up in bed, the little girl sat up suddenly.

"Meg, that is the most wonderfulest tree in the world," she said in a low, almost reverential tone.

Meg asked her to explain, and she told how she and Martha had walked backwards three times, around the "wishing-tree" in the Botanical Gardens.

Meg stooped down and kissed the dear little face; how she envied Poppet to-day! she was the only one who had had faith all the time.

"What did you wish?" she asked, though she knew without telling.

"That Bunty might be found this vewy day, and that they might find out about the money."

"But I think I know a little girl who has said that in her prayers every day for five months," whispered Meg. "Which do you think answered, God or the

tree?"

The little girl was quiet for a minute, then she knelt up on her pillow and drooped her sweet, grave face with its closed eyelids over her two small hands.

When she cuddled down among the clothes again, she drew Meg's bright head down to her.

"I was thanking Him," she said.

CHAPTER XIII. PARNASSUS AND PUDDINGS.

"When for the first time Nature says plain 'No
To some 'Yes' in you, and walks over you
In gorgeous sweeps of scorn."

Pip had not spoken to Meg for over three weeks. There had been one fiery outbreak consequent upon Miss Jones' dismissal of him. When he learnt Meg had been to her he had accused his sister of treachery, of trying to ruin his happiness; he had been willing, he said, to put off the question of marriage for a year or two, but no power on earth would have made him promise to give Mabelle up.

And she had given him up! Put him aside as if he had been a schoolboy, or a worn-out glove! And with astonishing firmness. He had even seen her already walking out with a man who sold saucepans and kettles and fire-grates in the one business street of the suburb.

No wonder his cup of bitterness seemed running over; no wonder he felt Meg had sinned beyond forgiveness in thus interfering.

His last examination had not, it was found, been hopelessly bad, and he had been granted a "*post mortem*." But even then he did not attempt to work. He used certainly, to stay in his bedroom, where his table stood with its wild confusion of books and papers, but he would sit hour after hour staring moodily in front of him, with never a glance at the Todhunter or Berkeley that so urgently required his attention. Or he would read poetry, lying full length on his bed,—Keats, Shelley, and Byron, tales of blighted passion and hopeless grief, till his eyes would ache with the tears his young manhood forbade to fall, tears of huge self-pity and misery.

Surely since the creation there had been no one quite so wretched, so

utterly bereft of all that made life worth living! How grey and monotonous stretched out the future before him! The probable length of his life made him aghast. The sheer uselessness of living, the hollow mockery of the sunshine and laughter and birds' songs, and the intolerable length of hours and days, seemed each day to strike him with fresh force.

After a certain time his mood induced poetic outpourings. He thought himself just as wretched,—even more so, indeed; but the mere fact that his feelings were able to relieve themselves in this way showed the first keenness was passing.

[image]

*"HE WOULD SIT HOUR AFTER HOUR STARING MOODILY IN
FRONT OF HIM."*

Sheet after sheet of University paper was covered with wild, impassioned addresses in the shape of sonnets and odes, or, when the pen was too full for studied forms, of eloquent blank verse.

For instance, the following poem struck him as exceptionally fine. He composed it at midnight, after eating his heart out in misery all the day. It was written in his blackest writing, as might be expected, and upon a sheet of grey note paper,—the University buff had suddenly offended his sense of fitness.

"Oh, what is life when all its joys are fled!
I am in love with Death's long dreamful ease.
Over my head I hear th' unwelcome tread
Of future years; my aching eye still sees
New suns arise and set, and seasons wane.
I would take arms against this sea of pain,
I would embrace Earth's sea and sink to rest,
For ever lulled upon her soothing breast!
I would fling off this gift of Life, as you,
O bitter Love, flung me aside, your you!
O Love, O Love, O bitter, beauteous Love,
Heartless and cold, but still my one fair dove!
What is this life that some find strangely fair,
When but to think brings sorrow and despair?
What is this life when love, your love, lies dead,
And mine, too much alive, slays me instead?"

I will give up, go down,—there is a sea,
 A winding sheet, kept cool and green for me.
 I will give up, go down! Yet, Love, but smile,
 But stretch to me that hand so soft and white,
 That seemed my own, that sad, sweet little while,
 And all grows day, for ever dead the night.”

He was not at all sure when he read it the eighth or ninth time that the mantle of the "Sun-treader" had not fallen upon him, that Helicon's drying fount would not spring up afresh at his bidding.

Other men in love, he knew, had made verses, but they were of the mawkish, sentimental kind his more fastidious taste rejected, the kind that generally began something like—

”Oh, Star of Beauty, all the night
 Thou shinest in the sky;
 For thee the dark doth grow quite bright—
 Oh, hear my plaintive sigh!”

His, he felt, were strong with the strength born of fathomless misery, and sweet with the bitter-sweet of undying and spurned love.

One day he met Mabelle; she was walking to church with her fat, honest old mother, who preferred a man of saucepans with money far before one of irreproachable shirt cuffs and empty pockets.

She smiled at him from her brown, beautifully lashed eyes, a kind of for-goodness-sake-try-to-make-the-best-of-it-and-don't-look-so-tragic smile, but he interpreted it as a sign of softening. When he got home he sent her the poem,—if anything in the wide world could touch her beautiful, stony heart he thought that would.

He entrusted it to the common post, and waited with an undisciplined heart for the answer.

It came on a Monday morning. Poppet took it from the postman and carried it up to him, but she was too busy with a scheme of Bunty's to notice how white he turned, and how his hand trembled.

It was painfully short and to the point:—

”What's the use of writing poetry to me when all's up and done with? I showed it to Ma and Pa and some one else, and they thort it very fine; but said you

oughtent to write it as some one else writes poetry for me now. I think it's very nice of course and I'll keep it this time but don't send any more.

"Your friend only and nothing more, "Miss JONES (not Mabelle).

"P.S.—I suppose I may as well tell you as I'm engaged to be married to Mr. Wilkes."

That was Pip's death-blow, and, if a paradox may be allowed, from that minute he began to live again.

The thought that his cherished poem had been submitted to the critical gaze of a man who sold frying pans and wrote "poetry" himself, stung him to madness. He sat down and attacked his hydrostatics with savage frenzy to prevent himself doing anything desperate.

He even played in a football match the next week, a thing he had not done for a long time; and he took food less under protest.

But Meg he could not forgive; his manner to her, if compelled to speak, was cold and contemptuous; when possible he totally ignored her presence.

The girl found such conduct very hard indeed to bear from her favourite brother, especially as it was only her keen anxiety for his welfare that had made her act as she had done; she bore it in silence, however, and without reproaching him. Some day, she knew, he would thank her from his heart, and for the present she must content herself to lie under the ban of his displeasure.

To solace herself she took to making puddings, learning the technicalities of meat cooking, and concocting queer-smelling bottles of stuff she labelled mushroom ketchup, tomato sauce, and Australian chutnee in her neatest hand.

Esther smiled a little when first these operations began. Meg had hitherto expressed the frankest dislike for culinary engagements.

Nellie laughed openly.

"Her 'prentice hand she tried on us,
And then she cooked for Alan, oh!"

she said one day, shaking her head as she eyed a surprisingly queer-looking conglomeration Meg called amber pudding.

"Many thanks, but no, Meg dearest; I think I will finish with honest bread and cheese!"

"Esther?" said Meg, pausing with uplifted tablespoon, and taking no notice

of Nell's sarcasm beyond blushing finely. "You'll try a little, won't you? I'm sure it's very nice."

But even Esther looked dubious; the frothed icing on top had an elegant appearance certainly, but underneath was a mass of strange colour and consistency.

"Dear Meg," she said, "I am like the French lady, you know,—I eat only my acquaintances. Nellie, pass me the cheese."

But this sort of thing did not damp Meg's spirits, not at least for more than a day or two.

Perhaps the next three or four puddings would be long-established favourites that no one could take exception to, but after that there would appear one or two of French title and unknown quantities. Now and again indeed they turned out brilliant successes, that every one praised and longed for more of; but most often, it must be confessed, they were failures, very trying to the tempers and digestions of all who ventured on a helping.

"It was well to be Alan," Nellie said, "with nine innocent people submitting themselves daily to the dangers of poisoning or lifelong indigestion, just that in future he might escape and have his palate continually pleased."

"If I can't practise on my own family," demanded Meg, smiling however, "how am I to get experience? All of you have excellent digestions, so it will not do you any real harm."

And she persevered with so much determination that they only groaned inwardly when a "confection à la Marguerite," as Nellie called it, took the place of old favourites, such as plum puddings, apple pies, roly-polys and Queens. Every one accepted their portion in meekness, and really tried to say encouraging things, especially if her face was hot and anxious.

Bunty was just beginning to find his place in the family again. But he was a changed boy. No one could doubt that those five hard months had had the most beneficial effect on his character, although they had made him so white and hollow-cheeked. He was stronger morally, more self-reliant. The rough usage he had received seemed to have quite dissipated his cowardice, and with it the inclination to falsehood. He was almost pitifully careful not to make the slightest untrue statement about anything; and now the barriers of reserve between himself and Meg were broken down, she was able to help him more, and put herself more in his place.

Poppet was as much as ever his faithful little companion; there was absolutely nothing the child would not have done for this dear, recovered brother. She even consulted Meg as to the practicability of learning Latin, just that she might look up his words for him every evening in the dictionary.

But as three-syllabled words in her own language made her pucker up her

poor little brows, and as English grammar still had power to draw weary, dispirited tears, Meg advised a short postponement.

CHAPTER XIV. MUSHROOMS.

"In what will all this ostentation end?"

A new house had been built lately not very far from Misrule, a grand, showy-looking place, or red brick, in the Elizabethan style, which the suburbs of Sydney are just beginning to affect largely.

The grounds were laid out by a landscape gardener, and there were velvet lawns, carpet beds, and terraces reaching down to the river, where at Misrule there was only a wilderness of a garden with broken palings, and a couple of sloping paddocks where long rank grass and poppies flourished. Then the carriage drive,—such a grand, smooth, red sweep, serpentine up to the great porch. The Misrule drive was hardly red at all; the gravel had mostly vanished, the dead leaves were generally of Vallambrosian thickness, and weeds raised cheerful heads at intervals. The name of the people who had built the new house was Browne,—Fitzroy-Browne, with a hyphen and an e.

Mr. Fitzroy-Browne was a railway contractor, and had builded himself an ample fortune out of a Government that not yet had need to cheese-pare.

There were three or four Misses Fitzroy-Browne, that fashionable boarding-schools, dressmakers, and several seasons had done their best for. There was a Mr. Fitzroy-Browne junior, who waxed his moustache, wore clothes of chessboard device, and kept racehorses. And there was Mamma Fitzroy-Browne, who was fat and good-natured, and said "Bless yer 'art" with a cheeriness refreshing in these days of ceremony, and then pulled herself up short and looked unhappy.

Poor Mamma Browne! who sometimes thought wistfully of the long-dead days when Papa had been only an honest navvy, and her little girls and boy too small to snub and suppress her, and order her about.

Mamma Browne, who had liked her little old "best" room, with its big round table, holding the Bible, three gilt-edged books, and some wax grapes under a glass shade, far better than her grand new drawing-room, that was like a furniture

show-place, all mirrors and cabinets, and green and gold.

How many Mamma Brownes there are in Australia! It is quite pitiful. Good dear creatures, with their bones too set to adapt themselves to the change the golden days have brought; poor simple-minded things, who, having consistently left "h" out of their language for forty or fifty years, cannot remember it now till an embarrassed cough or a blush and sneer from a Miss Hyphen Browne makes their old hearts ache for shame of themselves.

Dear housewives, who wasted not their husbands' substance in the old days, and now bring down vials of contempt from the daughters for anxious watchfulness over reckless servants! Sociable old bodies, to whom a cup of tea in the kitchen with a gossiping friend had been happiness, but "At Homes," thronged with stylish people whose speech fairly bristled with h's and g's, bewildering misery.

Comfortable women who have weaknesses for violet, crimson, and bright brown, with large bonnets heavily trimmed, and are sternly arrayed in fashionable no colours, and for bonnets forced to wear a bit of jet, a flyaway bow and strings, that they say piteously feels as if they had no head covering at all.

I should like to build a Home for them, these dear, fat, snubbed orphans of society that is altogether too fine for them—I said *fat*, because if you notice it is always the fat ones who get into trouble: the thin ones can shape themselves into place better,—to build a Home full of small cosy rooms, with centre tables, and chairs, not artistically arranged but set straight against the walls, with vases (pronounced vorses) in pairs everywhere, waxen fruit and flowers under glass, and china animals that never were on sea or land. There should always be a tea-pot, warmly cosied, cups big enough to hold more than one mouthful and not sufficiently precious to make one uncomfortable, plates of cake, cut, not in finikin finger strips, but in good hearty wedges.

These to be in readiness for all the dear old vulgar friends who had not got to fortune yet and loved to "drop in."

And if I had a uniform at all for my orphans it should be of a good warm purple, with plenty of fringe and plush and buttons; and the standard weight of the bonnets should be thirteen ounces.

All this because of Mrs. Fitzroy-Browne!

Captain Woolcot had told Esther she need not call when the new people came to the district: he said he "hated mushroom growths, especially when they were so pretentiously gilt-edged,"—which was rather a mixed metaphor, by the way but no one could tell him so.

For some time therefore all the young Woolcots saw of the "mushrooms" was on Sundays, when a pew that had belonged to two sweet old maids—grey-clad always, sisters and lovers, never apart even in their recent deaths—

blossomed out into a gay dressmaker's showroom, from which all the congregation could during sermon time take useful notes for the renovation of their wardrobes.

Nellie's hats were good signs of the times. The boys chaffed and scorned her unmercifully, but the poor child had such a weakness for having things "in fashion" that for her very life, when the Misses Fitzroy-Browne's trimmings were all severely at the back of their hats, she could not leave hers at the front. Or if their frills crept up into the middle of their skirts and had an insertion heading, how could she be strong-minded enough to let hers remain on the hem with only a gathering thread at the top?

Poor Nellie! she had a great, secret hankering for the flesh-pots of Egypt. The love of pretty things amounted to a passion with her, and the shabby carpets, scratched furniture, and ill-kept grounds of Misrule were a source of real trouble to her.

Privately, she took a great interest in the rich Brownes, and envied them not a little. Their grand house and beautiful grounds, their army of trained servants, their splendid carriages and horses, and their heaps of dresses and jewellery seemed to the half-grown girl the most desirable things on earth.

But if you had put it to the test whether she would change Esther's beautiful, quiet grace of manner for Mrs. Browne's nervous fussiness; her soldierly, upright father for little, mean-looking Mr. Browne; handsome, careless Pip, who looked like a king in his flannels and old cricket cap, for Mr. Theodore Fitzroy-Browne of the careful toilets and bold eyes; or sweet, gracious Meg, who always said the right thing at the right time, for one of the over-dressed, gushing Miss Brownes, I think—even with all the money thrown in—she would have clung to Misrule.

For their part, the Brownes took a great interest in the Woolcot family, and felt themselves much aggrieved that, with all their shabbiness, they had been too "stuck-up" to call upon them.

They would have liked Pip for their "At Homes" and dances; and the young, grave-faced doctor, who was always turning in at the Misrule gate; Meg, who looked "such a lady"; and Nellie, whose beautiful face would be so great an attraction to—at any rate—the masculine portion of their guests.

When, after some five or six months, no cards from Captain, Mrs., and Miss Woolcot had been deposited at the shrine of their wealth, they began to make overtures themselves.

Meg and Nellie had been helping to decorate the church one afternoon,—it was Easter-time,—when two of the Misses Browne came in, followed by a man in livery, bearing a great basket of exquisite white roses, and kosmea. Mrs. Macintosh, the clergyman's wife, introduced the girls to each other, since they were

[image]

"MEG AND NELLIE HAD BEEN HELPING TO DECORATE THE CHURCH ONE AFTERNOON."

so close, and they hammered their fingers and exchanged civilities together for the next hour.

Miss Browne at the end of that time wanted to know if they were not passionately fond of tennis.

"Oh yes—very," said Nellie. "We love it!"

"Of course you have a court?"

"Only a chip one the boys made; but it does very well."

It was Meg's answer. Nellie grew red, and wondered why her sister could not have contented herself with "Yes, of course!" seeing there was small chance the Fitzroy-Brownes would ever be asked inside the gates of Misrule.

Miss Browne was silent a minute, then she said,—

"We have three beautiful grass courts. I wish, Miss Woolcot, you would come up and have a game with us sometimes—and your sister, of course; we should be glad to see your brother as well, if he would care to come."

Meg tried not to look surprised, and did her best to find "the right word for the right place."

"Thank you very much," she said; "but our afternoons are very much filled, I am afraid we should not be able to."

"Then come in the morning," urged Miss Browne. "We always practise in the morning—it fills the time, for, of course, there is nothing else for us to do."

"I am always busy in the morning, and my brother is at lectures," Meg said; "thank you all the same."

"Well, your sister," said Miss Browne. "Won't you come, Miss Nellie? You can't be busy as well."

Nell looked at Meg as much as to say, "Why can't we?" but Meg was somewhat annoyed at the persistency.

"I am very sorry, but Nellie still studies in the morning," she said, just a little stiffly; "she is not old enough to be emancipated yet."

"Well, I think it's very mean of you, you know," was Miss Browne's answer; but she had not taken offence, for Meg's tone had been pleasant. "Still, if ever you can find time, we shall be delighted to see you; we are always at home on Tuesdays and Fridays, evenings as well as afternoons; or if you just sent me a little note to say you were coming I would stay in."

Again Meg thanked her politely, if not warmly, and managed not to commit herself to a promise. She moved away, however, from the danger of it as soon as she could, and helped Mrs. Macintosh to decorate the chancel with kosmea and asparagus grass.

But the Misses Browne kept the not unwilling Nellie close to them, chattering to her, flattering her adroitly, altogether treating her as if she were quite grown up, instead of not yet sixteen.

She was much easier to get on with than Meg, although she was a little shy. They found out from her, by dint of much questioning, that the young man with earnest eyes was Dr. Alan Courtney, and that—"yes, he was engaged to Meg." They learnt that Pip was in his second year, and went out a great deal; also that he played tennis splendidly, and had won the singles tournament at the University, but that he liked football much better. That the thin boy with brown, rough hair was John, and the little bright-faced girl who wore big hats and always sat next to him was Winifred. How Poppet would have smiled to hear her baptismal name! That Pete—Rupert and Essie were the "second family," and that the tall, beautiful girl they at first had thought was the eldest Miss Woolcot was the step-mother. Meg intimated to Nellie it was glove-putting-on time, and tried to draw her away, but Mrs. Courtney came up at the moment and engaged her attention.

"I *wish* you could have come to tennis," the eldest Miss Browne said, "or to our evenings; we have such awfully jolly ones."

Nellie admitted, half hesitatingly, that she should like to "very much indeed."

"It's a shame for a pretty girl like you to stay at home," Miss Isabel said. "It isn't fair to the poor men, my dear."

Nellie blushed exquisitely, and both the Misses Browne thought she was the sweetest-looking girl they had ever seen.

"I'm not out yet, of course," she said shyly. "I suppose I shall go to places when I'm as old as Meg."

But they seemed to think that was a very old-fashioned notion. When they were fifteen, and even younger, they said, *they* had gone to parties and no end of things.

"I don't suppose you could just run up to us one day next week by yourself, and have a game with us?" insinuated Miss Browne, who would fain show the glories of Trafalgar House to this young girl, who was trying, unsuccessfully, to hide her well-worn gloves from their gaze.

Nellie was "afraid not," but the "not" was very dubious; she was wondering if she could not manage it in some way, and when Meg, released from Mrs. Courtney, came down the church for her, the first seeds of the intimacy had been

sown.

CHAPTER XV. THE GOVERNMENT OF MEG.

"Alas! how easily things go wrong."

A week later, cards, very thick, gilt-edged, and perfumed, arrived at Misrule, requesting the pleasure of the company of Mr. Philip and the Misses Woolcot's company at an "At Home" at Trafalgar House.

Pip said it was "fair cheek." Meg raised her eyebrows, but Nellie longed ardently to accept, and almost wept when a formal answer pleading regret and a prior engagement was sent in return.

A fortnight passed, and more cards arrived.

MR. AND MRS. FITZROY-BROWNE.

The Misses Woolcot,

FRIDAY EVENING.

Dancing. R.S.V.P.

Meg left out the "prior engagement" this time in her reply, and merely "regretted the Misses Woolcot could not have the pleasure, etc."

But the girls gushed over Nellie just as much whenever they met her. She used to go occasionally to the Parsonage to play mild tennis with Mr. Macintosh's delicate son, who had been ordered the exercise. The Misses Browne also went there at times; they considered that to visit there on equal terms was a hall mark of gentility, and persevered therefore, even though they yawned afterwards all through the drive home.

They always drove wherever they were going, they seemed to think foot exercise below them. It was even said that when they went to return a call of the Macarthy's who lived two doors off, they went in their great open carriage, with high-stepping horses, coachman, and footman complete. So, also, whenever they went to the little homely Parsonage on the hill top, the imposing equipage took them there, the footman stood in petrified state while they alighted, and afterwards handed the two racquets out with as much ceremony as if he was

assisting in some public function.

Innate good taste sometimes whispered to Nellie that these things ought not to be so, but she generally chose to be conveniently blind.

How could she find fault with them when they petted her and flattered her till her silly little head was swimming? when they pressed gifts upon her,—a gold bangle that one of them wore and she had admired, a brooch with a tiny chrysophrase heart, even a parasol composed of billowy chiffon. She had the good sense certainly to refuse the presents, though she looked at them with longing eyes, but none the less she admired and envied girls who had it in their power to make the offers.

"Your people seem determined not to come to our house," Miss Isabel said one day on the Parsonage tennis ground.

"They—they have so many engagements," said Nellie, with hesitating mendacity and a blush of distress. What would they say if they knew the contempt the cards met with at Misrule?

Miss Browne spoke of the great ballroom at Trafalgar House, of illuminated grounds, of the throngs of guests; to Nellie, who had not yet been allowed more harmful dissipation than tea-parties, picnics, and children's romps, it sounded entrancing. "Yes, I should love to come," she said wistfully, as they once again regretted she should not give the world an opportunity to see her beauty.

The child naturally was flattered that two grown-up young ladies should take so much notice of her, and tell her so frequently of her good looks; it seemed strange, even to her, that with all their money and friends they should trouble to make much of a girl of her age who never wore anything more expensive than muslin, crepon or serge, and always trimmed her own hats.

The reason was that the Misses Browne, though they had really taken a genuine liking to the shy, beautiful-faced child, had a great respect for the name of Woolcot, the high esteem in which the family was held, peccadilloes notwithstanding, and envied greatly their unquestioned entry into the society that, strive as they would, opened not its doors for them. And they thought, if they could once get on to a friendly footing at Misrule, other people in the neighbourhood who had looked coldly on them hitherto would immediately hold out hands of friendship, and come to their doors with the magic bits of pasteboard they so desired.

The best means to this end they considered would be to dazzle the eyes of the family with the luxury and unstinted wealth at Trafalgar House.

But Nellie was the only one they could get hold of, so they fed her young vanity without stint, and tried to lure her up to the great red mansion.

"Yes, I should love to come," she had said on this occasion. They were standing on the Parsonage court after a sett, Nell in a pink cambric blouse and

well-worn serge skirt, the Misses Browne in elaborate costumes of Liberty silk with crossed tennis racquets worked all round the skirts.

"Well, *come*," they said,— "don't wait for the others; we want *you*,—why can't you come even if they won't?"

"Oh," said Nell, who had not dreamed of independent action, "how could I if Esther and Meg don't?"

Miss Browne gave a little laughing sneer.

"What a good little girl it is! Does it always ask permission for everything, and do exactly as it's told? Why, when we were your age we never dreamt even of consulting our parents where we went, and they never dreamt of interfering. Why, it's a very old-fashioned notion to be in bondage like that to your parents."

Nell flushed half-shamefacedly.

She began to believe that she really gave in too much to her elders, that she ought to have more freedom, and be more independent, now she was nearly "grown up."

"Perhaps I will come some day," she said a little uncertainly.

"Just show them a few times that you are not a child, to be dictated to as they wish," advised Miss Isabel; "after that it will be quite easy. Why, I'd just like to hear ma or pa say we shouldn't go here or mustn't go there, shouldn't you, Beatrice?"

Beatrice's laugh of utter scorn was sufficient answer. "Why, it's just the other way," she said: "we tell ma what to do."

"Some day" Nellie had said, but had not imagined how soon the day would be offered to her.

General Blaxland, the head of the forces in New South Wales, had decided to send a certain Lieutenant Holloway and Captain Birsted to India, with a view to gaining information from the forces there about several reforms he wished to introduce into the colony.

Just at the last Lieutenant Holloway fell ill, and the General had asked our Captain whether he could manage to tear himself away from the bosom of his family for the time required, or whether they must send one of the younger lieutenants. The Captain had asked for a day to think it over, hastened home to Misrule, and told Esther if she would go with him he would accept, for it would be a delightful holiday for both.

Esther was charmed with the idea. India had always seemed a kind of beautiful enchanted country to her, where Arabian Night kind of entertainments went on from morning to night. She begged for small Essie's company, but the Captain would not hear of such a tie. So as they would only be away four months Esther at length consented, and delivered her baby into Meg's care with numberless injunctions.

There was one week of wild confusion at Misrule. The children had holidays from lessons; dressmaking and millinery seemed going on all over the house; trunks, cabin boxes, and portmanteaux stood gaping open in Esther's room, and the Captain had a fit of intense irritability all the time.

Monday, the day the *Orotava* started, came at last, and Meg awoke from the confused dream she had been in all the week to find herself on the Quay waving a wet handkerchief to a boat almost out of sight, and only refraining from more tears by a hastily got up argument between Peter and Essie.

"Ze tised me last," said Essie, trying to derive tearful superiority from the fact.

"The waved to me latht, tho there!" Peter said.

"Ze never!" said Essie.

"The did!" cried Peter.

Meg thought it time to put away her handkerchief and interpose herself between the two "grass orphans," or the quarrel would end in Essie slapping Peter, and Peter growing red and pushing her down on the ground.

Every one was looking a little grave and upset. It is impossible to see a great ship bearing our dear ones move slowly away toward the wide, terrible ocean without quickened heart-beatings, and serious if not misty eyes, even if they are only going for a very little time, and accidents are unheard-of things with such splendid ships.

Meg proposed an adjournment.

"Let's go and have tea and cakes or ice-creams at Quong Tart's" she said.

"Who'll pay?" asked Buntly the practical.

Meg waited a moment; she half hoped Pip would come with them, his own merry self again, and offer to "go halves," but he made no movement.

"I might take it out of the housekeeping money just this once," she said. "Seven of us,—that would be three-and-six; only, Peter, you mustn't ask for ice-cream too if you have a custard roll or anything; every one can only have one thing, or it makes it too expensive."

Pip moved away.

"Won't you come, Pip?" she said half beseechingly, and catching his coat sleeve.

But he gave her a cold look.

"No, thanks," he said, and walked off.

So only six of them went to drown their grief in tea and ice-cream.

There had been talk of asking Mrs. Hassal to come down and look after Misrule and its inmates for the four months; but then, what would have become of Yarrahappini?

Meg begged her father to have no one. Surely, she said, for that short time

she was capable of being head of the house. The cook was a married woman, and would give an air of steadiness to the place; Martha was thoroughly reliable; and Pat had the virtue of doing as he was told. There would be herself and Pip in authority, with Nellie as aide-de-camp; Bunty was a changed character; and as to Poppet, Peter, and Essie, any one with a little tact could manage them.

So it was decided at last, and Meg picked up the reins of government with a pleasurable feeling of responsibility and no misgivings whatever.

Pip felt he had done his duty for the time when he spoke a word in season to Peter and threatened "hidings" innumerable if he waxed obstreperous.

But the aide-de-camp was tried and proved wanting,—all the trouble that followed came through her.

Meg, who desired everything to go on smoothly and pleasantly, made a point of consulting Nellie in many things, and treating her as an equal in age. As it happened, it was the worst policy she could adopt just then, for it strengthened the younger girl's growing ideas of independence.

A little firmness—a mother's firmness—and the enforcement of unquestioned authority at this juncture would have saved her from many a subsequent heartache. But alas! there was no mother, and Meg's rule was certainly not despotic, though it was firm in its way, and answered excellently with the young ones.

"Where are you going, Nell?" she said one afternoon, going up into the bedroom, and finding her young sister in the midst of as elaborate a toilet as her simple clothes would allow.

"Up to Trafalgar House for tennis, that's all!" Nell replied, in a tone whose studied nonchalance was somewhat overdone.

Meg fairly gasped. Was she going to have open rebellion among her subjects as soon as this?

"You are going to do nothing of the kind, I hope," she said, with considerable warmth in her tone. "What are you thinking of? Of course you can't accept hospitality from people we refuse to visit!"

"Oh, that's all nonsense!" Nellie replied, fluffing a strand of hair backward with the comb and pinning it up into a roll. "I consider Esther and you were very rude and unneighbourly not to call on them, and it's no reason I should be impolite as well!"

"But you can't do such an impossible thing!" Meg cried. "Don't be such a child, Nellie. Go to the Parsonage, or the Courtneys, or anywhere if you want a game; but, for goodness' sake, keep away from that horrid place!"

Nellie proceeded quietly with her dressing, the resolute light in her eyes not a whit diminished. She buttoned her blue tennis blouse, brushed some specks of dust off her skirt, and put a piece of clean belting in her silver waist-clasp.

[image]

”NELLIE, I FORBID YOU TO GO!’ MEG CRIED.”

”I can’t believe you’re in earnest,” Meg began again; ”why, you *must* remember father expressly said we were not to go!”

”He did not tell me; he only said Esther needn’t call,—that’s not forbidding *me!*” Nell said calmly.

She put on her sailor hat, stuck the pins through with great care, and made a few little deft dabs at her fluffy side hair. Then she put on her very best gloves and picked up her racquet.

”Nellie, I *forbid* you to go!” Meg cried, finding neither reasoning nor asking would answer. ”Remember, I have been left here in charge of you all, and I absolutely *forbid* you to go near those Brownes!”

”Pooh!” said Nellie, ”I’m nearly as old as you—I’m too big to be forbidden. Give your orders to Peter and Poppet—I’m *going!*”

And she went.

CHAPTER XVI. MORE MUTINY.

”Gently scan your brother man.
Still gentlier sister woman,
An’ if they gang a trifle wrang
To step aside is human.”

That was the first battle; another followed quickly on its heels; and then there came a long and sorrowful peace.

Meg had been exceedingly angry about it—and with justice. She marvelled, not only at Nellie’s rebellion, but that she should care to mix with such ”impossible” people, as she called them.

”It isn’t as if they were merely homely and uneducated,” she said; ”but their vulgarity and pretentiousness are enough to make any one sick!”

However, as Nellie was very quiet—docile even—after the one outbreak, and as it was not possible to keep up an unfriendly spirit for ever, she thought she had better overlook it as a first and last offence; more especially as she remembered her own mad infatuation for Aldith MacCarthy, when she had been even older than Nell was now.

But she warned her with much resolution in her tone.

"You only leave me one course, Nellie," she said. "I have been left in charge, and if you won't obey orders—I'm sure I try to give as few as possible—I shall be compelled to write to Mr. Hassal and ask him either to send you to school till father comes back or else to let some one come here whose authority you will respect."

Then she softened, and put her arms round her sister.

"Don't make it so hard for me, Nell," she said, almost with tears in her eyes; "there's nothing in moderation I'd try to stop you, but you really must see I can't let you grow intimate with these people."

But Nellie had not responded with her usual sisterly hug and kiss. She wriggled away from the encircling arms and gave a little impatient toss of her head.

"What a fuss you make about things, Meg!" she said pettishly. "I do wish you'd leave me alone! I'm not a child, and I'm not going to be ordered about like one."

Then came the next war.

Cards for a dinner-party arrived from the "unsnubbable" Brownes—Bunty's adjective.

"Put them in the fire," Pip said. "No answer is the best for such people."

If there had been some pretty faces among the feminine portion of the Browne household Pip would not have been so scornful of the overtures, but the girls were each and all undeniably plain. For the days that intervened between the arrival of the cards and the date of the dinner-party Meg was exceedingly busy.

She had a dressmaker in the house making winter frocks for Poppet and Essie; that took up much of her time. Besides this, two great cases of quinces and apples had been sent to them from Yarrahappini, and, with Martha's help, she was converting them into jam and jelly.

Bunty also had been unwell, and from school a day or two, and Peter had one of his perverse fits upon him. She had not had time to give the Fitzroy-Brownes as much as a passing thought; and as the new daily governess made no complaint about Nellie's morning studies she concluded all was going on well.

Judge therefore her immeasurable amaze when, going up to the bedroom on the date of the dinner-party, and just after nursery tea was over, she discovered

Nellie again in the act of making a "toilette." She had the white crepon dress on; it nearly touched the ground in front, and trailed a little behind. There was soft lace in the neck and sleeves of it, and on her bosom a cluster of the exquisite pink roses that climbed all over the tool-shed. She had white suede gloves and black pretty shoes, both new, as the gap in her small allowance testified.

Excitement had lent a brilliant colour to her cheeks; her eyes, with their thick, curled lashes, were like stars. For one second Meg paused, struck with the wondrous, exceeding beauty of her young sister; the next she realised what she was dressed for.

"Where are you going?" she said, merely as a matter of form—of course she knew.

"I'm going to the Fitzroy-Brownes at Trafalgar House for a small dinner-party,—seven to ten, carriages at half-past," Nellie said, with elaborate attention to detail. "Is there anything else you would like to know?"

Meg went a little white.

"You don't move from this house, Nellie!" she said, and her lips set themselves firmly. "You can take off that dress as soon as you like!"

Nellie twisted a long lace scarf round her beautiful shining head.

"It's no use making a bother," she said; "I've made up my mind to go, and I'm going!"

"I refused the invitation," Meg said, catching at a straw.

"But I accepted," was Nellie's answer. "I met Isabel yesterday and promised."

For ten long minutes did Meg argue, reason, coax, and appeal to Nellie's better judgment: the fear of Isabel's sneers, together with the thought of the cost of her shoes and gloves, were of more avail. The girl was quietly obdurate; Meg found she was not even listening to her.

"They are sending a brougham down to pick me up at the Bentleys," she said, when Meg was almost exhausted; "I shall miss them if I wait any longer." She moved to the door.

But a flame of righteous anger sprang up in Meg's eyes. She hastened down the corridor to Pip's room, and laid the case in a few words before him.

Offended as he was with his sister, he could not refuse to uphold her in a matter like this—especially as he had such a vast contempt for the "mushrooms."

He caught Nellie on the staircase.

"Don't be such a little idiot!" he said. "Go and take that frippery off at once!"

"Go and mind your own business, Philip Woolcot!" retorted Nellie.

"Well, of all little donkeys!" he said. "Do you actually mean to say, Meg, she was going off on her own hook, without you or me or any one?"

"I certainly do think she's losing her senses!" Meg said in exasperation.

Philip surveyed her in silence for a minute—her exquisite, childish, unformed beauty even appealed to his coldly fraternal eyes. He smiled almost benignly.

"Be a good little chicken," he said; "wait three or four years, and you shall revel in this sort of thing till you find it's all vanity."

Three or four years! Nellie's eyes flashed defiance at them both.

"I'm *going*," she said, in a low, very determined voice. She brushed past Meg and went down five stairs.

But "Are you, my lady?" quoth Pip. He jumped the steps, caught her, and held her fast.

She struggled violently—anger and excitement lent her unnatural strength—and she freed herself at length, and fled in wild, mad haste down the stairs and to the front door. Once in the brougham, which was only a little way off, and she knew she could bid defiance to all the Megs and Pips in the world!

But Pip's blood was up. He had no intention of letting a little chit like Nellie get the upper hand of him, even if there were no real object at stake. As it was, the thought of his pretty, innocent little sister in the company of the "off crowd" of men he had seen young Fitzroy-Browne take home, and the loud women with whom he felt instinctively the girls consorted, made him shudder.

"Are you going to stay at home quietly?" he said, fire in his dark eyes as he caught her by the arms just as she was pulling the door handle back.

"No, I'm not!" she said stormily.

For answer he picked her right up in his arms as if she had been Poppet.

"Where shall I put her, Meg? I'm going to lock her up," he called breathlessly; she was not fragiley light.

Meg was a little startled at such a summary proceeding; then she decided rapidly it was the only thing to be done at the juncture.

"Here!" she cried, "in her own bedroom." She flung open the door, and he strode down the passage with his struggling burden in its dainty dress and sweet, crushed roses.

They left her the light. There was a shelf of books to occupy her if so she liked, also her work-basket, with a fleecy cloud she was crocheting; she would be able to fill the time. But they locked the door very carefully, and took the key downstairs with them.

"You must have been exceedingly careless, Meg, to let her get to know them," Pip said, with masculine inclination to locate blame.

Meg told of the introduction and subsequent meetings—how it seemed impossible to get the people to accept the frequent if delicately-conveyed hints that their acquaintance was not desired. She kept the tennis episode to herself, for she feared it would only make him more harsh and overbearing to Nellie, and do

no good.

When they were separating some time later she looked wistfully up at him.

"Dear Pip, aren't you ever going to forgive me?" she said; "can't you see I only did it for your good? Do let us kiss and be friends again."

He looked at her very coldly and sternly; the old bitter curve showed at his mouth.

"No," he said, "I shall never forgive you while I live, Meg." Then he turned and went out of the room.

Meg went upstairs, tired, dispirited. Tears smarted in her eyes from her rebuff. Nellie, she knew, was thinking hard thoughts of her; Alan had not written to-day, for some reason or other; and all the world seemed wrong. She went into her room and sat down, with a sob and some splashing tears, in the dark by the window.

[image]

"HER DESCENT FROM HER OWN BEDROOM WAS ALMOST EASY."

Such a great calm sky of pale, sweet stars; such a hushed, faint breath in the tall gum trees; such a low, soothing lapping of little river waves!

In an hour she was very strong again; her eyes were dry and calm and brave; there was a great, sweet peace in her heart.

She thought she would read for a little time, and grow still calmer. There was her Browning on the writing table—he had strengthened her often since she had begun to know him; and there were a couple of books Alan had lent her: "At the Roots of the Mountains," and something of Pierre Loti's. She fingered them a moment.

But first she would go and speak to Nellie, who would be calmer too by now,—poor pretty Nellie, with her childish defiance and longings for "other things." She went down the passage, softly, by Peter's room and Bunty's. The light was shining beneath Nellie's door; the poor little prisoner was not asleep, then.

She stopped and inserted the key with a flush of shame: how ignominious it must feel to be locked in!

"Dear Nell——" she began, and then stopped aghast.

The room was empty.

CHAPTER XVII. A DINNER PARTY.

"Oh, would I were dead now,
Or up in my bed now,
To cover my head now
And have a good cry!"

Trafalgar House, if you please. Time, about eight o'clock. Dramatis personæ some fifteen brilliantly-dressed ladies, and as many gentlemen in regulation evening attire.

A great long table, magnificently set, and ablaze with tiny electric lamps cunningly hidden among foliage and splendid flowers. At one end Mrs. Fitzroy-Browne in rich black satin, a truly astonishing cap, and twice as many glittering rings as she had fingers.

Mrs. Fitzroy-Browne, with a large fixed smile that only her fork or spoon ever disturbed—Mrs. Fitzroy-Browne, with one anxious eye on the waiting servants, one half frightened on her son and daughters, and only the large smile for the guests.

At the head Mr. Fitzroy-Browne, a small, neat man, with little eyes and a half-apologetic, half-assertive manner, as if he were begging your pardon for the great wealth that made you mere nobodies, and at the same time hugging himself mightily.

[image]

"AWAY DOWN NEAR ONE END SAT NELLIE."

At intervals down the sides the Misses Fitzroy-Browne, in *decolleté* dresses of latest style.

Sandwiched with them and other females with large bare arms and rough, fashionably-coiffeured hair, net-covered, men of various sorts and conditions,—self-made men like their host, who came to approve the show money could make;

a few of better position, who enjoyed the wines and good dinner and despised the vulgarity of the givers; a good-looking adventurer or two of higher society, remittance men, who, having almost outrun the constable, as a last resource came heiress-hunting.

In the middle of one side Mr. Adolphus Fitzroy-Browne, with a large expanse of white shirt front, a pink-edged tie, great diamond studs, and a red silk sash tied at one side instead of a waistcoat.

And away down near one end, a stout American Hebrew, dinner intent, on one side, a young man of the puppy order on the other, sat Nellie,—Nellie, looking like a little lonely field flower sprung up in a bed of gaudy dahlias,—Nellie, in a white, simple dress of home make, high-necked, long-sleeved, with the dying pink roses at her breast, and a silver "wish" bangle that cost half-a-crown for her only jewellery.

Poor little Nell! Never perhaps in all her fifteen years had she been so immeasurably miserable and uncomfortable.

In the drawing-room the women had stared her up and down in scorn, and rustled about in voluminous silken and velvet skirts; the thought of her own plain, high-necked dress made her cheeks burn. The Misses Browne had been too busy with entertaining to do more than give her a nod and a word or two as they introduced several of the men to her.

"Daughter of Captain John Woolcot," she overheard one of them whisper once,— "poor, but of very good family, related to a title; great friend of dear Isabel's; pretty little thing, yes; quite a charity to show her some life."

Nellie had blushed hotly, and shrunk back into a corner. Oh, if only there had been a door near and she could have slipped out and flown through the night back to dear, despised Misrule. If only the floor would open and mercifully swallow her out of sight! If only there was a window near, through which she could make her exit from Trafalgar House for ever! But alas! the drawing-room was upstairs here, and there were no convenient tanks and thickly-wooded creepers such as had made her descent from her own bedroom almost easy. There was a little patch of green on her skirt, and a pin held together a ripped flounce, but, certainly, no one in that gay assemblage suspected her of leaving her own home by any more unusual mode of exit than the front door. It was even worse when a move was made towards the dining-room, and she was assigned to a youth in a chokingly high collar, a youth who said ya-as and haw, and left out his r's and g's because he had been told it was "as done in London."

She was in a hot state of nervous distress even when no one was speaking to her; it was increased tenfold when she found this man evidently expected her to talk and be talked to all the time.

He asked her whose dancing she liked best, Sylvia Grey's or Marion Hood's.

"—I don't know either of them," she answered, wondering distressfully if she ought to use her silver knife and fork or an ordinary fork only for the *paté-de-something* that the footman had just given her.

"Haw," said the youth, "at the theatre,—don't-cher-know,—haw—haw, very good."

Nellie's cheeks burned. He looked at her with impertinent admiration.

"Like to see a garl blush myself, don't-cher-know," he drawled, "shows they're young. Lord! what wouldn't the old ones give to do it—our friend Miss Isabel, for instance?"

Nell's pink deepened to scarlet under the cool audacity of his stare. This was the first experience of the kind she had had in her life; all the men she had hitherto met on equal terms had been gentlemen unmistakably.

But she did not speak; her long eyelashes lay almost tremblingly on her cheek, and she took a mouthful or two of the *paté*; she had decided to use the fork, and then crimsoned afresh to see most of the others employing knife as well. The pastry broke up into little flaky pieces; in vain her one implement chased them round her plate, she could only get a crumb to stay on the prongs each time.

"Haw—what lovely long lashes you've got, Miss—haw—Woolcot, wasn't it? I suppose that's why you keep persistin' in lookin' down, isn't it now?" said the voice at her elbow.

She looked up in desperation, her cheeks aflame again.

"Haw, that's better," he said; "now I can see your eyes. I couldn't when you kept them so cruelly hidden, don't cher see."

Then the Hebrew neighbour claimed her attention.

"Grand finisht dot vash at Randwick, Sat'day," he said. The servants were bringing him fresh supplies, so he could spare time for a minute to speak to the pretty little girl beside him.

"Yes," assented Nellie in a hurry. She had not caught what he said, but thought it would be easier to assent than tell him so.

"And vich horse vos it you vos backing?" he pursued.

Then she had to explain she had not heard what he said; and afterwards, that she had never been to the races in her life.

The Hebrew had no other conversation at command just then, so he returned to his fresh plateful, and left her to her other neighbours, who smiled openly, but made no movement to help her when a servant brought champagne, and she was perplexed to know whether she ought to offer one of the many glasses beside her or remain passive. She had never thought it possible for a meal to last the interminably long time this one did.

The others seemed to be enjoying themselves exceedingly. There was loud

talking and laughing on both sides, wine was flowing freely, and there was an exhaustless supply of good things to eat.

Nellie wondered miserably if Meg had found her out, as she dipped her finger tips into the Venetian glass finger bowl. There was a tiny William Alan Richardson rosebud floating there; Meg had had a cluster stuck in her waistband when she had been entreating her to give up this dinner. Dear, dear Meg! and to think she had vexed and worried and grieved her like this, just for the sake of these horrible people and their thrice horrible dinner-party!

Her eyes ached with tears, there was a lump in her throat, a tightness at her heart; the young man at her elbow was talking, but she neither heard his words nor turned her head. Then he laughed out, and the Hebrew gentleman touched her arm. All the ladies had risen and were on their way to the door; she only was sitting still, her gloves yet off, her young, unhappy face downcast. A wave of colour rushed into her cheeks, and as she jumped up hurriedly, every one was looking at her, half amusedly, half admiringly. Isabel at the door waited for her, a little vexed.

"What *were* you dreaming of?" she said. "Why, you haven't even got your gloves on."

"Dear Miss Isabel," Nellie said, entreaty almost tearful in her voice, "do let me go home now. Indeed I must,—oh do, do, do!"

But "What nonsense, child!" Isabel answered, and bore her along with the others into the brilliantly lighted drawing-room.

Here it was not quite so bad. Nell saw a chair half hidden behind a window-curtain, and felt she had indeed come into a haven of peace when she gained it. No one disturbed her for a time; some of the girls yawned openly, and kept their speech for the arrival of the gentlemen; one or two frankly closed their eyes to show the small appreciation they had for their own sex; the others discussed the men, their moustaches, money, eyes, figures, in a way that made the one violet in the room want to shrivel up or turn rosy for the shame of her girlhood.

They all ignored Mamma Browne, who had a spacious velvet sofa all to herself; she would have liked to knit or do something with her fingers, but the girls had told her it wasn't "good form," so she only twisted them in and out of each other, and wondered if the people would go at eleven or twelve, and whether they had noticed that only three servants waited instead of the five they always had for the parties.

Then she noticed the little lonely figure in white by the great window. There was a droop about the little sweet mouth and a misty look in the sweet eyes that quite touched her kind old heart. She got up and waddled slowly across the floor. "Come and sit on the sofy with me, dearie," she said; and all Nellie's heart went out to her.

The sofa was in a deep window at the end of the room, quite away from the loud-voiced, finely-dressed girls who so overpowered her.

"Oh, do let me stay with you all the time, please!" she said, as she nestled down close to the motherly, capacious-looking old lady. "Oh, it is much nicer here—may I?"

"Why, of course," said Mrs. Browne; "why, I'll be glad to 'ave you; you ain't been enjoyin' yourself, I'm thinkin'?"

"Oh," said Nellie, who was a polite little soul, even in distress, "oh, it has been very nice, I'm sure, only I don't go to dinner parties yet, and so I am a little shy, I suppose."

"Well, I ain't enjoyed it," said Mrs. Browne, with a sigh; "they worrit my life out, these parties, and unsettle the servints, and make all the house rumped up, and then no one says thank you or likes you a bit better for it all."

She felt she might ease her poor old heart a little to this young girl, whose dress was not fine enough to make her haughty, and whose face was sweetly sympathetic.

"Oh, I'm sure every one has enjoyed it very much, and thinks it is very kind of you to give such a nice party," Nellie said, touched by the tired quaver in the speaker's voice.

"Me!" the old lady replied, with a touch of bitterness. "I'm only their mother, I don't give it, bless your soul!—all the good mothers is nowadays, is to mind the servints and take blame when things go wrong. Me! All I 'ave to do is to order dinner and stay up till every one's gone."

She rocked herself to and fro unhappily; her state of bondage was beginning to tell upon her.

"Ha' you got a mother?" she asked, turning sharply on her young guest.

And Nellie's reply was very low and sad: "She died nine years ago."

The poor child was in the mood to-night to long inexpressibly for the soft arms and breast of a mother. There was silence for a few minutes.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Browne, and her voice also was very low, and a little unsteady with tears, "she was fortunite, mothers had oughter die when their childers is little and loves them. When childers is growed up mothers is only in the way."

Nellie stretched out her young hand and stroked the poor old fat one that was tremblingly smoothing imaginary creases out of the sofa seat. "Why, I would give all the world if my mother were alive," she said, with eager hurrying lips, "and Meg and Pip would,—all of us, dear Mrs. Browne. I think it is just when we are grown up we love mothers best, and want them most."

"Not me," was the slow, sad answer, accompanied by a furtively wiped tear. "Not mothers as ain't been learned grammar proper when they was young. Them's the kind of mothers as had oughter die afore their boys and girls are

grew up.”

Then the gentlemen came in, and there was a louder buzz of talk, a new settlement of chairs, and presently some excessively noisy music.

”I’m just goin’ to get something for my ’ed, it aches so bad,” Mrs. Browne whispered to Nellie after a time; ”they won’t notice if I slip out when Miss ’Udson goes to the pianee.”

Nellie lifted eager eyes. ”Let me come with you,—oh, please!” she said impulsively, and the next minute the two were stealing out of the nearest door together.

In the dimly-lighted bedroom the old lady gave way altogether, and sobbed for a long time in a heartbroken way, much to Nellie’s distress.

”Oh, I wish I was dead, I do—I wish I was dead!” she said, with a little rocking movement to ease the sorrow of her poor old heart. She mopped at her eyes occasionally with her lace-trimmed handkerchief; in olden days she would have put her apron over her head and shed her tears behind its screen; but even that solace was denied her now.

Nell found eau-de-Cologne on the dressing-table, and insisted on bathing her head with it, and then fanning slowly with a palm leaf till the poor thing’s agitation calmed and the burning head was a little cooler.

”I think I’ve let things worrit me too much to-day,” was her faltering excuse when, half an hour later, she awoke to the fact that Nellie was still fanning her; ”but no one knows what my poor ’ed ’as been lately. Marthy the parlour-maid was sick last night, poor thing, and I sat with her till near two; and James the other footman begged me to let ’im go off—they said ’is little girl was bad with scarlet-fever. I ’ad to let ’im, of course, and you could see ’ow vexed Pa was when we was short-’anded at table. It worried me awful.”

There was a rustle of silken skirts along the corridor, and a patter of high-heeled shoes. Isabel had suddenly missed her young guest, whose eyes she had so wanted to dazzle; it struck her with infinite vexation that it was more than probable she was with her mother, despising her hugely for her ungrammatical language and many banalities.

”Well, really!” she said, sweeping into the bedroom, and looking vexedly at the two on the sofa.

Mrs. Browne struggled instantly to her feet.

”I’m just comin’, my dear,—comin’ this minute,” she said, in a voice whose nervousness struck Nellie as strangely pathetic. ”I thought the folk wouldn’t be missin’ me just for a bit.”

”Oh, I never expect *you* to do things like other hostesses,” her daughter answered rudely. Then she turned to Nellie.

”I don’t know what you want to run away like this for; I shall begin to

think you're not enjoying yourself. Come, we're going into the ballroom to have a dance or two: can you do the cotillon?"

She swept her away to the lights and music again, to fresh vexation of spirit that self-forgetfulness for a time had made less keen.

In the midst of a waltz with her odious dinner companion Nell caught sight of her so-called hostess, who had followed her daughter back to the room.

She was sitting, poor fat old creature, on a stiff chair near the wall, blinking patiently at the dancers, the large set smile on her face again, and a headache pucker on her forehead.

To Nellie the one bright spot in that dreadful evening was the thought of her touching, surprised gratitude at the trifling service she had done her.

"I just wish you was my little girl!" was her wistful speech at parting, when twelve o'clock put an end to the revels,— "oh, 'ow I wish you was my little girl!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

"HOW GOOD YOU OUGHT TO BE!"

"Greater than anger
Is love, and subdueth."

The silence of midnight hung over all the house—there was darkness in all the rooms save one. Outside, the rain was falling, but without noise; sometimes the wind blew it against the window-panes in little gusts like the light spray of waves, but for the most part it fell in straight, silent sheets upon the soaking garden and paddocks. Now and again the same fitful wind stirred a Japanese sun-blind at the end of the side verandah. It had a broken pulley, and was hauled up slant-wise; when the wind stirred, it moaned and creaked like a live creature.

Meg was sitting on the drawing-room hearthrug, her head in her hands, her fair hair rumpled back from her forehead, her eyes, intensely thoughtful, fixed on the ashes in the grate. Early in the evening a fire had been lighted; for, although it was only May, it had been a chilly day. The fire had gone out, however, and Meg had not noticed this, though she had been staring hard at it most of the time.

Only one gas-jet was alight, and it was turned low—the room had almost an eerie look in the faint light. A great vase of pampas grass and bulrushes loomed tall and ghostly from the corner near the piano; and a wet, dull moon—when the

drifting clouds permitted—looked in at a little side window where the blind was not drawn.

Every one in the house was asleep but Meg.

She was sitting up for Nellie.

Pip had gone out before she had found the bird was flown from the cage in which he had locked her. There was a smoking concert at one of the Colleges, and he had left word that he should not be back that night at all—the last boat left so ridiculously early that one of the men had offered him a bed.

So Meg kept her lonely watch with cold feet and low spirits.

She was wondering if it was not very selfish of her to think of being married. Alan had given her a year, under protest,—at the end of that time he would assuredly claim her. No one was less conceited than our sweet, pale Margaret, but she could not help seeing that things would be much worse at Misrule when her place knew her no more. There was little, eager Poppet with her excitable nature and wonderful capacity for feeling everything,—who would listen patiently to all her funny little plans and thoughts, or take an interest in her keen childish troubles and joys? Poor, reclaimed Bunty, whose sullen reserve and brooding fits of depression she was just beginning to understand and sympathise with—if the old days of "John" and carping blame began again, his character would be ruined.

And Pip, who had just left his glad boyhood paths and was stepping so carelessly into the strange, sorrowful ones of manhood, where there were precipices and pitfalls at every turn,—how she longed to be at his elbow again, giving him the right kind of help! He had spurned her away just now, she knew; but soon, she felt certain, she could slip back to him as if nothing had happened, and keep him from worse things, perhaps.

But not if she made fresh ties for herself.

She told some of her fears, half falteringly, to Alan.

"I think you must give me longer," she said.

But he only laughed at her. Men never understand these things.

"I didn't think you were conceited, Meg," he said; "why, Nellie will make a model eldest sister, by-and-by, of course. And I have far more need of you than these children have. And I'm not going to take you to New Zealand or the Islands; we shall live somewhere in Sydney, and you will still be able to keep your eye on Bunty's collar,—that's the greatest grievance, isn't it?"

Meg was trying to imagine beautiful, spoilt Nell as a model eldest sister this evening as she sat on the hearthrug. Why, not one of the young ones would have acted so wrongfully, so utterly foolishly as she had done about these Brownes; the girl had no "balance" naturally, and her great beauty already seemed likely to prove as much of a snare as beauty is popularly supposed to be. She was not even decently educated; the daily governess they had had so long had been a person

of weak will, and Nellie in especial had learned or refused to learn much as she pleased. True, she could play and sing fairly well, and write a ladylike hand; but her French was hopeless, her slate pencil had not travelled beyond discount and the rule of three, and her acquaintance with the great lights of English literature was so restricted that, though she knew Shakespeare wrote "Romeo and Juliet," and "Paradise Lost" was composed by one John Milton, nearly all the other names she met conveyed nothing more to her mind than that they were "men at the end of the history book."

Meg's lips grew severe as the night wore on. In truth she did not know what to do in this crisis, she felt so young and powerless. If Nellie insisted on going to Trafalgar House every night of her life, how could she prevent it? She told herself her sister knew this, and was taking advantage of their father's absence in an exceedingly unworthy way.

Through the rain came the half-deadened sound of wheels along the road. Meg stood up, cramped and cold, sick at heart. How she did dread and detest "scenes," and she knew there must be one!

The gate clicked, but no wheels came up the drive. Meg pulled herself together and went out to the front door with a little shiver. She knew exactly how it would all be: Nell would be flushed and beautiful and defiant; she would brush past her and go upstairs in her pretty, white trailing gown, her head very high. She would most probably say "Mind your own business" or "Hold your tongue," for both these phrases were in Miss Nellie's vocabulary of anger. And then she would lock her bedroom door and go to sleep, rebellious as ever.

Her cold hand pulled back the heavy fastening of the door when light footsteps fell on the verandah. She stood there in silence. But oh! such a little woe-begone, dripping wet figure was there, with no wrap on at all, and only a bit of soaking lace on her head!

"Oh, Meg!" she said, and sprang into her sister's arms with a hysterical sob of relief. "Oh, Meg, Meg, Meg! oh, my darling old Meg!"

What could Meg do?

Be angry when the wilful, beautiful creature was sobbing so pitifully?

Shake her aside and speak coldly when she was clinging to her with such a passion of love and relief? She kissed the face, wet with rain and tears.

"Come and get your wet things off, dear," she said; "you should have driven up to the door, the drive's so long."

"I was afraid it would wake every one," was Nellie's answer, broken in three places.

Even when Meg had taken off, with her own hands, the poor spoiled white dress, and wet white gloves, and little muddy shoes; when she had made up a crackling fire of wood in the bedroom open fireplace, and brought her own cosy

red dressing-gown and a white shawl for array, Nellie still wept heartbrokenly.

She was overwrought with the excitement of her escape, the evening, and her return. And now Meg's tenderness and utter absence of reproach broke her down altogether.

She put her head on the arm of the easy chair, and all her body shook with sobs.

Meg only stroked the wealth of beautiful hair she had let down to dry; she felt it better not to speak at all.

By-and-by she slipped out of the room and stole down to the kitchen. When she returned, Nellie was a little calmer, and even gave a wet look of interest at the tray she carried. There was a little old saucepan on it, a tin of *café-au-lait*, two cups, sugar in a saucer, the end of a loaf of bread, and some pineapple jam.

"I couldn't find the butter," she said, half apologetically, as she set down her load on the bed edge.

"Oh, I don't deserve it!" wept Nellie, meaning less the butter than Meg's kindness.

They had to use the water out of the wash-stand bottle, and in the absence of spoons had to stir their cups with the bone ends of their toothbrushes, but the meal gave them both new life and spirits. Meg toasted the bread on the end of her knife and spread a piece thickly with the toothsome jam. She proffered it to Nell with burnt cheeks and a gay little laugh.

"Oh, Meg, you are the best girl on earth!" the girl said, flinging her arms impetuously around her sister's neck. "I'm not fit to black your boots! there's nobody just like you, Meg, in all the world. Oh, Meg darling, why can't you make me more like you?"

[image]

"LOOK!" SAID MEG.

Meg only kissed her for answer, kissed her with a sweet, moved look on her face. And then Nellie told everything: how she had dropped from the window on to the tanks and scrambled down from there with the help of the creeper, how she had been in time for the brougham they had sent, how utterly miserable she had been all the evening.

She declared their own comparative poverty seemed beautiful against the Brownes' wealth and glaring vulgarity.

Meg saw all the girl's sensitive nature had suffered, and uttered not a word of rebuke; she even said they would keep the affair to themselves, and not tell

Pip.

But she dropped one little word in season before she went to her own room to bed.

The dressing-gown suited the girl's exquisite young beauty marvellously; all the time they had talked Meg could not help admiring.

When they got up she drew her quietly to the long glass of the dressing-table.

Oh the wonderful picture it showed! the rich, warm colouring of the graceful gown, the young sweet face with its dewy eyes and tremulous lips and pink flush, and all the soft great waves of riotous hair one golden splendour to her waist!

"Look!" said Meg.

The girl looked at her image shyly, almost shamedly, but with a certain little glad quickening at her heart.

"Oh, *Nellie!* how good you ought to be!" whispered the elder girl, and kissed her and slipped away.

CHAPTER XIX. HEADACHE AND HEARTACHE.

"Look where the healing waters run,
And strive and strain to be good again."

Poor little Nell,—it was almost pitiful to see how good she tried to be after her escapade. There was absolutely nothing she would not have done for Meg. She begged to be allowed to help in the housekeeping, offered to take the darning of Bunty's socks and Peter's terrible stockings as her own particular work, and sternly refrained from looking in her glass when it was not necessary for the straight set of her collar or respectable appearance of her hair.

She consulted Meg as to the best study she could take up—she said she felt ashamed to be so dreadfully ignorant.

"Why, I haven't read anything better than Jessie Fothergill and Rhoda Broughton this year," she said, in a tone of stern surprise at herself.

Meg suggested the "Essays of Elia," "The Professor at the Breakfast Table," "Sesame and Lilies," Lives of various poets.

"You can go then gradually to something deeper," she said. "I'm afraid you might be discouraged if you started on anything more solid just yet."

But Nellie's zeal was too tremendous for half measures.

During the morning of the day after the dinner party, Meg had occasion to go into the nursery for something or other during Miss Monson's hours, and with difficulty restrained a smile.

Nellie always studied—or pretended to—at a rickety-legged draught-table in the window. Her working materials hitherto had consisted of a chased silver pen that looked too elegant to write with, an ornamental inkstand with violet and red ink, a box of chocolates, a novel in brown paper covers, "Le Chien," highly dilapidated, and "Samson Agonistes," which she was supposed to be studying in detail.

This morning all was changed. There was black ink in the bottles, the silver pen was invisible, and a plain penny red one occupied its place on the stag's head. No trace of chocolates, no covered fiction at all. Instead, a pile of books selected from the study simply because they were the most solid looking and driest on the shelves. The choice had occupied Nellie for almost an hour; if any she took down had spaced matter, light-looking conversations, or broken-up paragraphs she instantly replaced them. She had finally selected and carried to the nursery, to Miss Monson's incredulous surprise, the following six: "Sartor Resartus," "The Wealth of Nations," "Marcus Aurelius," "Mazzini's Essays," the "Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire," and Johnson's "Rasselas."

When Meg came in she was struggling with Carlyle, fingers at ears to keep him quite apart from the object lesson on Ants which Miss Monson was delivering to Poppet and Peter. In the afternoon she practised for two consecutive hours, not waltzes and scraps from the "Mikado" and "Gondoliers" and "Paul Jones" as usual, but Plaidy's technical studies and Czerny's Velocity Exercises and a fugue from Bach.

At night she took out a quantity of red wool that she found in a box, and began to crochet a petticoat for an old woman who lived in a tumble-down bark hut near the river, and had the reputation of being mother of two bushrangers who had been shot, sister to a famous murderer, and daughter of one of the early Botany Bay convicts.

But of course such an abnormal state of goodness could not be expected to continue uninterruptedly, at any rate in its early days. In less than a fortnight the silver pen made its reappearance, and violet ink crept back into one of the bottles. The crochet needle was slipped out of the sixth row of the petticoat and made to work fleecy white wool up into that pretty style of head wrap known as a "fascinator."

"Oh, I didn't do anything so very dreadful, after all," she said to herself,

with the blunted memory of ten days. "Dear old Meg is always a little inclined to make mountains out of molehills."

At first there had been a little real fright mixed with the thought of the dinner-party. Five days after it was over, she was in at the chemist's spending eightpence of her allowance on a sweet little bottle of scent for Meg.

And one of the grooms from Trafalgar House came in with a prescription.

"The old lady's pretty bad," he said, in answer to a question of the chemist that Nell had not caught, "and two more of the maids are down."

Nellie lingered a few minutes, counted her change several times, examined the nail and tooth-brushes displayed in a glass case, and read an advertisement setting forth the merits of somebody's pills.

The man said he would call back for the medicine in half an hour, and departed. Then she went back to the counter.

"Is it Mrs. Fitzroy-Browne who is ill?" she asked, remembering with a pang the poor old woman's wistful "I just wish you was my little girl!"

"Yes, she's down with scarlet-fever—several of the servants too," he said, and went to the gas to melt some sealing-wax.

The girl went home with a grave face. Apart from regret at the old lady's illness, there was the fear that she herself might have caught it. She went straight to her room and examined her tongue anxiously at the glass; then she held one wrist gravely with a finger and thumb, and asked herself if she felt feverish.

But the pulse was calm, the tongue healthily red,—she laughed at herself.

"I never felt better in my life," she said aloud. After some deliberation she decided she would not tell Meg. "She'd only worry, and prepare herself for my immediate funeral," she thought. "I should be all over red spots by now if I had got it."

So that is how it happened, when ten days had gone and she still felt exuberantly well, that the silver pen returned and the fascinators were commenced. One could not wear sackcloth for ever.

She even borrowed "Comin' thro' the Rye" and "Joan" from a girl-friend; and "Rasselas" and "Sartor Resartus" slipped down behind the table and were forgotten.

But she had intended all the time to consult Alan. He had been away for almost a fortnight in Victoria, or she would have asked him before.

The afternoon he returned, and as soon as she could get him away from Meg, she asked him if he would come down into the garden with her, as she wanted to ask him something very particularly.

The young doctor laughed, and put himself very much at her service.

"I hope it's not about the style of hats in Melbourne," he said in mock alarm, as they went down the path; "for I culpably forgot to notice. If it's only sleeves,

now, I can tell you—they're up to the ears, and a yard and a half wide."

"It's about the state of my health," she said sententiously,— "I wish to consult you *professionally*, Dr. Courtney!"

He put on a sympathetic look.

"The heart, I suppose?" he said.

But Nell stopped short in the summer-house.

"Don't be stupid!" she said. "Look here, Alan, have I, or have I not, got scarlet-fever?"

He could not help laughing. It seemed so absurd for a fine girl—the picture of health—to ask such a question.

"Your skin is cool—your pulse normal—your tongue fit for a health advertisement. If you have got it you're managing to conceal it very well," he said. "You might give me the recipe for my other patients."

"I was talking to some one who had scarlet-fever just after," Nell returned,— "that's all."

There was no fun in Alan's face now.

"When?" he said sharply.

"Oh, nearly a fortnight ago!"

"You've not got it, then," he said. "Did you change your things after?—take every precaution? How did it happen?"

She told him everything, blushing hotly at the surprise in his face when he heard she had been to Trafalgar House.

He looked exceedingly serious over it.

"There's no knowing what may be the end of it," he said, a frown of anxiety on his brow. "How could you do such a thing, Nellie? You might have known Meg's judgment would be good."

"But you say I haven't got it," the girl answered, resenting the elder-brotherly tone of reproof, "so there's no need for any more fuss."

"How do I know you did not bring it home with you and give it to one of the others?" he said shortly.

Nell looked aghast.

"Why, I couldn't do that, could I?" she said, with startled eyes. "I never dreamt any one but I could have got it."

"You ought not to have been allowed with the others," he said. "However, as things are, I daresay no harm has been done. No one has been complaining of headache or sore throat, have they?"

Nellie thought hard for a minute or two. She reviewed each member of the family rapidly in succession, and tried to remember if any one's appetite had failed at any meal lately, that was always the great test of health at Misrule.

"No," she said at last. Then she caught her breath.

"Essie had a headache this morning," she faltered. "Oh, but she fell down and bumped her head, so that accounts, and she ate four jam tarts yesterday when no one was in the room; that's the cause of hers, Alan, isn't it?—oh, you can see it is."

"I'll look at her," he said. "Does Meg know anything about all this?"

"I didn't like to worry her," Nellie answered, and followed him up the path like a criminal found out in blackest iniquity. She had never dreamed she was endangering the others. Poppet met them on the second path.

"Afternoon tea's ready, and Meg says aren't you two ever coming in. No, I don't want any, there's only gingerbread."

[image]

"PETER WAS ENGAGED IN CHASING A FAT DUCK."

Alan felt her pulse, and asked to see her tongue.

"There's something alarming in a little girl who doesn't like gingerbread," he said; but there was a professional look in his eye.

"She never eats gingerbread," Nell exclaimed, almost indignant with him for having fears when the child looked so rosy.

"Poppet's all right," he said in a low tone, as they went on; and Nellie could have cried in her relief.

"Peter next," she said.

They went down into the paddock, where Peter was engaged in chasing a fat duck from end to end, without a thought in his mind of being cruel to it. He was hot, certainly, but that was the exertion of running and shouting.

"Is your throat sore?" Nellie burst out, before they fairly reached him.

"I should think I can thout if I like," he said in an injured tone, taking her anxious query for sarcasm.

Alan caught him by the back of his sailor coat.

"Mad, quite mad," he said—"only lunatics rush about like this. Hold him while we find out the symptoms, Nellie, and see whether we'll have to extract his teeth, or put his legs in plaster-of-Paris."

"He's all right too, I think," he said, when the released boy sprang away again after the duck, that was panting in a corner with one anxious eye on its enemy.

"Bunty's *beautifully* well," Nell said eagerly, as they went up to the house again. "You should just see him eat, Alan. And Pip is splendid, so is Meg, as you can see."

Meg was standing on the front verandah, a troubled look in her eyes.

"Oh, there you are!" she said.

"Here we are," said Nellie. She drooped her eyes guiltily. "Is the tea cold?"

But Meg did not answer her.

"I wish you'd come and look at Essie, Alan," she said. "She's been eating pastry, and it's upset her, poor little thing. I don't like her looks."

"Does her head ache?" Nellie asked with dry lips.

"She says her head aches, her throat aches, and her legs ache,—everything aches," was Meg's answer. "Esther always gives her aconite if she's out of sorts, Alan. I gave her five drops this morning: was that right?"

"Quite," he said; "I'll go up and look at her now."

He went up the stairs behind Meg, a very grave look in his eyes.

And Nellie followed with a face as colourless as the great white roses she had stuck in her belt so lightheartedly half an hour ago.

CHAPTER XX.

MY LITTLE ONE DAUGHTER.

"Misery,—oh! Misery,
This world is all too wide for thee!"

The very next day came a letter from India.

"Oh, this beautiful, beautiful country!" wrote Esther. "Oh, the colouring, the life in everything I I cannot tell you how *new*, painfully new, Australia seems compared with it. Imagine a little perky, pretty cottage beside a grand old castle, whose walls bear the mark of centuries. India is the castle. Or a nice, clean, healthy child in pinafores, very fond of play, and more than a little inclined to be spoilt, beside an old, old seer with a grand head grown white with wisdom, and wide eyes dim with staring at eternity. Australia is the nice clean child.

"It is the age of the place that sobers me. I feel I ought to go about on tiptoe and speak in a whisper half the time. We are at Ajmere just now: from the window here I can see a white temple on the peak of wild mountains. It is called Taraghur, or the abode of the stars, and the Mohammedans make pilgrimages to it. Yesterday we rode (I wear a white linen habit and a helmet, girls) to Pookur, twelve miles away. It is a spot considered sacred by the Hindoos; indeed, it is

one of the most sacred places in India. There is a lake lying in a basin among the hills, with its banks studded with buildings, old temples, and gardens, and in the centre a ruined fane I am afraid to say how many hundreds and hundreds of years old.

"To-morrow we go to Musseerabad, where the garrison is that your father has to take notes about; then on to Oodeypore; after that I am not certain of the programme, only—don't all exclaim at once, or I shall hear even at this distance—we cannot possibly be back in the time we said. Your father has written for two months' extension, and really, though of course I want to see you all, and ache sometimes for a sight of my baby's little dear dirty face, I shouldn't like to come without seeing more. Fancy if we had to come back without visiting the Taj Mahal! My only anxiety is that any one should be ill; but then, again, I don't see why any one should be so inconsiderate,—you've all managed to keep in splendid health for years; just keep a clean bill till I get back, and then you shall all take it in turns if you like. Dear Meg, keep Essie's hands from picking and stealing. I dreamt the other night she ate a cocoanut and went in a fit. And Peter, my precious son, don't climb the pine tree till mum comes back—if you must break your dear little collar bone at least give me the satisfaction of seeing it done. Of course there is no earthly reason why any of you should be ill, but I worry a little at times; I suppose it is because of the difficulty in getting letters. We never know where we are going next, so they can't send on the mails from Bombay to us till we write for them. I will send you, by the next mail, an address to write to: we have not decided yet whether we are going to Hyderabad, Madras, or Calcutta. We are picking up presents for you all,—the loveliest chessmen for Pip, a wonderful cabinet of Bhoondee carving for Meg, moonstones from Ceylon for Nell,—something for every one. Such a box we shall have.

"Good-bye, my chickies all; take care of yourselves, and have as good a time as you can. If you should be just a little extravagant with the housekeeping money, Meg, I won't scold you much; you can let Bennett's bill run if you like, and have a little garden party or jollification. Every one kiss my little one daughter for me.

"Your loving old mother, "ESTHER."

It was only the last part they heeded. What were descriptions of old temples to them with that little tossing head on the pillow?

"Oh, Esther,—poor, poor Esther!" Meg said, with the first sob in her throat since Alan had pronounced it to be the fever—"oh, *if* she knew!" But she was

mercifully spared that knowledge. They held a grave consultation together, Meg, Nell, Pip and the family doctor, while Alan stayed at the bedside. It really seemed useless to send for the travellers to come home. If it was only a slight attack the child would be quite well again by the time they returned; if—there was a catching of breaths—if even the very worst should happen, still they could not be home in time, and oh! what agony of mind they would have during the long voyage. It was even no use sending a cable until they received Esther's next letter, for they had no address.

The doctor decided the matter.

"Don't send," he said; "please God we'll have the little woman up and well in no time. I will send in a trained nurse, she shall have every care possible. Mrs. Woolcot could not do anything further if she were here herself. Now about the other little folks."

It had been decided at once to send the others away from fear of infection. Pip had even suggested packing them off by the early morning train to Yarrahap-pini.

But the doctor shook his head. There was the chance that they had the germs in their systems even now; it was neither fair to send them into other families, nor yet wise to allow them to go far from home nursing.

There was a furnished cottage about half a mile up the road: he advised that Poppet, Peter, and Bunty should be removed there until all danger of infection was over.

"This young lady might go to look after them," he said, laying his hand on Nellie's shoulder. "They will want some one, of course, and Miss Margaret will be quite sufficient to help the lady I shall send in."

Nellie lifted great beseeching eyes, rimmed with the shadows of a sleepless night.

"Oh, let me stay! oh, I must stay,—it would kill me to have to go!" she said, with a great sob.

"Of course you will have to go, Nellie," Pip said hastily; "don't make extra trouble by being tiresome,—surely you have done enough."

"Oh, hush!" said Meg.

Pip knew now how the infection had been brought, and could not find any excuse for his sister.

[image]

"OH, LET ME STAY! OH, I MUST STAY!"

But Meg saw the wince of pain that his words caused the poor girl, and knew a little what an agony of remorse she was suffering.

"She'll be out of the danger, too," Pip added, a little ashamed of himself when he saw the beautiful, miserable eyes.

Out of the danger! And the girl was in such a frenzy of repentance and grief, she would gladly have laid down her life just to see Essie go flying down the drive in a losing race with Flibbertigibbet.

She caught the doctor's arm.

"I would watch night and day—I would do anything in the world, anything—oh! *let me stay*," she said.

"Poor little girl!" he answered, and patted her bright head; he had learnt something of the heart apart from its physiological formation during his long practice. "Poor little girl! standing still is very hard work, isn't it? But all soldiers can't fight at the same time, you know.

"Yours not to reason why,
Yours but to do or die.

That's not for sword-soldiers only, little girl."

Poor Nellie! no punishment on earth could have been harder for her. To die—that would be quite easy, pleasant even; but to remain passive—oh! it needed greater courage than hers.

To go away, to leave the house, and not even venture past the gates again for weeks, not to see the little sweet sister upon whom her wilfulness alone had brought this suffering, not even to have the relief of spending her strength in nursing! To go away, and eat and sleep and pass the time doing ordinary things, and trying to keep Bunty, and Poppet, and Peter comfortable and happy!

No one would ever know quite what it cost the girl, but it had to be done.

"Mayn't I just see her for one minute, Meg?" she said, her courage failing her at the last minute.

It almost made Meg cry to see the utter despair and misery on her face, and to have to refuse her.

"Alan shall tell you every day how she is. Dear Nell, you know I dare not let you go into the room."

Then she went away to take up her post with the nurse. And Nellie, with that unutterable ache at her heart, had to go and collect the clothes they would all need, the books, playthings,—everything.

She and Poppet, with Bunty's help, were to do the work of the cottage between them. At first, Meg had thought of letting Martha go with them, but afterwards it occurred to her it might be better to let Nellie cook, wash up, and

see to everything, just to keep her time occupied.

Bunty was to go to school daily, but Miss Monson relinquished her duties for a time. She had two little sisters and a baby brother at home; no one could say that Peter or Poppet would not sicken personally, and she dare not run the risk. "But Nellie can easily manage the little ones," she said, "and even keep up her own studies; she will have plenty of time."

The little sick child was put into Esther's room, and a bed made up on the sofa for Meg or the nurse. The window looked straight to the gate, and could be seen through a gap in the acacias. They arranged a code of signals to be waved by Meg through it three times a day. She kept a walking-stick of the Captain's just near the window, and with it a white towel, an old red dressing-gown of Poppet's, and a black wool shawl belonging to Martha. The black signal meant "Better,"—not for worlds would they have used the black for "Worse"; the white meant "No change"; the red, "Not so well."

And when that was settled, and every other little matter, and the dogcart filled and sent off with the luggage, then the four sorrowful little figures walked slowly down the drive, waved with wet eyes to Meg at the window, and disappeared round the bend in the road.

And Misrule, strangely quiet for days and days, saw only the silent-footed nurse in her grey dress and cap, and poor Meg with her young shoulders weighed down with the responsibility; the two doctors, Alan and the old one, on occasion, and the maids. Nobody shouted in the nursery or quarrelled and laughed along the passages; no little girls ran lightly down the stairs; no boys tramped up with muddy boots. No ringing voices floated from the grounds through the open windows; no flying figures and yelping dogs went down the drive.

Meg's face grew grave and old-looking those long, slow, silent days when there was so little to be done and so much to fight for. She lost her old trick of dimpling when she smiled—she almost lost the trick of smiling at all. Always there was a picture before her eyes,—Esther coming towards her, radiant with the happiness of home-coming, Esther with outstretched arms and bright eyes with no shadow of suspicion in them.

Always the picture was speaking—

"Meg, where is Essie?—what have you done with my baby, Meg?"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SEVENTH DAY.

”When the heart is sick,
And all the wheels of Being slow.”

Seven leaden days had come and gone. To-night they said the little child would die or live. But the second would need almost a miracle.

All day the red signal had drooped out of a front upstairs window of Misrule. Five times had the children from the cottage trailed with sick hearts up the long red road to the house, and each time had that sorrowful signal been there.

Meg’s heart had bled as she floated it out in the morning; only that they had her faithful promise they should not be deceived, she could not have borne to put it there. ”Not so well,” they had agreed it should mean, but her heart said ”Dying” as she fastened it, and she knew the little anxious-eyed group at the gate would read it so.

Such a tiny darling it was, such a wee frail body for the fierce fever to feed upon. How could it stretch out its little listless hands and grasp strongly at that strange thing Life that was slipping so fast away? And ah, God! that those standing by so wild with grief might not put out their eager hands and seize it for her!

After the fifth sad journey the children dragged to the cottage again and cried themselves sick. Poppet began. The minute they got inside the little front room she dropped down in a heap on the oilcloth and sobbed in a wild hysterical way that shook her poor little body all over. Peter fell down beside her and cried in the bitter, astonished, whole-souled fashion of very small children. And Bunty put his rough head down on the table with both his arms round it. Nellie walked past them all into her tiny bedroom, and only God saw her despairing grief. They had had tea before they went the last time, and the early winter darkness had fallen already, though it was only seven o’clock.

Alan had promised to come in at nine and give them the latest report, but how could any of them see the end of that interval with such wet eyes? Time seemed to have ceased for them altogether just now.

After a time, however, Peter sat up straight and looked around; childish tears, thank Heaven, dry quickly. There was one of his little tin soldiers on the hearthrug, and he picked it up gratefully and held it in his small warm hand. Near the fender two of the horsemen with red caps were lying; he would like to have reached them as well, only Poppet’s chest was on his other arm, and he could not bear to disturb her.

Five more minutes ticked away by the funny old clock on the mantelpiece. It pointed to a quarter to eight, and had just struck eleven; they all knew by that it was about twenty minutes past seven.

Peter sighed, and very, very softly withdrew his small cramped arm; he waited a minute or two longer, and then crawled over to the horsemen. He felt a chastened joy to find all the boxful in the fender just as he had left them yesterday after the war against the Matabele tribes. He had painted one of them black for Lobengula, and it reminded him of the exciting game he had had over his capture. He wondered, poor little tear-weary boy, would Essie mind very much if he had a little, only a little, game very quietly on the floor now; the oilcloth had beautiful yellow squares, all ready for the different detachments.

Poppet's head was turned the other way; he fancied she was asleep, she lay so still; Bunty at the table had stopped breathing loudly; perhaps he was asleep too; and Nellie was in her room.

[image]

”NELTHONETH COPPED THE IMPITH!”

He marshalled the little figures up in rows, army against army; the brass toy cannon he gave to the English, but to make up, he put a few more men on the side of the Matabeles. He always felt secretly sorry for them, and often gave Lobengula loopholes of escape that he did not permit to Nelson, Gordon, and Marlborough, who, with small-boy enthusiasm, he had placed in command of his British forces.

The clock struck six, indicated eight, and meant half-past seven. Then the stillness of the little lamp-lit room was suddenly broken.

”Nelthonth copped the Impith! hurrah—hip, hip, hur—”

Poppet sat up speechless. Poor little sinful Peter lowered his head at her accusing eyes and whimpered softly.

”You *cwuel* boy!” she said

”I wath only picking them up,” he returned, so bitterly ashamed he could not be quite truthful.

”*I've* been *cwying* hard all the time,” was Poppet's sorrowfully superior answer; she was feeling disappointed with herself at being so near her own last tear, and it made her more severe with him. ”I don't b'leve you care a *bit*.”

”I'm thorrer than you, tho there!” he retorted tearfully.

”Why, you've hardly *cwied* at all!”

”I have, I cried for hourth,—you're a thtory, Poppet.”

Bunty bade them hold their tongues. He got up and reached ”Hereward the Wake” off the side table to try to occupy his thoughts with; he was half through ”Tom Floremall's School Days,” and it lay open on the same table, but he felt it

would have been unfeeling to read anything so light.

The example, however, encouraged the children. Poppet put out her hand and caught the black kitten that had tapped her shoulder temptingly once or twice; she cuddled down on the hearthrug with it, after giving Peter a kiss of forgiveness.

And Peter, utterly relieved, banged Marlborough and Lobengula together in such fierce single combat that it is wonderful neither of them was decapitated.

The door handle turned and Nellie came in again, Nellie with a sheet-white face, heavy wet lashes, and swollen eyes.

"I'm going up again," she said.

"Tho 'm I," said Peter, springing to his feet.

"An' me," Poppet cried.

"Come on," said Bunty, picking up his hat.

But Nellie shook her head.

"You know your cold's bad again, Poppet; and, Peter dear, it's after your bedtime,—you *must* stay," she said. "Oh, Bunty, *do* stop with them."

"I'm sure—"

Bunty answered, with contradictory accent. Nellie caught a sob.

"I shall *die* if I don't go this minute," she said passionately.

She moved to the door, but Bunty had gone before her.

"We *can't* leave them,—oh, *Bunty*, if only you'd stay!" She held his coat sleeve and tried to force him back.

"I want to hear as much as you do," he said, with all his old gruffness; "here, let go."

"I tell you I shall go mad—*mad*—if I don't go!" the girl said wildly. He saw the burning look in her eyes, the pain at her lips, and fell back suddenly, awkwardly.

"All right, go on," he said.

Then his just wakening brotherly-protection ideas occurred to him.

"I say, you can't go," he said; "don't be a silly. You're only a girl, and it's dark,—let me go, Nell; I'll run all the way, and come straight back and tell you."

"I *must* go," she repeated hoarsely. "Make them go to bed; give Poppet her medicine; don't leave the matches near Peter."

She slipped off his detaining hand, and the next minute was flying up the road through the cold white moonlight; a small dark figure with desperate eyes,

and the wretchedest little heart in the world.

CHAPTER XXII. AMARANTH OR ASPHODEL?

"Falling with my weight of cares
Upon the great world's altar stairs,
That slope through darkness up to God."

All the way she never stopped once,—it was nearly a mile. Her heart was in her throat, her breath coming in great choking pants; her knees were trembling as she stumbled up against the old Misrule gate, and clung to it blind and giddy for a moment.

There was a step on the footpath—it stopped at the gate. Some one came and peered at her and uttered a cry of surprise.

"Why, Nellie!"

"How—is—she?"

She gasped the words, swayed, and recovered herself.

"I'm just going in again," Alan said. He slipped his arm round her and steadied her—"I told you not to come again, Nellie."

[image]

"*OH, LET ME COME!*" SHE IMPLORED."

"I couldn't help it."

He saw she couldn't, and did not scold her.

"But what am I to do with you?" he said in dismay.

He was anxious to get in, and now here was this poor, trembling, wild-eyed girl on his hands.

"Oh, *let me come!*" she implored. There was a sob rising in her throat.

Then he did scold her a little. Surely she was not going to trouble them on this terrible night? Meg was all courage, and quite calm, and so relieved to know the children were being well looked after,—she must not fail them all now at the crisis.

The sob was strangled instantly.

"I'll stay," she said,— "only—oh, *Alan*, come out and tell me soon!"

He promised he would. He drew her just within the gate and wrapped his overcoat round her, for she was jacketless, of course.

"I trust you not to come past the hedge," he said. "See, stand here, and I can find you easily. There now, dear, I *must* go."

"A minute—is she in—real danger, Alan? Is she going to die?"

Oh the wide, beseeching eyes, full of moonlight and misery!

He had never told a lie in his life,—never even charged one to his medical conscience; but his arm clasped her more strongly, more tenderly.

"She is in danger," he said quietly. "We are afraid she cannot live; but there is always hope, and the next hour will decide."

She pushed him forward.

"Go!" she said, "go!" and he kissed her forehead and went.

She paced up and down by the low pittosporum hedge that divided the garden from the shrubbery next the fence, and she held her hands so tightly together, that she felt the pain as far as her elbows.

It was full moon to-night.

She remembered when it had been new,—a little, friendly, pretty crescent. They had sat out on the verandah—four or five of them—watching it rise, and Alan had said it

"Was like a little feather
Fluttering far down the gulf."

But Pip said he thought that man saw things straighter who found "the curled moon more like a bitten biscuit thrown out of a top-story window in a high wind." Meg culled from "Endymion." "The beautiful thing," she said,

"Only stooped to tie
Her silver sandals, ere deliciously
She bowed into the heavens her timid head."

And Bunty said, "What rot!"

How happy and light-hearted they had been then! Oh the strange and sad and oh the glad things that happen in this world between the crescent moon and the full!

Such a white cold moon it was, so far away, so wondrously large and calm. It suggested the immeasurable vastness of the universe, the infinitesimal small-

ness of herself. Her heart sickened and died within her,—what use was it for her to pray and weep and beat her hands to such a far-off sky? What madness to suppose the great high awful God beyond it would put forth His saving hand just because one small insignificant creature down on earth prayed to Him! Such a faultful creature too; all her life through she could not remember one really good thing she had done, nothing but wrong-doings, littlenesses, and selfishness came to her mind. She looked away from the sky and scornful moon, she went to and fro with her eyes on the white ground.

"Of *course* it's no use," she muttered, and held her hands together more tightly.

A buggy stopped at the gate. The old doctor got out; he told the coachman not to drive in, but to wait there.

Two people passing up the road saw him, and crossed over.

"How's the little girl?" they said.

And "Very bad, poor baby," was his answer. "I ought to have been here before, but have been at a deathbed."

"Whose?" they asked, in the lowered tones death claims.

"Mrs. Fitzroy-Browne," he said, and hurried away up to the house.

Nellie went back to the low hedge. From there she could just see the palely-lighted window upstairs, and the large shadows on the blind. She saw Meg move across to the corner where the bed stood, then the nurse's cap was outlined, Alan's head and shoulders, the doctor's.

More and more icy grew the hand at her heart, whiter and whiter shone the moon, longer and longer every minute took to pass. A sudden gust of wind blew over the pampas clumps full into her face, and the air was still again. Perhaps with that very wind Essie had left them.

She fell on her knees with wide, outstretched arms, and dropped her face on the low hedge. The twigs and leaves scratched and pricked her, the ground made her knees ache, the night air was freezing her; but that was happiness. The sky she dare not look at; but she was compelled to pray again, just to say God, God, God! and shiver and writhe and bite her lips. There was no help for her on earth, and she must shriek to God even though He heard not.

Suddenly the moonlight faded, the garden, the silent house, the pale lights.

She was at the top of a hill, and at the foot was the reddest sunset the world had ever seen. She was a little child again, flying from the bark hut and awful gathering shadows to the fence that skirted the road along which help would come. She was a child flinging herself on the ground, face downward, and crying, "Make her better, God!—God, make her better,—oh, *can't* you make her better!"

But Judy had died. He had not listened to her then, He would not listen now.

She lifted a face of agony and looked at the sky again. It had grown softer, a grey more tender, and deepened with blue; the moon hung lower, a yellow warmth had crept into it.

Her tears gushed out again, and poured in hot streams down her face.

"Dear God!" she whispered,— "oh, my dear, great God, I will be so good— only let her live, just let her live—such a little thing, God, such a little baby thing,— oh, you wouldn't take her from us, my great God—I will give you all my life, God! I will be good always, I will go to church always, and do everything you want me to, only don't take her away, God! Please, Jesus, ask Him,—dear, sweet Jesus, don't let Him take her; oh, my sweet, kind Christ, let her stay here!"

Her face fell into the hedge once more, and her lips babbled the wild, pitiful, bargaining prayer that only One could understand.

It seemed hours that she knelt there, praying, sobbing, and shivering, before Alan came as he had promised.

She heard his step coming down the path, and she struggled to her feet and forced herself forward.

But he was going past her,—had he forgotten her?

No, she knew; the child was dead, and he could not tell her.

He had passed the hedge and was going on to the gate; she stumbled along after him, but he did not seem to hear her.

"Alan!" she said, as he pulled the chain aside to go out. Her voice sounded hollow and far away.

He stopped, but did not look at her.

"I—know," she said.

He nodded.

"Dead—dead—dead!" she said.

But he spoke then.

"Essie is better," he said; "she will live now."

She caught at the palings; all the world was moving about her, the sky, the ground beneath her feet.

"Better," she told herself—"better, better—can't you hear?"

Then she noticed Alan's face. It was deathly white, his lips were trembling and twitching, his eyes were wild.

"What?" she whispered.

"Meg has got it," he said with a great sob in his voice; and he brushed past

her and went away.

CHAPTER XXIII. LITTLE FAITHFUL MEG.

”And shadow, and silence, and sadness
Were hanging over all.”

Pip had a time of unhappiness almost as great as that Nellie had gone through.

He was playing chess at the Courtneys to keep from thinking, when Alan came in with the news that Meg had the fever.

All the colour dropped from his brown, handsome face; he started up in his place, the queen he had just captured still in his hand; he went out of the room and out of the house without a word. Andrew caught him up when he had gone some hundred yards up the road.

”Here’s your hat, old fellow,” he said, and Pip took it without thanks and walked on.

Little faithful Meg, whose worst fault had been loving him too well to let him spoil his life! And he had shaken her aside time after time when she had tried to end the quarrel—he had told her he would never forgive her!

And now, perhaps, he would never have the chance.

He pulled back the gate at Misrule with fingers as nerveless as the veriest girl; he turned to go up to the house the short way, by the pittosporum hedge. There was a little dark heap of something on the wet grass in front of him; he touched it with his foot, and then bent down in horror.

It was his second little sister, sobbing as if her heart would break; she was face downwards, her arms spread out, her whole body convulsed.

So stunned and shaken with his grief had Alan been, he had utterly forgotten, when he left the poor child, that she was not at her proper place for the night; he had gone straight home to see if there had been a call for him, then off to a serious case of typhoid in Fivedock, for doctors cannot sit down and give themselves up to their grief, however great the cause.

Pip tried to raise the girl, but she stiffened herself and resisted him; when she had flung herself down she had prayed passionately that she might die, and here was some one come to disturb her.

But surely it could not be careless Pip who held her so tenderly, when at last he did manage to lift her,—Pip who stroked her hair, and rubbed his cheek against hers, and let her finish her bitter weeping on his shoulder.

When he felt how cold and damp she was, he stirred.

"You must come home, old girl," he said.

"Here," she said—"I must stay here! I shall nurse her, but she'll die—oh! I know she'll die."

Pip groaned: he knew it himself, he would not give himself the slightest hope; and the bitterness was as of death itself.

But he saw Nellie was totally unfit to go into an infected house that night.

"To-morrow," he said; "come down to the cottage now; there's the nurse there, and the servants; you'll be ill yourself next."

"I want to be—oh, why *can't* I die?" she wailed. "It's all me, every bit of this, and God won't let me die."

Oh the young miserable face, so white and wet in the moonlight! A great lump came into Pip's throat, and in his heart a sudden knowledge of the dearness of his sisters.

"Oh, you poor little thing!" he said.

He put her on the old seat under the mulberry tree near, and went away.

When he came back he was leading one of the horses by the bridle over the grass.

"What are you going to do?" she asked miserably.

And "Ride you home," was his answer.

[image]

"HE LED THE HORSE OUT OF THE GATE, AND CARRIED HER TO IT."

He led the horse out of the gate, carried her to it, and put her just on the saddle; then he got up himself behind, and held her with one hand and the reins with the other.

That is how they reached the cottage.

The children were in bed, and poor Bunty, weary of waiting, had fallen asleep sitting bolt upright in a chair.

Pip woke him, gently enough.

"Make up the fire," he said.

The boy fell to the task with all his heart, so dreadful was his sister's face. The clatter woke Poppet; she slipped out of bed and came in to them in her little

nightgown, her eyes heavy with sleep and the struggle between forgetfulness and remembrance.

"Baby!" she said. Then her eyes flew open, and the colour died out of her little flushed cheeks. What made Nellie look so terrible?

"Better, much better—getting well," was Pip's hasty answer. He did not want another ill on his hands.

The child gasped with relief.

"Go and get something on," said Pip; "and bring Nell a big shawl or rug, and put something on your feet."

She came back with a great blanket for Nellie—she had pinned her little flannel petticoat round her own shoulders, and stuck her feet into goloshes.

Bunty made coffee—a great jugful. The grounds were floating on the top, certainly, but it was very hot. Pip made the girl drink two full cups and eat a big piece of bread and butter—he heard she had had neither dinner nor tea.

Then she crept close to him again. What a dear big brother he was, and how much less terrible things looked here in the firelight, with his arm round her, than when she lay prone on the wet grass under the white, far moon.

They dare not tell Poppet to-night, her eyes were far too bright, her cheeks too flushed. So Bunty, at a whisper from Nell, picked her up and carried her off to bed again.

"I'll stop with you till you go to sleep," he said, feeling her chest heave.

"I b'leeve they're 'ceiving me," said the poor little child. "I heard Nell whisper to you! Oh, Bunty, *tell* me!—oh, Baby, Baby!"

He reassured her eagerly. The crisis was quite past; the doctor said she could not *help* getting better now. Why, they would be playing with her again now in no time!

She cried a little from the relief, and then dropped off to sleep, holding tightly to his gentle, roughened hand.

In the sitting-room Pip was comforting Nellie as tenderly and pitifully as if he had been a woman and she a poor, little, hurt child. They had never known each other before—these two—and both were touched and surprised at the beauty of the new knowledge.

He agreed that she must go to Misrule and help to nurse, but thought they would wire up to Yarrahappini and ask Mrs. Hassal to come down to the cottage instead of getting any one strange. Nellie thought it an excellent suggestion, and made him draft a telegram immediately, so that it might be sent first thing in the morning.

When he thought she was calm again, and fit to be left he saw her into her own bedroom, and made her promise to go direct to bed and try her best to sleep, since so much depended on her now.

Such a poor, scratched, swollen face it was lifted to him for a good-night kiss, so different from the brilliant, beautiful, rebellious one that had defied him on the night of that trouble-causing dinner party.

He took the front door key with him, and went out, riding slowly back to Misrule, though he had no business there, as he knew. He put his father's horse back into the stable, and learnt from the man, who had just gone to bed, that Martha was with Essie and the nurse with Meg.

Then he went round into the garden, and to the side of the house where Meg's bedroom was.

There was a white, flat paling fence separating that part of the garden from the paddocks; he sat down on it and watched the light on her white blind with a despairing expression in his eyes.

He would have given all the world for a kiss from her, a smile of forgiveness; his love for Mabelle lay, a cold thing, almost dead, in his breast; he felt he could never breathe on it and warm it to life again.

To him, as to Nellie, this great white awful night brought back to memory the red red sunset and purple black shadows of the evening Judy had died. Like Nellie, he too fell on his knees, and prayed as he had only prayed that one other time in his life. And, like Nellie too, he prayed despairingly and without faith because that other prayer had not been answered. It was midnight when he had ridden back; he stopped there in the white, hushed garden till the moon began to fade out of the sky and a pale flush of rose crept up from the river. He was stiff and cold from his long watch; on the ill-kept strip of grass beneath the lighted window he had worn a path with his pacings, and his heart was heavier than ever.

When five o'clock came he still lingered; he was watching for the first opening door. To wait for her smile and forgiveness till she was better—to wait—to miss it for ever, perhaps—was more than he could bear to contemplate. He wrote her a little eager loving note on the back of an envelope from his pocket; his sister, his dear, sweet old Meg, would she ever forgive him?

He thought he would give it to Martha the minute there was a stir of life within the house, and he went softly round the verandah to the side door; it was always opened first, he knew. He stood there more than half an hour, listening for a footstep on the stairs, for the creak of a door or the sound of a voice.

On the weather-worn wall near there were a number of marks and names and dates; it was the measuring wall of the family. It carried his thoughts back a long, long time. It was nearly seven long years since the first marks were made: the little one, only a couple of feet off the ground, was marked "The General,"—Pip remembered Esther had to hold him there, for it was before he could walk. Then all the small steps above it—Baby, and Bunty, and Nell—such a little Nell;

Judy, with a crossing out at her name and a mark lower down—he remembered finding out after he had measured her first, that she had tacked a bit of wood on to each heel of her shoes; then himself, and Meg topping them all.

The last marks were recent; they had measured merrily just before Esther went away, to see if any one could possibly grow in such a short time. He himself was at the top now, ten inches past Meg, and Nellie and Bunty were nearly up to Meg. How nearly the new little mark that meant Essie had never risen any higher! And Judy, dear, dear little Judy, so quick growing, so eager-eyed—her mark was no longer among them.

It forced itself upon Pip that perhaps never again would he put the flat book on Meg's bright head and crush down, ere he measured her, the fluffy hair that gave her an unlawful inch.

He turned on his heel from the wall; the mark seemed on his heart.

Some one opened a verandah door some distance away and stepped out into the garden. It was the nurse, heavy-eyed, pale-cheeked, come out for a breath of the quickening morning. She did not see the unhappy boy standing there, but went down the path towards the sun-touched river, and left the door open behind her.

Pip slipped in, on uncontrollable impulse. He stole through the quiet hall and up the staircase; he went softly down the upstairs passage—and Meg's door was open.

She was quite alone, lying among the pillows, with her bright hair loose, her cheeks a little flushed, but her eyes open and quite natural. The next second he was in the room kneeling by the bedside, and kissing the little hot hand on the counterpane.

"Just say you forgive me, Meg darling—darling!" he implored, the tears rolling down his cheeks.

She sat up in distress.

"Oh, go away!" she cried. "Oh, Pip, how mad of you—dear Pip, you'll catch it!"

But he would not loose her hand.

"Will you?" he said.

She moved to put her arm round his neck, then remembered and shrank back.

"Why, there is nothing," she said; "it was you to forgive me—if you do I am more than glad; now do go, old fellow."

"Lie down," he said, standing up again; it had only just struck him he might be doing her harm.

"There, lie so,—keep still, for heaven's sake. I only came to tell you you're the best sister on earth, and I've been a brute to you. Meg, I'll promise you

faithfully never to think of Mabelle again—oh, good God! I haven't made you worse, have I?" For Meg put her hand up to her head with a sudden movement.

"Not an atom," she said, "the cloth was wetting my neck, that's all.—you've made me better indeed with that promise; now go, Pip dearest, this minute, and change everything—promise me; think of the children; get a suit out of your room and have a bath."

The nurse's step was on the stairs; he kissed her hand again and fled.

Afterwards he felt he had done a selfish thing, and made himself miserable over it. Perhaps he had excited and worried her, perhaps it would make her worse; and suppose he gave the infection to Peter or Poppet!

He took his evening clothes, they were the only ones left in his room, and he went down to the river with a slow and heavy step.

Then he undressed and swam about for nearly twenty minutes, so determined was he not to carry home a microbe. He even struck out into the middle, and braved any sharks that might be yet unbreakfasted. Then he made his toilet again, swallow-tail and all, carefully washed the clothes he had taken off, and laid them on the grass to dry.

A man he knew, coming down to the water with his towels over his shoulder, met him on the way to the cottage and stared amazedly.

"You're fairly late home, old chap," he said; "where in the world have you been?"

Pip only shook his head and pushed on. He was far too unhappy to stay and explain.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"IN THE MIDNIGHT, IN THE SILENCE OF THE SLEEP TIME."

"Have I not trodden a weary road
 Saint, my Saint?
 And where, at last, shall be my abode,
 Oh, my Saint?"

But Meg only had it very lightly, or those two poor human hearts could not have borne their misery. She was not half so ill as Essie had been; she was not delirious at all, and she never went near to the great wide sea whose cold waves

had washed up to the little baby feet.

When she woke after a troubled sleep in the afternoon, there was Nellie standing by the bedside looking at her, with all her heart in her eyes.

"What about the children?" she said with instant anxiety. "You oughtn't to be here."

But Nell stooped and kissed her.

"It's just where I ought to be," she said, "and Esther's mother will be here this evening, to look after the children,—don't worry."

Meg turned over restfully; how good it was to feel there would be a sister near always instead of the strange hands and face of a nurse! What a relief, now the strain was over, to be able to give up and be taken care of instead of taking care!

In the morning, when she woke, her first question again, after hearing Essie was improving fast, was what about the children?

Mrs. Hassal had come, Nell said; Mr. Gillet had brought her, and they were both at the cottage. Mr. Gillet was much distressed to hear she was ill, and had sent kindest regards and hopes for a speedy recovery.

For a moment the long-unheard name brought no connection with it to Meg; then she saw the burnt grass paddocks, the dingy sheep, the homestead and clustering cottages of Yarrahappini.

She called to mind his little room as she had seen it when she went for the keys of the storeroom. She was surprised to still remember, after all these years, her astonishment at finding the keeper of the stores with the room of a gentleman.

She could remember the rows of books, the medallion of Shelley, the pictures, the little breakfast table—even the silver chased vase with the passion flowers in it.

She wondered if he had kept the blue ribbon she had given him; even now her cheeks coloured above their fever to think how intolerant she had been in those days. But perhaps she was just as bad now, or had other faults still worse; she tossed unhappily and thought upon all the mistakes she was for ever making. Then Nellie's cool fingers touched her forehead and replaced a wet, lavender-sweet handkerchief, and she dropped off into an uneasy slumber.

She thought they were binding her head round and round with ribbon, pale blue with creases in it; it held her down to the bed so that she could not move; and there in the dancing river little Essie was struggling, the grey look of death on her small sweet face.

Then that torture shifted, and it was Pip who was struggling, and he could not put out his arms to swim because he had a monstrous gold wedding-ring binding them to his body. And Peter was at the top of the forbidden tree, and

Poppet shrieking to him to come down. And Bunty was in the hospital with scarlet fever, and they could not give him medicine because he would not tell his name.

For several days troubles of this kind lasted, with short unrefreshing waking intervals when her mouth was parched, her throat swollen, and her head throbbing.

On the sixth morning she opened her eyes about eleven o'clock. Nellie was mixing lemon drink at a small table, and Alan was standing by the bedside, Alan with a face grown quite haggard, and a look in his eyes that had never quite left them since she fell ill.

"Am I getting better or worse?" she said, for his look made her suddenly fearful for herself.

But he brightened instantly, for, in truth, the anxiety was almost over, only he could not shake it off at once.

"Much better," he said. "Do you know you have been asleep since nine last night?"

"How many hours is that?" she asked, with smiling languor; "my brain's asleep yet, I can't count." But neither could he. His lip trembled suddenly, and he put his face down on hers.

She slipped her thin hands round his neck.

"Poor old fellow!" she said, "dear old fellow! I'm going to get better immediately now."

"Try to go to sleep again," he whispered, putting a kiss on each eyelid to keep them shut. "Please, my little, pale daisy."

The eyelashes lay quite still, but the lips smiled up to him. Then, before she knew it, she was asleep again, her breathing regular, her skin cool. And when she woke she was far on the road to recovery. But down in the cottage, while Essie and Meg were struggling slowly up the beautiful tiring hill of convalescence, a terrible tragedy had happened.

In the middle of one night, Poppet, sleeping in a little made-up bed in the room with Mrs. Hassal, woke up hot and choking. One side of the room was in a sheet of fire; the curled, leaping tongues of flame came nearer every instant.

She sprang out of bed shrieking wildly, and pulled and shook poor little Mrs. Hassal, who, half suffocated with the smoke, lay motionless.

Pip slept at the Courtneys now, since the cottage was so taxed for room, Bunty and Peter across the passage, and Mr. Gillet had a camp bed in the sitting-room. No one had wakened till the little girl's wild shrieks rang through the house; the smoke had stupefied them all.

Then there was a terrible scene of confusion. The door of the bedroom was in a blaze—all the wall adjacent; the flames were licking at the long French

window, and the curtains already burning.

Mr. Gillet went back one second for his thick coat, which he had not put on at first; then, shielding his face with his arm, he sprang into the room through the window, calling to Bunty to stand outside.

[image]

"He sprang through the flames, the child close in his arms." The Family at Misrule. Page 271.

Poppet, mad with terror, was still pulling at Mrs. Hassal, and the mosquito nets of the bed had just caught.

He pushed the child aside, and bade her go into the one safe corner. Then he enveloped Mrs. Hassal in the blanket, carried her across the room, and hastily put her through the window to Bunty.

Then he went back for the little girl,—Meg's little sister.

He took off his coat to wrap her in, as the other bedclothes had caught, but as he did so Bunty threw back the big blanket, and he used it instead.

The flames at the window were growing worse, but he sprang through them, the child close in his arms. When they took the blanket off her not a hair of her head was hurt.

One breathless second they looked at the burning room together from the safe vantage ground of the grass plot at the side.

Then Mr. Gillet started forward again.

"I've left my coat," he said.

Mrs. Hassal held his arm. "As if that matters," she answered indignantly.

"But there's something I rather prize in it," he said; "there's no danger,—see, I'll have the blanket this time."

He flung it round his head and shoulders, and went through the window again.

"Catch!" he cried, and threw the rough serge coat far out to them.

[image]

"THE BOY SEIZED HIM BY THE SHOULDERS AND DRAGGED HIM OUT THROUGH THE BLAZING GAP."

They saw him in the burning window putting his arms up to dive out. But even as he did so there was a crash and fall—a great burning rafter had dropped

from the ceiling.

Bunty was the hero now. He put his coat over his head and dashed into the room.

Mr. Gillet had fallen just inside, the blanket still around him.

With incredible strength and courage the boy seized him by the shoulders, dragged him out through the blazing gap and into safety, amid the shouts of the awakened neighbours, who had come too late to be of use.

But the man was dead.

The rafter had struck his temple, and he had no more days of life to ruin, no more with which to redeem past ruin.

They did not tell Meg until long after, not until Blue Mountain air had blown the last of the fever away, and all the seven were together for the last week before coming home.

Then they gave her the something he had "rather prized."

She sobbed and went away from them all when she had opened the little parcel and seen its pitifulness.

It was nothing but the length of ribbon, the blue faded, and still creased as it had tied her hair.

On the paper wrapping it he had written, "My soft-eyed girl St. Cecily."

CHAPTER XXV.

HERE ENDETH.

"God's in His heaven,
All's right with the world."

Such a day! The spring of the year in the sky, and on the river, and on the land. September at its happiest, fresh and young, and gladdening as a maiden stepping with shining eyes and light feet into a world that she knows she is going to brighten.

Blue in the sky, blue deeper and sun-flecked in the river, a glory of roses in the garden, a yellow splendour of wattles in the bush.

Tea was spread on the lawn, not under a tree, but out in the sunshine that no one could get enough of. Even the cakes had a light-hearted look; and as for the shining kettle on the lamp, it was absolutely bubbling with good spirits. They

were all there,—the seven and Mrs. Hassal, all mentally on tiptoe, physically in comfortable attitudes, sitting or lying round the cloth.

The Captain and Esther were expected every minute.

Peter wanted to begin on the little cakes that had such a fascinating bit of peel on the top of each.

"Leth go halveth in one, Nell," he said; "we ought to tathte them firtht,—praph you forgot the thugar."

But Nellie assured him they were sweetness itself, and removed the plate into the middle of the cloth, where they could not lead his fingers into temptation.

She consoled him with two lumps of sugar, and he gave Poppet one and bet her he could suck his for a longer time than she could without it breaking.

Alan was hammering at a tipsy-looking erection of posts halfway down the drive, that said "Welcome" in pink and white roses, and threatened to fall and engulf any one passing underneath. Bunty had made it, Alan was only trying to ensure the safety of Esther's head.

Near the door was another arch; it was very low—both the Captain and Esther would have to go under it doubled up: it was done in ferns and red geraniums and blue flag lilies and yellow "bunny rabbits," and it said "Wellcome."

This was the architecture of Peter and Poppet; the choice of flowers and handing up had been Essie's work.

The kettle boiled over. Meg took the opinions of the company as to whether she should make the tea or wait. The travellers were coming overland from Brisbane, and the man had already gone to the station with the dogcart. It always made the Captain irritable to be met by half his family on a station, so they were all assembled at home instead. Nellie counselled waiting, tea brewed too long was "horrid."

Pip said no one would know what they were drinking, so it did not matter.

Swift wheels on the road, a shriek from Peter and Poppet, and the question was decided. Meg filled up the teapot and cosied it, then snatched Essie up in her arms and went down the path. Oh, thank God, thank God she had her to take!

Esther leapt out before the horse fairly stopped, just as impetuously young as ever. She devoured Essie, lifted big Peter right up in her arms, laughed and cried over the others.

No one said anything the pen could catch for the next ten minutes; every one spoke at once and laughed at once; every one asked questions and no one waited for answers.

It was the Captain of course who first made a whole speech. "We've been travelling for hours,—haven't you any tea for Esther, Meg?"

Then they all trooped up under the arches to the white cloth, flower-strewn, and Flibbertigibbet had improved the shining time by drinking the milk.

[image]

"THE WHOLE SIX RUSHED TO PICK HER UP."

Martha came down with more, her very forehead sharing in the great smile that widened all her features.

She shook the Captain's hand and Esther's; then small Essie ran before her, and she pulled up her apron to catch a sudden sob and went away.

Little Mrs. Hassal picked up the child,—just her own little girl Esther over again. She gave her a lump of sugar and squeezed her tenderly for nothing in particular. Then Nellie crept round and took her to find the prettiest cake of all, and Pip rode her round and round on his shoulders and kissed her again and again when she happened to stand near him.

And once, when running back from the house with her grand new doll for inspection, her eager little feet tripped and she fell on the path, the whole six started up and rushed to pick her up. Esther told herself she had left her darling in loving enough hands, she need not have worried so.

"But she seems a little thinner to me, Meg," she said; "I don't know if it is my fancy."

Then they all grew silent, and each one waited for the other to tell.

It was Nellie who spoke at last, and told the story, and Esther's tears fell and she clasped her baby close to her breast and thanked God who had been so good to her. And the Captain put out his hand and drew his eldest daughter closer to him, and said he did not think Alan could have her now.

It is only four o'clock, and the spring glad sunshine is still over everything; the feast is at its height, and all faces untroubled again. Let us leave them here.

Esther is leaning against her husband, her bright face full of content and happiness; once or twice her eyes have gone skywards, and the light in them has deepened. Essie is in her arms, saucy and dimpled: she knows she is the undisputed queen of that gathering, and is taking advantage of her power by giving all manner of sweet little commands.

Peter is still engaged on the cakes; he is only eating the tops of them where the peel nestles, but no one has noticed. He has just informed Esther of the progress he has made in her absence.

"I tharcely drop any blotht now," he said; "I've gone into theven times, I'm learning peninthulath, and I've thtopped lithping."

As no one disputes any of his statements, and as no one smiles openly, he is quite happy in his present occupation. Poppet seems to have grown; she is

thinner than ever,—arms and legs, as Bunty says, and nothing else worth mentioning. He forgets the heart; it is just the same dear loving tender little one, with room for all the world, and one warm, special corner for himself.

Bunty's collar this afternoon is a sign of the times; it is perfectly white and almost unrumpled; the whole of it is visible, and his jacket does not fit extraordinarily badly. His mouth is firm, but hardly strikes one as obstinate now, and the brooding light that used to be in his eyes shows very seldom. Pip says if some day the boy becomes a great hero it will not surprise any one in the family at all, despite those early days he is so bitterly ashamed of.

This is quite a different Nellie from the one who went over this same lawn in her first long dress. More beautiful if possible: the shining hair and dewy, long-lashed eyes, the clear colouring, and slim, straight figure are just the same, but there is a deeper look in the young eyes, a sweeter, graver expression about the young mouth. She will be that gladdening thing, an exceedingly beautiful woman; she will be more, a good woman and a noble.

Meg,—well, Meg is Meg.

A little thin and pale-looking from the fever, a little quieter, and, if possible, even more sweet, more womanly and lovable than ever. Alan is at one side of her, her family at the other; so far they possess her equally, and perhaps the standing between is the happiest time of her life.

Pip is stretched on the ground, six feet of splendid young manhood; his laugh is good to hear, his cheeks have the tint of health, he measures a surprising number of inches round the chest. Surely it is reasonable to suppose his blighted affections have not done him irreparable mischief! Peter lets a light in on the subject. He has finished the cakes, and is at liberty again to pour out all the events of note that have happened during Esther's absence.

He has informed her that "the catht had four kittenth, that his betht thuith grown too thmall for his legth, that the butcher thent the choph and thteak too late for breakfatht, and Meg got another one named Thmitherth, and that a thtorm of hail had thmathed the thtudy window."

Then his eye fell upon his eldest brother, and his young catholic mind found an item of news concerning him.

"An' Mith Joneth ith married to the man at the thauthpan thop; me and Poppet peeped in at the church, and the looked thplendid. And Pip wath awful mad, but he'th gone on Mith Thybil Moore now."

And as Miss Sybil Moore was the exceedingly pretty daughter of new delightful neighbours, and as Mr. Philip coloured somewhat warmly and inverted the young scamp in great haste, there seemed a probability of pleasant truth in the statement. Especially as Meg smiled contentedly.

Esther spoke of Indian scarfs and shawls and gauzes the boxes held.

"They will do beautifully for charades and theatricals," she said.

"Or playing at being grown up," said Poppet.

The Captain leaned back against a tree. "There is not much playing about it," he said. "I must be getting an old man; how fast you are all growing up."

"What's dwoing up?" asked Essie.

"I used to think it was just long dresses and done-up hair," sighed Nellie; "or a stick and a moustache."

"And not doing as you're told," supplemented Poppet.

"An' eating thingth and not getting thick." It was Peter's amendment.

Meg only smiled.

But there was a faint curve of sadness as well as the smile on her young lips—and one was for sweet, buried childhood, and one for the broadening days.

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