FERNLEY HOUSE

BY

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FERNLEY HOUSE

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By Laura E. Richards

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Peggy
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"HUGH AND MARGARET, ALL UNCONSCIOUS OF HER SCRUTINY, WERE ENJOYING THEMSELVES EXTREMELY."

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LAURA E. RICHARDS

AUTHOR OF "CAPTAIN JANUARY," "MELODY," "QUEEN HILDEGARDE," "GEOFFREY STRONG," ETC.

Illustrated by
ETHELDRED B. BARRY

Emblem

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Book Spine

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FERNLEY HOUSE

CHAPTER I.

A DUET

"Well, Margaret!"

"Well, Uncle John!"

"Not a word to throw at a dog, as Rosalind says?"

"You are not a dog, Uncle John. Besides, you know all about it without my saying a word, so why should I be silly, and spoil your comfortable cigar? Dear children! They will have a delightful time, I hope; and of course it is perfectly right that they should go to their father when he wants them; and—the summer will pass quickly."

"Very quickly!" Mr. Montfort assented, watching his smoke rings float upward.

"And Peggy is coming; and—oh, we shall be all right, of course we shall; only—we do miss them, don't we, Uncle?"

"I should think we did! A house is a poor place without children; and we flatter ourselves that our two—eh, Margaret?"

"Oh, they are the dearest children in the world," said Margaret with conviction. "There is no possible doubt about that."

She sighed, and took up her work; Mr. Montfort blew smoke rings and watched them melt into the air. There was an interval of sympathetic silence.

The children, Basil and Susan D., Margaret's cousins, had hardly been gone two hours, yet the time seemed already long to Margaret Montfort. Fernley House, which only this morning had been so running over with joy and sunlight, and happy noise and bustle, seemed suddenly to have become a great empty barrack, full of nothing but silence. Margaret, after putting away, sadly enough, the things that the children had left about, had been glad to join her uncle on the pleasant back verandah that overlooked the garden.

Fernley was in the full glory of early summer. The leaves were still young, and too soft to rustle in the gently moving air; the laburnums and honey-locusts were in blossom, and the bees came and went, heavy-laden. The sombre, trailing branches of the great Norway spruces touched the smooth green turf, starred here and there with English daisies. Farther back, the tulip-trees towered stately, and the elm branches swept the crest of the tall box hedges.

Margaret's eyes kept wandering from her work. How could she stitch, when things were looking like this? There was the oriole, swinging on the bough beside his nest, pouring out his song, "Joy! joy! joy!" The eggs might be hatched to-day. Basil had begged her to promise that she would let neither cat nor squirrel meddle with the young birds. What should she do, if she saw a cat up there, forty feet from the ground? Dear Basil! he never could understand why she could not climb trees as well as he and Susan D. Dear Basil! dearest of boys! how nice he looked in his new blue suit; and who would mend the first "barndoor" that he tore in jacket or trousers?

And little Susan D.! the warm clasp of her arms seemed still about Margaret's neck, in that last strangling hug of parting. She had grown so dear, the little silent child! "I will be good," she whispered. "Cousin Margaret, I will try not to die without you, and I will remember the things you told me about papa; but don't make me stay very long, because I haven't got enough goodness to last very long, you know I haven't."

Margaret was roused from her reverie by her uncle's voice.

"When did you say Peggy was coming, my dear?"

"Next week, Uncle John. School closes on the eighteenth. Dear little Peggy! think of her being a senior! it seems hardly possible. She is afraid I shall tell her to put her hair up; I certainly shall not, at least while she is here. I am sure you prefer the pigtail, don't you, Uncle John?"

"Yes! oh, yes!" said Mr. Montfort, abstractedly. "Pigtail—yes, by all means. And how will you and Peggy amuse yourselves, my dear? No Rita this summer to electrify us all. You will not find it dull?"

"Dull, Uncle John? how could Fernley possibly be dull? Why, Peggy and I are going to be as happy as possible. I have all kinds of plans made. You see, it is time Peggy was learning something about housekeeping and that sort of thing, and I thought this summer would be the very best time to show her a little. Of

course, when she is at home, she wants to be doing twenty thousand things on the farm, just as she always has done, and the time goes so quickly, she has not begun to think yet about the indoor things; so I am going to be the Humdrum-major, Uncle, and give her some lessons; if you approve, that is."

"Highly, my dear, highly. Every woman should be able to take care of her own house, and the only way for her to learn is to begin upon some one else's. I should think Peggy might make a vigorous little housekeeper, if a chaotic one. Don't let her loose in the library, Margaret, that is my only prayer."

"Uncle John, I really do believe that you think housekeeping consists entirely in dusting and setting things to wrongs, as you call it."

"Well, my love, I confess that has always seemed to me a prime element in the art. But I also confess my ignorance, and the depth and darkness thereof. Am I humble enough? Now I must go and take the puppies for an airing. Till dinner-time, May Margaret!"

Mr. Montfort strolled away, and Margaret bent with renewed energy over her work, giving herself a little shake as she did so. Her uncle's words still sounded in her ears: "You will not find it dull?" She had answered out of the fulness of her heart, thinking it impossible that dulness should come where Uncle John was, especially as he happened to be at Fernley House, the most enchanting place in the world. Yet—and yet—it was going to be very, very different, of course, from the life of the past year, so filled full and running over with delight. It was not only that she missed the children; it was that in the care of them, the watching over the growing bodies and the eager minds, she was learning so much herself, feeling the world grow, almost hourly, bigger and brighter and sweeter. The mother-nature was strong in Margaret Montfort, and the children were bringing out all that was best and strongest in her. Well, she must do without that now for awhile; and there was no doubt that the prospect seemed a little flat, even with Peggy to brighten it. Dear Peggy! Margaret loved her fondly; but she was so grown up now, so strong herself, so helpful and self-reliant, that there was no question of taking care of her any more. "Why, she knows twenty times as much as I do," said Margaret, "about most things, except history. I don't suppose she will ever remember the difference between Mary Stuart and Mary Tudor. But, foolish creature," cried Margaret to herself, "what have you just been saying to Uncle John? Here is all the world of housekeeping, about which Peggy knows little or nothing, and which, thanks to Elizabeth and Frances, you do begin to understand a little. Is it a small thing, I ask you, to

teach the qualities and fine shades of damask, and the high-lights of huckaback? or the different cuts of meat, and when what is in season? I am ashamed of you, Margaret Montfort! And then there are the puppies, too! Don't let me hear another word of dulness from you, miss, do you hear? Perhaps you would like to be weaving cotton in a factory this heavenly day, or selling yards of hot stuffs in a shop? Go away!" and Margaret shook her head severely, and was surprised at herself.

The puppies were two fine young setters, Nip and Tuck by name, which the wise uncle had bought on purpose to soften the blow of the parting with the children. Margaret had never known dogs before, and though Messrs. Nip and Tuck were being strictly trained, and had to spend much of their time in the stable-yard, she still had many a pleasant half-hour with them, when her uncle took them for a run over hill and dale, or gave them a lesson in the garden. Her one anxiety was lest they should meet the Queen of Sheba, her great Angora cat, and there should be trouble; for the Queen was a person of decided temper. Margaret had taken infinite pains, ever since the arrival of the puppies, to keep them out of one another's sight; but Mr. Montfort warned her that she was merely putting off the inevitable, and that the day must come when cat and dogs should meet.

It seemed a little hard that this meeting must take place when the master was not present; but the finger of Fate pointed, and at this very moment, while Margaret was sitting with her peaceful thoughts, Michael, the stable-boy, chanced to drop the leash in which he was leading the puppies to their master. Three minutes later, Nip and Tuck were careering wildly around Margaret, leaping on her with frantic caresses, and talking both at once, and very loud, as dear dogs will sometimes do.

"Down, Nip!" cried Margaret. "Tucky, do behave yourself. Now, boys, however did you get away? Charge, do, like dear boys, and wait for the master; he will be here in a minute."

Nip and Tuck explained breathlessly that they had just got out by the luckiest chance in the world, that they loved her to distraction, and that, upon the whole, they preferred her society to that of any one else in the world, if only she would let them lick her nose. This Margaret firmly refused to do, and they lay down panting for a moment, but only for a moment. Again the finger of Fate pointed; and so it came to pass that as Mr. Montfort came round one corner in search of his run-aways, the Queen of Sheba came round the other. There seemed but one

white flash as the two puppies, recognizing their destiny on the instant, flew to meet it, yelling like demons of the pit.

"Oh, Uncle John!" cried Margaret, starting up in distress. "My poor Queen! my poor Sheba! they will—"

"I wouldn't worry, Margaret," said Mr. Montfort. "Sheba can take care of herself, if I am not greatly mistaken."

The great cat stiffened herself into a bristling bow, and waited the charge with gleaming eyes. The dogs' frenzied rush carried them within a foot of her whiskers, and there they stopped. This was not what they had looked for. They had seen cats before, and had chased them, with infinite joy; their mother had taught them that cats were made to be chased, with a special eye to the healthful amusement of good little dogs. But this furry, glaring creature, radiating power and menace,—could this be a cat?

Nip and Tuck put their heads on one side and considered. The Queen of Sheba advanced one step, slowly; the puppies retired, too, and sat down, wagging their tails. Perhaps, after all, it was a kind of dog; their minds were cheerfully open to new impressions, and they were full of good will toward all creation. Perceiving their innocence, the Queen of Sheba, who had seen many generations of puppies, lowered her warlike arch, and, sitting down opposite them, proceeded to wash herself elaborately. Nip and Tuck looked on with open-mouthed admiration. Presently Tuck, who was a bold dog, gave a short bark of decision, and, stepping forward, began with infinite politeness to assist in the washing. Sheba received the attention with regal condescension. Five minutes later, all three walked off together, rubbing sides cordially, and presumably in quest of rats.

Margaret drew a long breath. "Did you ever see anything like that?" she cried. "Look, Uncle John; they are talking to one another; you can almost hear the words. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Very pretty," said Mr. Montfort. "Now they'll be friends for life, you'll see. Sheba will be of great assistance in their education. It takes an intelligent cat to understand puppies, and Sheba is a remarkably intelligent cat. Well, May Margaret, and now shall we take our four-legged children for a walk?"

"Oh, Uncle John, I was so afraid you were not going to ask me! Will you wait just half a minute while I get my hat? and on the way back I will stop and see

Mrs. Peyton. I have not been there since the dogs came or the children went, and I ought to be ashamed."

Margaret ran up-stairs lightly, saying to herself as she ran, "Dull, with that man? and Peggy and the puppies beside? Margaret Montfort, I *am* ashamed of you!"

CHAPTER II.

MRS. PEYTON'S COMPANION

"Dear me!" said Mrs. Peyton. "Here is Patience, down off her monument, come all this way to smile at Grief! I am Grief, my dear; allow me to introduce myself. Well, Margaret, and how do you get on without your brats—I beg pardon! I mean your pets?"

"As well as could be expected," said Margaret, lightly, as she stooped to kiss the ivory forehead. Mrs. Peyton was charming, but one did not confide one's troubles to her. "We are behaving beautifully, Mrs. Peyton. Not only have we dried our tears and hung our pocket-handkerchiefs out to dry, but we have set up some new pets already."

"Not more children? Not another set of 'The Orphans of Fernley,' bound in blue denim? That would be unendurable."

"No; four-legged pets this time. We have two dogs, Mrs. Peyton; beautiful Gordon setters. I hope you are fond of dogs."

"Oh!—dogs? Yes, I like dogs. As a rule I like them better than two-legged torments. You are a two-legged torment, Margaret, when you move about the room in that exasperatingly light-footed manner. I don't suppose you actually do it to make me feel my helplessness, but it has that effect. Do sit down! you are not a bird. And don't, for pity's sake, look patient! If there is one thing I cannot abide, it is to see people look patient when I insult them. If I had only known—but John Montfort always did like to thwart me, it's his nature—if I had only known, I say, that those brats of yours were going away, I need not have set up a menagerie of my own. It's too late now, the creature's coming."

"What do you mean, Mrs. Peyton?" asked Margaret, always prepared for any whim of her whimsical neighbor. "Are you setting up a dog too?"

"No! nothing half so comfortable as a dog. A fox, or wolf, or hyena, or something of that kind. Don't be stupid, Margaret; I am not up to explanations to-day. A companion, simpleton! A Miss Fox or Miss Wolfe, I can't remember which. I don't *think* it was Miss Hyena, but it might be. It's an unusual name, but

she is recommended as an unusual person."

"Mrs. Peyton! you said you never would try it again. And you know I am always ready to come and read to you."

"I know you are a little Fra Angelico angel, with your halo laid in your top bureau drawer among your collars, for fear people should see it; but I have a little scrap of conscience about me somewhere,—not much, only about a saltspoonful,—and if you came every day it would get up and worry me, and I can't be worried. Besides, the doctor ordered it, positively."

"Doctor Flower? has he been out again?"

"Yes, he came on Monday. I thought I was going to die, and wanted him to see how prettily I should do it. I'll never send for him again; he always tells me to get up and do things. Tiresome man! I told him I was perfectly exhausted by simply listening to him for half an hour. He replied by ordering this Miss Fox, or whoever she is. I am to try her for a month; I sha'n't probably keep her a week."

"A nurse?"

"No, not a trained nurse. She means to be one, goes to the hospital in the autumn. He thinks she has a gift, or something. I detest people with a gift. Probably she has a squint, too. You will have to receive her when she comes, Margaret, and take the edge off her. I fancy her unendurable, but I promised to try; I really must be going to die, I am growing so amiable. Which of my gems do you want? I am going to make my will this time. You needn't laugh, Margaret Montfort."

"I was laughing at your dying of amiability, Mrs. Peyton!" said Margaret. "When is this young lady—I suppose she is young, if she is going to study nursing—when is she coming?"

"To-morrow, I believe; or is it to-day? where is the note? Tuesday! Is this Tuesday? It cannot be."

"Yes, this is Tuesday, and the three o'clock train—I suppose that is the train she will come by—must be in by this time. Hark! there are wheels this moment. Can she be coming now, Mrs. Peyton?"

"My dear, it would be exactly like the conception I have formed of her. Go down and see her, will you, Margaret? Tell her I have a headache, or Asiatic

cholera, or anything you like. I cannot possibly see her to-day. Her name is Fox —or Wolfe, I can't remember which. Bless you, child! you save my life. Show her the Calico Room. Hand me the amethyst rope before you go; I must compose my nerves."

With a smile and a sigh, Margaret ran down-stairs, and met the newcomer on the doorstep. A tall, pale, grave-looking girl, with deep-set blue eyes, and smooth bands of brown hair—a rather remarkable-looking person, Margaret thought.

"Miss Fox?" she said, hurriedly, holding out her hand. "Oh, how do you do? Pray come in. Mrs. Peyton asked me to receive you,—I am a friend and neighbor,—and show you your room and make you comfortable. She has a bad headache, and does not feel able to welcome you herself."

She led the way into the dining-room, and rang the bell. "You will have lunch?" she said, "or would you rather have tea?"

"Tea, please," said the stranger; and her voice had a deep, musical note, that fell pleasantly on Margaret's ear.

"I am sorry Mrs. Peyton is unable to see me. Is it a real headache, or doesn't she want to?"

Margaret colored and hesitated. The blue eyes looked straight into hers with a compelling gaze; a gleam of comprehension seemed to lurk in their depths. Margaret was absolutely truthful, and, consequently, was sometimes at a loss when speaking of her invalid friend.

"Doctor Flower told me somewhat about her," Miss Fox went on. "He thinks —he wants me to rouse her to effort."

She spoke so quietly, her whole air was one of such calm and repose, that Margaret looked at her wonderingly.

"MARGARET DID THE HONORS, STILL FEELING VERY SHY."

"MARGARET DID THE HONORS, STILL FEELING VERY SHY."

"If Doctor Flower has explained the case to you," she said, at last, "you probably know more about it than I do. Mrs. Peyton often seems to suffer a great deal. She is fanciful, too, no doubt, at times; I suppose most invalids are."

"I have just been staying with a woman who had had both feet cut off by a train," said Miss Fox, tranquilly. "She was not fanciful."

It was a relief when the tea came. Margaret did the honors, still feeling very shy, she could not tell why, before this grave person, who could not be more than a year or two older than herself.

"Have you come far to-day, Miss Fox?" she asked, for the sake of saying something. The stranger put her head on one side, and gave her a quaint look. "Any addition to one's personal menagerie is always interesting," she said; "but one has one's favorites in the Zoo. If it is not taking a liberty—why Fox?"

Margaret started, and blushed violently. "I *beg* your pardon," she said. "Mrs. Peyton was not sure—she could not remember—is it Miss Wolfe, then? I hope you will forgive me, Miss Wolfe!"

"Please don't," said Miss Wolfe. She smiled for the first time, and Margaret thought she had never seen so sweet a smile. "It is not your fault that I am philologically quadruped, surely. So long as I am not called Zebra, I really don't mind. I always associate Zebra with Zany, don't you know? they were in my Alphabet together. But you were saying something which I was rude enough to interrupt."

"I only asked if you had come far."

"Not very far, if you put it in miles; only from New York; if you mean by impressions, a thousand leagues. It is at least that from that maelstrom to this quiet green place. How should one have nerves in a place like this? To sit here in peace and turn slowly into a lettuce—that would be the natural thing; but life is not natural, if you have observed."

Margaret laughed. "Mrs. Peyton is certainly not in the least like a lettuce; I don't know whether you see any signs of the change in me; I have only been here two years, though."

Miss Wolfe surveyed her critically. "N—no!" she said, slowly. "I see nothing indicating lettuce—as yet. You are cool and green—no offence, I hope! I pay you one of the highest compliments I know of when I call you green; it is the color of rest and harmony; cool and green enough, and pleasantly wavy in your lines, but you have too much expression as yet, far too much. Placidity—absence of emotion—that is what superinduces the lettuce habit." She waved her hand

gracefully, and seemed to fall into a reverie. Margaret surveyed her in growing wonder.

At this moment Mrs. Peyton's bell rang violently; and presently a maid appeared to say that her mistress was feeling better, and would see the lady now. Miss Wolfe rose and glanced significantly at Margaret. "Curiosity overcomes distaste!" she said. "Are you coming?"

"No," said Margaret. "I think I'd better not. I will slip away quietly. But I shall see you soon again. I will run over this evening, perhaps; and you must come over to Fernley whenever Mrs. Peyton can spare you. It is very near, just across the park."

"Fernley!" repeated Miss Wolfe, pausing and looking at Margaret with an altered expression.

"Fernley House, Mr. Montfort's place. That is where I live. Why—I have never introduced myself all this time, have I? I am Mr. Montfort's niece; my name is Montfort, too, Margaret Montfort."

"Oh, my prophetic soul! my aunt!" exclaimed Miss Wolfe. "I beg your pardon; nothing of the sort. I am somewhat mad at times. Good morning, Miss Montfort; I am glad to know you. To be continued in our next!"

She nodded, kissed her hand gravely to Margaret, and turning, followed the maid up-stairs.

Margaret looked after her for a moment in amazement. "What a *very* extraordinary girl!" she said. "She seemed to know my name. I wonder how."

She paused, shook her head, then went soberly home across the park, wondering how the new venture would turn out.

CHAPTER III.

AN ARRIVAL

"AT THIS MOMENT POLLY APPEARED RED-CHEEKED AND BREATHLESS." **"AT THIS MOMENT POLLY APPEARED RED-CHEEKED AND BREATHLESS."**

"What can the dogs be barking at, Elizabeth?" asked Margaret, looking up from the table-cloth she was examining. "I'm afraid they have got a squirrel again."

"I thought I heard the sound of wheels, Miss," said the sedate Elizabeth, who had just entered, her arms full of shining damask. "Just as I was coming up the stairs, Miss Margaret. I told Polly run and see who it was, and send 'em away if they was a tramp. It do be mostly tramps, these days; Frances says she'll poison the next one, Miss, but she always feeds 'em so as they go off and send all their friends."

At this moment Polly appeared, red-cheeked and breathless. A gentleman was below, asking for Mr. Montfort, and she couldn't find Mr. Montfort nowhere in the house; so then he said could he see Miss Margaret?

"Is it any one I know, Polly?" asked Margaret.

"I don't know, Miss Marget; I niver see him. A lame gentleman with a crutch; he looks just lovely!" added Polly, with effusion.

"Miss Margaret didn't ask you how he looked, Polly!" said Elizabeth, severely. "You let your tongue run away with you."

"Tell him I will be down directly, Polly," said Margaret.

"Now, Miss Margaret, do you think you'd better?" asked Elizabeth. "If it's not a tramp—"

"Indeed, and he's no tramp!" broke in Polly, indignantly. "He's a gentleman, if ever I see one, Miss Margaret; and him in lovely white clothes and all, just like young Mr. Pennyfeather as was here last year."

"Polly, will you learn to speak when you are spoken to, and not interrupt your elders?" demanded Elizabeth. "If he's not a tramp, I was saying, Miss Margaret, he's likely an agent of some kind, and why should you be annoyed, with all the linen to go over? He can call again, most likely."

Elizabeth spoke with some feeling under her grave and restrained words. The examination of the house-linen was to her mind the most important event of the week, and already they had been disturbed once by a sudden incursion of the dogs, bringing a dead squirrel.

"No, Elizabeth," said Margaret, "I must go down. Tell the gentleman I will be down directly, Polly; show him into the library, please. Dear Elizabeth, you can finish the table-cloths just as well without me. You always did it before I came."

"Not at all, Miss," said Elizabeth, with patient resignation; "you'll find me in the sewing-room, Miss, whenever you are ready for me. It's best that you should go over the things yourself, and then you will be satisfied, and no mistakes made."

Margaret nodded, with a little inward sigh over the rigidity of Elizabeth's ideal of a perfect housekeeper; patted her hair hurriedly to make sure that it was neat, confirmed the pat by a glance in the mirror, and went quickly down-stairs.

A tall, slender figure rose, leaning on a stick, as she entered the library. "What a sad face!" was Margaret's first thought; but, when the stranger smiled, it changed to "What a beautiful one!"

"Cousin Margaret?" said the young man, inquiringly.

"Yes—I am Margaret," said the girl. "But who—oh! are you—can it be Peggy's Hugh? It is, I see. Oh, how do you do, Cousin? I am so very, very glad to see you."

They shook hands cordially, scanning each other with earnest and friendly eyes.

"I should have known you, of course, from your picture, if not from Peggy's ardent descriptions," said Hugh Montfort.

"And I ought to have known you, surely," cried Margaret; "only, not knowing you were in this part of the country, you see—"

"Uncle John did not get my letter? It ought to have reached him some days ago. I was coming on to Cambridge, and wrote as soon as I started. No wonder you were surprised, being hailed as cousin by an unheralded vagabond with a stick."

"Oh, why do you stand?" cried Margaret. "Sit down, Cousin Hugh; to think of its being really you; I have wanted to see and know you ever since—oh, for ever so long. Hark! there comes Uncle John now. How delighted he will be!"

"Margaret, my dear!" called Mr. Montfort from the hall. "I have just had a letter—most surprising thing—from—hallo! what's all this? Hugh, my dear fellow, I'm delighted to see you. Got here before your letter, eh? How did that happen? Never mind, so long as you are here now. Well, well, well! sit down here, and let me look at you. This is a pleasure indeed. Your father's eyes; I should know them in a Chinaman; not that you look like a Chinaman. How are they all at home? How's your father? When did you leave home? Have you had anything to eat? What would you like? Margaret, my dear, get Hugh something to eat, he's probably starved."

Hugh laughingly disclaimed starvation, and begged to wait till their tea-time. "I am not hungry, truly I am not," he said. "There is so much to say, too, isn't there, Uncle John? Father is very well and hearty. I have a pipe for you in my bag. I brought a bag with me; do you suppose you could put me up for a few days, Uncle?"

Reassured by Mr. Montfort's earnest assurance that he should keep him all summer, Hugh leaned back in his chair, and looked about him with eager eyes.

"This is the library!" he said. "Uncle John, ever since I learned to read, one of my dreams has been to see this room. Father has always told us about it, and where his favorite books were, and where you all used to sit when you came here to read."

He rose and, crossing the room, took a book from a shelf without a moment's hesitation. "Here is the 'Morte d'Arthur,'" he said; "you see I knew where to find it. And Father used to sit on top of that stepladder."

"So he did!" cried Mr. Montfort, delighted. "I can see him now, with one leg curled under him, eating apples and shouting about Lancelot and Tristram."

"And you sat in the great copper coal-hod—ah! there it is!—and read

Froissart, the great folio with the colored prints. I see it, just in the place father described."

"Uncle John," said Margaret, reproachfully, "you never told me that you sat in the coal-scuttle. I know papa's perch, the mantel-piece, because he could get at the little Shakespeares from there."

Mr. Montfort laughed.

"Leave me some remnant of dignity, Meg," he said. "How can you expect me to confess that I sat in the coal-scuttle? Have you no reverence for gray hairs?"

"Oh, a very great deal, dear Uncle; but there were no gray hairs in the coal-scuttle days; and my only regret about you is the not having known you when you were a boy."

"Horrid monkey, I have been given to understand," said her uncle, lightly. "Go on, Hugh; tell us some more of the things that Jim—your father—remembers. Old Jim! it's a great shame that he never comes to look up the old place himself."

"It is indeed, sir!" said Hugh. "I've always thought so, and now that I see the place—oh, I shall send him, that's all, as soon as ever I get home. There are the Indian clubs; oh, the carved one—is it true that that was given to Grandfather Montfort by a Fiji chief, or was the Pater fooling us? He sometimes makes up things, he acknowledges, just for the fun of it."

"True enough, I believe!" said Mr. Montfort, taking down the great club, covered from end to end with strange and delicate carving.

"Did he ever tell you how near he came to breaking my head with this club? He may have forgotten; I have not. We used to keep it in our room, the great nursery up-stairs, Margaret; you must show that to Hugh by and by. I woke up one night, and was afraid the crow that I was taming in the back garden might be hungry. I got out of the window and shinned down the spout. The crow was all right; but when I came back, Jim woke up, and took me for a burglar, and went for me with the club, thinking it the chance of his life. I was only half-way through the bars when he caught me a crack—I can hear my skull rattle with it now."

"Oh, Uncle John! and you held on?"

"My dear, I held on; it would have been rather unfortunate for me to let go at the moment. I sung out, of course; and when I got through I fell upon my friend James, and Roger had to wake up and come and drag us from under the bed before he could separate us. Sweet boys! do you and your brothers indulge in these little endearments, Hugh? Jim was a glorious fighter."

Hugh laughed. "Jim and George used to have pretty lively scraps sometimes," he said. "It wasn't so much in my line, but I took it out in airs, I fancy. The poor fellows couldn't punch my head, and it must have been hard lines for them sometimes. As for Max and Peter, they are twins, you know. I doubt if either of them knows exactly which is himself and which is the other, so they don't have real scraps, just puppy-play, rolling over and over and pounding each other."

"Oh, what good times they would have with Basil and Susan D.!" cried Margaret. "What a pity they cannot know one another, all these dear boys!"

"So it is! so it is!" said Mr. Montfort, heartily. "We must bring it about, one of these days; we must surely bring it about. Fond of dogs, Hugh? I've got a pair of nice puppies here; like to go and see them before tea, or shall Margaret show you your room?"

Hugh elected in favor of the puppies, and uncle and nephew walked off together, well content. Margaret looked after them, thinking what a noble pair they made. Hugh walked lame, to be sure, yet not ungracefully, she thought; and though slender, still his shoulders were square and manly.

Then her thoughts turned to matters of practical hospitality, and she sped to the kitchen, to tell the good news to Frances.

"Oh, Frances, Mr. Hugh has come, my Uncle Jim's son; Miss Peggy's brother, Frances! He has come all the way from Ohio, and I want you to give him the very best supper that ever was, please!"

Now Frances had that moment discovered that her best porcelain saucepan was cracked; she therefore answered with some asperity. "Indeed, then, Miss Margaret, what is good enough for Mr. Montfort must be good enough for his nephew or any other young gentleman. My supper is all planned, and I can't be fashed with new things at this time of day."

"Now, Frances, don't be cross, that's a dear! I want you to see Mr. Hugh. Look, there he is this minute, crossing the green with Uncle John."

Frances looked; looked again, long and earnestly; then straightway she fell into a great bustle. "Dear me, Miss Margaret, run away now, that's a good young lady. How can I be doing, and you all about the kitchen like a ball of string? He's lame, the beautiful young gentleman; you never told me he was lame. I did think as how we might be doing with the cold fowl, and French fried potatoes and muffins, but that's nothing to show the heart. Run away now, Miss, and if you was going up-stairs, be so good as send me Polly. She's idling her time away, I'll be bound, and not a soul to help me with my salad and croquettes. Dear! dear! I be pestered out of my life, mostly."

"Don't kill us, Frances!" cried Margaret, as she ran away, laughing. "I really think the cold fowl will be quite enough."

Frances deigned no reply; and Margaret hastened up-stairs, to tell the good news to Elizabeth. Elizabeth was in the sewing-room, waiting, with plaintive dignity, till Margaret should please to go over the rest of the table-cloths; but at the tidings of the advent of a dear and honored guest, she dropped thimble and scissors, and rose hastily, declaring that the Blue Room must be cleaned instantly, and put in order for Mr. Montfort's nephew.

"But you swept it yesterday, Elizabeth, and I dusted all the ornaments myself, and put them back in place. It only needs a few fresh flowers, I am sure," said Margaret.

Elizabeth turned on her a face of affectionate reproach. "Miss Margaret, you don't mean that. Mr. Montfort's own nephew, and the room not touched to-day! I'll go this minute and see to it. But if you would pick out the towels you think he would like best, Miss, please; gentlemen do be that fussy about towels, as there's no pleasing some of them, though being Mr. Montfort's nephew, likely he'll be different. Give him the finest huckaback, and Mr. Montfort is easy satisfied, so long as there's no fringes. He never could abide fringe to his towels, and there's no person with sense as wouldn't agree with him. And if you would see to the bureau-scarf and the flowers, Miss Margaret—there! she's gone, and not a word about what table-napkins I am to use! I like to see them young, so I do, but they're terrible heedless. I expect I'd best put the finest out, for Mr. Montfort's nephew."

CHAPTER IV.

UNCLE JOHN'S IDEA

"Margaret, I have an idea!"

"I am so glad, Uncle John; your ideas are always pleasant ones, especially when they make your eyes twinkle. Is this about more dogs?"

"No, no, child. Do you think I have no soul except for dogs? I was thinking—why, you see,—this is a delightful fellow, this nephew of mine."

"Isn't he, Uncle? I never saw a more interesting person, I think. How well he talks, and how much he knows!"

"Yes, and right-minded, too; singularly right-minded. Jim has done well, certainly, by his children, and is very fortunate in them. H'm! yes. Who would have thought, thirty years ago, that things would have turned out in this way? Old Jim!"

Here Mr. Montfort fell into a brown study, and only roused himself after some time, to ask Margaret what were her orders for the day.

"Why, Uncle John! And you have never told me your idea."

"Bless me! so I haven't. Age, my dear child, age! Such a fine idea as it is, too. Listen, then! as I was saying, Hugh Montfort is a charming fellow."

"Yes, Uncle John."

"And Peggy Montfort is a charming girl."

"Certainly she is. Dear Peggy!"

"We may not unreasonably infer, therefore, that other members of the family may be charming also. Now, my idea is this. Peggy is not going home this summer; why would it not be a good plan to send for her nearest sister—Jean, isn't she?—to come here and meet her brother and sister, and all have a good time together? What do you say?"

"Uncle John! I say that you are the very cleverest person in the world, as well as the dearest."

"A little house-party, you see," Mr. Montfort went on, beaming with pleasure at the delight that shone in Margaret's face. "And—we shall want another lad, it seems to me, possibly two lads. Why not ask young Merryweather and his brother for a couple of weeks? You liked the young fellow?"

"Oh, certainly, Uncle John!" Margaret suddenly became interested in tying up the Crimson Rambler that was straying over the verandah-rail. "Yes, indeed, I thought him very nice."

"And you like the idea? You don't think it would make too much work, too much responsibility, my dear little niece?"

Margaret was still busy with the rose, which proved quite refractory, but it was clear that she thought nothing of the sort. It would be altogether delightful, she said; and as for care—why, she had been longing for something to take her mind off missing the children, and—

"And to see Jean, too!" she cried, suddenly emerging from the rose-vine, with an unusual flush on her delicate cheek, and her gray eyes shining; "I have always wanted so to know the other Peggypods, as you call them, Uncle John; and now to have Hugh here, and Jean coming—oh, Uncle John, you are *so* dear!"

"Then that is all right," said Uncle John; "and I will go and telegraph to old Jim and tell him to send the little girl along. Shall we tell Peggy, or leave it for a surprise, eh? What do you say?"

"The surprise, by all means; Peggy loves a surprise, you know. Oh, how can I wait a whole week to see her?"

Mr. Montfort looked with pleasure at Margaret's sparkling eyes and rosy cheeks. He had hit on the right thing, evidently. Young people wanted young people; didn't he remember well enough—here he fell into a muse again, and said "Rose!" to himself two or three times. Perhaps he was thinking of the Crimson Rambler.

"Now, about rooms!" he said, waking up after a few minutes. "And we must get more help, Margaret. Frances—"

"I'll tell Elizabeth first, I think," said Margaret, thoughtfully. "She has a way

of breaking things gradually to Frances, and taking the edge off them; she is really very clever about it."

"Elizabeth is a treasure," said Mr. Montfort. "So is Frances, of course, a treasure—only with dragon attachment."

"And as for the room, Uncle John—let me see! Peggy's own room is big enough for her and Jean, and I am quite sure they would like to be together. Then there are the two little east rooms that are very pleasant—or we could give the two Mr. Merryweathers the big nursery."

"That's it!" said Mr. Montfort, decidedly. "Boys like the nursery; it was made for boys. Nothing breakable in it except the crockery, and plenty of room for skylarking. Yes, my dear, get the nursery ready for them—if they come!" he added. "We are counting our chickens in fine style, Margaret. Suppose we find that Jean is in San Francisco and the Merryweathers in Alaska."

"Oh, they won't be!" cried Margaret. "They wouldn't have the heart to spoil our party. I have read about house-parties all my life, and to think that I am going to have one! Why, it is a fairy tale, Uncle John."

"So it is, my dear; so it is. You are the fairy princess, and I am the old magician—or the bear, if you like better, that used to be a prince when he was young."

"The king that used to be a bear would be more like it," said Margaret, gaily. "How about John Strong, Mr. Montfort?"

"John Strong was a useful fellow!" said her uncle, gravely. "I had a regard for John; he is getting lazy now, and rheumatic besides, and he neglects his roses shamefully, but there are still points about John. Bring me my old hat, and the pruning-shears, and you shall see him in the flesh, Miss Margaret."

Margaret enjoyed nothing more than what she called a "rose-potter" with her uncle. He was never weary of tending his favorite flowers, and handled and spoke of them as if they were real persons. Coming now to join him, with the great shears, and the faithful old straw hat in which, as John Strong the gardener, she had first seen the beloved uncle, she found him bending over a beautiful "La France" with anxious looks.

"My dear, this lovely person is not looking well to-day. Something is wrong with her."

"Oh, Uncle, I am sorry. She had her bath last night, I know, for I gave it to her myself. What do you think is the matter? To me, she looks as silvery-lovely as usual; but you have a special pair of eyes, I know, for roses."

"I fear—I think—ah! here he is, the beast! Yes, Margaret; a caterpillar, curled up—see him! Right in the heart of this exquisite bud. No wonder the whole plant has sickened; she is very sensitive, La France. There, Madame, he is gone. Now, a little shower of quassia, just to freshen you up; eh? See, Margaret, how gratefully the beautiful creature responds. Now, Jack here,"—he passed on to a Jacqueminot rose, covered with splendid crimson blossoms,—"Jack is thick-skinned, quite a rhinoceros by contrast with La France or the Bride. Here are—one—two—five—my patience! here are seven aphides on his poor leaves, and yet he has not curled up so much as the edge of one. Take him for all in all, Jack is as good a fellow as I know. Responsive, cordial, ready for anything—not expecting to have the whole world waiting on him, as some of these people do—ah, Hugh! Finished your letters? That's right!"

Hugh Montfort, who had come in unobserved, was leaning on his stick, watching them with some amusement.

"Who is this Jack, if I may ask, Uncle John? He seems to be a rather remarkable sort of chap."

Mr. Montfort looked slightly confused. "Only my fantastic way of speaking of my roses," he said. "They seem like real people to me, and I am apt to call them by their names. A shame, to be sure, to take such liberties with the General. Permit me to present you in due form! M. le Général Jacqueminot, I have the honor to present to you Mr. Hugh Montfort, my nephew, and—may I say admirer? The General is sensitive to admiration."

"You may indeed!" said Hugh, bowing gravely to the splendid plant. "General, your most obedient servant! I have known others of your family, some of them, I may say, intimately, and I can truly say that I never saw a finer specimen of the race."

The General glowed responsive, and Mr. Montfort glowed too, with pleasure. "Fond of roses?" he said; "that's good! that's good! why, boy, you seem to have a great many of my tastes. How's that, hey? your father never knew one flower from another."

There was a very tender light in Hugh's eyes as he returned his uncle's look.

"When I was a little chap, sir," he said, "my father used to tell me a good deal about you and Uncle Roger, the two best fellows he ever knew. I used to think—and I think still—that if I could be like them in anything I should do well; so I took to flowers because you loved them, and to books because they were Uncle Roger's delight. The big things seemed pretty big, but I thought the little ones would be better than nothing."

The glow deepened on John Montfort's cheek, and the light in his eyes; in Margaret's eyes the quick tears sprang; and with one impulse she and her uncle held out their hands. Hugh grasped them both, and there was a moment of silence that was better than speech. Hugh was the first to break it. "I have two new friends!" he said, in his sweet, cordial voice. "This day is better than I dreamed, and that is saying a good deal. But now, go on with the roses, Uncle John, please; there are several kinds here that I do not know. What is this cream-colored beauty?"

"Why, that, Hugh, is my special pride. That is a sport of my own raising; Victoria, I call her. She took a first prize at the flower show last year. We were proud, weren't we, Margaret?"

"Indeed we were, Uncle John. Think, Hugh, she had two hundred and seven buds and blossoms when we sent her. She looked like a snow-drift at sunrise; didn't you, Victoria?"

"Could you send a plant of this size without injury? Ah! I see; pot sunk. Well, she is a marvel of beauty, certainly. I have some slips coming from home for you, Uncle; the box ought to be here to-day or to-morrow. There are one or two things that I think you may not have. But you have a noble collection; what a joy a rose-garden is!"

"Mine used to be the greatest pleasure I had," said Mr. Montfort, "until I took to cultivating another kind of flower, the human variety." He pinched Margaret's ear affectionately, and she returned the pinch with a confidential pat on his arm.

"For many years," he continued, "I lived something of a hermit life, Hugh. There were reasons—no matter now—at all events I preferred solitude, and save for my good aunt, your great-aunt Faith, about whom Margaret will have a great deal to tell you, I saw practically no one from year's end to year's end. Very foolish, as I am now aware; criminally foolish. I have got beyond all that, thank Heaven! During this secluded period, my garden, and my roses in particular, were my chief resource, next to my books. Indeed, in summer time the books

had to take the second place, and it should be so. You remember Bacon, Hugh: 'God Almighty first planted a garden; it is the purest of human pleasures,' etc. I used to know that essay by heart. In summer time, the Great Book, sir, the Book of Nature, is opened for us, spread open by a divine hand; it were thankless as well as stupid to refuse to study it. So I studied my garden first, and after that, my fields and woods and pastures. Great reading in a broken pasture! When I wanted human companionship—apart from that sweet and gracious influence of her who was my second mother—I found it in my friends between the covers, who were always ready to talk or be silent, as my mood inclined. I thought I did well enough with Shakespeare and Montaigne and the rest; I have learned now that one living voice, speaking in love and kindness, is worth them all for 'human nature's daily food.'"

Margaret listened, wondering. Her uncle had seldom said so much about his own life even to her, his housemate and intimate companion these two years; while Hugh, without a word, simply from some power of silent sympathy that lay in him, had drawn out this frank speech a few hours after their first meeting. She wondered; and then asked herself, why should she wonder, since she herself felt the same drawing toward her new-found relative. "This must be what it is like to have a brother!" she said to herself; and felt her heart quicken with a new sense of comfort and happiness. "Such a pleasant world!" said Margaret.

CHAPTER V.

A VISION

Hugh Montfort was having a delightful morning. He had been at Fernley three days now, and already knew every nook and corner on the place. With his uncle's consent he had appropriated for his own use the little summer-house, covered with clematis and York and Lancaster roses, that looked out over the south wall of the garden, and away toward the sea. Here he had brought his desk (an old one belonging to his father, that Margaret had found in the garret), and had tacked up a shelf for a few favorite books; and here he was sitting, on the fairest of June days, with a volume of Greek plays open before him, considering the landscape, and enjoying himself thoroughly.

Hugh was no less delighted with his uncle and cousin than they with him. Always and necessarily a student and observer rather than a man of action, he felt an instant sympathy with the man and woman of books and thought. He loved dearly his own family, active, strenuous people, overflowing with strength and energy; but he often felt himself out of place among them, and reproached himself with the frequent languor and headache that so often kept him from sharing in their full-throated, whole-hearted mirth. He had graduated from a Western university, and was now going to study for a post-graduate degree at Harvard; he was tired, and the quiet at Fernley, the sense of perfect congeniality with his uncle, and Margaret's serene face and musical, even-toned voice, were like balm to his over-strung nerves.

This morning his head ached, and he did not feel like study. The book open before him gave him a kind of moral support, but he did hardly more than glance at it from time to time. His eyes roved far and wide over the lovely prospect that lay outside, broad stretches of sunny, rolling meadows, dotted with clumps of trees, and framed in the arched opening of the summer-house. This summer-house had been a favorite playhouse of his father and uncles in their boyhood. He knew a dozen stories about it; and now his eyes turned to the lattice walls, carved everywhere with the familiar initials, and the devices of the four brothers Montfort: John's egg and Jim's oyster, Roger's book and Dick's ship. What glorious boys they must have been! This was where they used to play Curtius,

and Monte Cristo, and all manner of games; leaping over the wall into the meadow below, deep in fern and daisies, or swinging themselves down by the hanging branches of the old willow that peeped round one side of the arch. Glorious boys! And then Hugh thought of his own brothers, and said "Good old Jim!" under his breath.

Thus musing, he was aware of a voice under his latticed bower, as of some one in the meadow below; a woman's voice, calm and melodious as Margaret's own, but with a deeper and graver note in it.

"What did he want then, a Lovely Person? Did he want her to love him? Well, she did, ardently; so that is all right."

A rustling followed, and the voice spoke again:

"No, he mustn't kiss her; that is not permitted. He may lie at her feet, and gaze at her with his large, brown eyes, Philip her King, but no kissing. She is surprised at his suggesting such a thing."

Hugh sat mute, in great perplexity. What interview was this, at which he was unwillingly assisting? Were two rustic lovers below, taking their ease under the old willow, whose twisted roots made an admirable seat, as he knew? And, if so, should he be guilty of the greater offence by keeping still, or by going away? He knew every board in the summer-house floor, and there was not one that would not betray him with a loud creak; on the whole, it seemed best to sit still; after all, they need never know that any one was there. Hark! the young woman—the voice was certainly young—was speaking again:

"He was perfectly beautiful, that was what he was. Yes! he had the loveliest eyes in the world, without any exception; and his ears were a dream of perfection, and, as for his coat and waistcoat, words fail her to describe them. Now if he will sit still, she will tell him something; no, not on her dress; a little farther off, a precious Poppet!"

A curious sound followed; something between a loud sneeze and an equally loud yawn, accompanied with lively and prolonged rustling of the willow branches; but no articulate word from her companion. She seemed satisfied, however, for she went on,—a delightful quality of voice; Hugh felt it creeping in his ears like music:

"That is right. Yes, she understands perfectly; she knows all about it, and she

loves him to distraction. Well, Lovely One, that Lady is a Cat; that is what she is."

Another sneeze and yawn, louder than before.

"Precisely; you think so, too. A cat! 'cat, puss, tit, grimalkin, tabby, brindle; whoosh!' was he fond of Dickens, a Pink-nosed Pearl? She is no more sick than you are, Beloved. She has been, no doubt, and now she has forgotten how to be anything else, but she is liable to find out. Your Aunt, beloved, proposes to put this lady through a Course of Sprouts. Tu-whit! your Aunt has spoken. We may also remark, in this connection only, tu-whoo!"

Her companion's only reply to this speech was a loud breathing, which might be caused by emotion, or by heat and fatigue; at all events, he did not seem inclined to speak. A thought flashed through Hugh's mind,—the man might be a deaf-mute. What a terrible affliction! It was bad enough to be lame; but to be deaf, and in company with a girl with a voice like that! Hark! she was speaking again, slowly and meditatively, rather as if talking to herself than to some one else:

"Your Aunt has not got her plan entirely laid out yet. She knows what must finally happen: the patient must be got out of that house, and away on a sea-voyage; but there will have to be various occurrences first. Your Aunt's ingenuity, Adonis, will be put to a severe strain. At present your Aunt is alone, and in difficulties. Many oxen come about her, fat bulls of Bashan compass her on every side, as the Scripture hath it; you are not acquainted with the Scripture, Adonis, so there is no earthly use in your putting on that look of keen intelligence. But there may be balm in Gilead; I think Gilead may be in this very place above our head, my Popolorum Tibby. Now, what is the matter with him?"

At this moment a sound was heard,—a bark, distant at first, but coming momently nearer; a loud, joyous, inquiring bark. It was answered from below by a sound combining bark, sneeze, and snort; there was a violent shaking of the branches, and, next moment, a brown and white setter sprang out from under the wall, and stood at gaze. Another instant, and a second dog, his exact image, appeared on the brow of the slope, careering toward him. There was a rapturous duet of barking and sneezing, and then the two swept away over the brow, and were gone.

"That is the most heartless puppy I ever saw," the voice said, slowly. "A woodchuck, I suppose. 'Twas ever thus. The moral is, don't make love to strange

puppies, however beautiful; but he was lovely, and he understood me. No more of him! The question is, what should I find at the top of this beanstalk—I should say, willow-tree? There is an—answer to—every question—if—you only ask it—quick enough!"

The last words were spoken so low that Hugh did not catch their import. Alarmed, however, by the continued rustling of the willow branches, he rose hurriedly to his feet, and was about to steal away as quietly as might be; but at that moment a hand was laid on the coping of the wall,—a brown hand, slender but muscular; the next moment an arm followed, and a young woman swung herself across the opening, and, leaning on the wall, looked full in his face.

It was the vision of an instant only; the lithe figure, the face full of careless power, the deep-set blue eyes, startling into black as they met his, while the slender brows met above them in angry amazement; then one hand reached back to the willow branch, the girl dropped from sight, and he heard her rustle from branch to branch, and then heard the light, swift sound of running feet through the fern, and dying away in the distance.

"Is this a pleasant neighborhood, Margaret?" asked Hugh, as they sat on the verandah after dinner. "Have you any pleasant—a—friends, of your own age?"

"None of my own age," said Margaret. "Indeed, our only near neighbor is Mrs. Peyton, an invalid lady, whom I go to see quite often. She is very charming, but—no, there is no one else; the places are large and scattered, you see, all about here. The next one on the other side belongs to Miss Desmond, and she is always abroad, and has not been here at all since I have."

"You don't think she may have returned lately, without your knowing it?"

"No, I am sure she cannot; I heard of her only a few days ago, in Egypt; Uncle John had a letter from her. Why do you ask, Hugh?"

"Oh—idle curiosity; or curiosity, whether idle or not. And—there are no other young girls?"

"None; that is why I missed Peggy and Rita so terribly, as I was telling you last night. Then the dear children came, and they were my comfort and joy; I

shall have them again when the summer is over; happy day it will be when they come back. But, you see, having first the girls and then the children has rather spoiled Uncle John and me, and that is why it was so very particularly nice of you to come, Cousin Hugh."

"Suppose we drop the 'cousin,' and be just Hugh and Margaret?" suggested her cousin. "I am used to having sisters about me, you know, and don't know how to get along without them; some day it may be 'Sister Margaret.' Should you mind?"

Margaret colored high with pleasure, and again the foolish tears came into her eyes. "I have wanted a brother all my life!" she said, simply; and again Hugh's smile told her that he understood all about it. He was certainly a most wonderful person.

They sat in comfortable silence for a few minutes; then—"I did not tell the exact truth," said Margaret, "when I said there were no young people here. Just now it happens there is one, a newcomer, a girl of my own age."

She paused. "Yes?" said Hugh, suggestively. "Some one you know?"

"Yes—and no! I have met her once. She is a Miss Wolfe, who has come to be a sort of companion to Mrs. Peyton. A singular-looking girl, with a most interesting face. I want to see her again; and yet,—somehow,—I am rather afraid of her."

"Is she formidable, this she-wolf?"

"Not formidable, but—well, I don't know how to describe her. She impresses me as different from anybody I have ever seen. Wild is not the word; Rita was wild, but it was something totally different."

"Peggy is wild, too," said Hugh, "wild as a mountain goat, or was, before you took her in hand, Margaret. Is this young lady like Peggy?"

"Oh, not in the very least. She is not shy, not a bit; not shy, and yet not bold. She seems simply absolutely without self-consciousness; it is as if she said and did exactly what she felt like doing, with no thought as to whether it was—well, customary or not. I am afraid I am rather conventional, Cousin—I mean Hugh; not in thought, I hope, but—in temperament, perhaps. This girl strikes me very strangely; that is the only way I can describe her. Yet she attracted me strongly, the only time I saw her, which was the very day you came, by the way. I ought to

have gone over to see her before this. I think I will go this evening, while you and Uncle John are having your after-supper smoke."

"I think I would," said Hugh Montfort.

CHAPTER VI.

ALI BABA

Margaret went over duly that evening, meaning to be very friendly to the strange young woman; but it happened to be one of Mrs. Peyton's bad times, and she sent down word that she needed Miss Wolfe, and could not possibly spare her. Margaret left a civil message, and went home disappointed, and yet the least bit relieved: she had rather dreaded a long tête-à-tête with her new neighbor.

"How absurd you are, Margaret Montfort," she said, severely, as she walked across the park. "Here you have been longing for a girl to talk to, and the moment one comes, you are seized with what Peggy calls 'the shyies,' just because she happens to be cut from a different pattern from your own."

Hugh was on the verandah, waiting for her, and seemed really disappointed when he heard that she had not seen Miss Wolfe; that showed how wide and cordial his interest was, and how much thought he took for others, Margaret told herself. What could he care about the meeting of a cousin he had just begun to know with a girl whom he never had seen?

Next day, however, she forgot all about Miss Wolfe, for the time being. Gerald and Philip Merryweather had accepted Mr. Montfort's invitation with amazing alacrity, and Jean had telegraphed her rapture of anticipation from Ohio. Uncle John and Hugh were left to their own devices, while she plunged, with Elizabeth and Frances and Polly, into intricacies of hospitable preparation. Stores must be ordered, linen examined, silver and china looked out. In regard to the silver, Margaret had an experience that showed her that, even after two years, she did not know all the resources of Fernley House. Her uncle called her into his study after breakfast, and handed her a key of curious pattern. "This is the key of the iron cupboard, Margaret," he said. Seeing her look of surprise, he added, "You surely know about the iron cupboard, my dear?"

"No, Uncle John. I remember hearing Aunt Faith speak of something of the kind once, but I did not rightly understand, and, being shy then,—it was before I knew our Dear so well,—I did not like to ask."

"Oh, there is no mystery, my child. No secret staircase this time, no ghosts in

velvet jackets. But in a house like Fernley, that has been inhabited for many generations, there is necessarily an accumulation of certain kinds of things, above all, silver. We keep out all that an ordinary family would be likely to use, and the rest is stored in this safe cupboard, in case of fire or robbery. Very stupid of me not to have told my careful little housekeeper of this before. To tell the truth, I forget all about this hoard most of the time, and might not have thought of it now, if Elizabeth had not come to me with an important face and asked me if I did not think Miss Margaret ought to have the opportunity of putting out The Silver if she wished to do so, being as the house was to be full of company. That meant that Elizabeth herself wanted to display to the astonished eyes of Hugh and the Merryweather boys the resources of the house that she and Frances rule (on the whole, wisely), through you and me, their deputies and servants. I see no reason why the good souls should not be gratified do you?"

"On the contrary, I see every reason why they, and I too, should be gratified. Uncle John, I am glad I did not know about it before. It is the most delightful thing about Fernley, that one never seems to come to the end of it. I thought I knew everything by this time, and here is another enchanting mystery; for say what you will, Uncle John, an iron cupboard full of old silver, that nobody knows about,—or hardly anybody,—*is* a mystery. Now I am sure there are others, too; I shall never feel again that I know all about the house. Some day, when I am old and gray, I shall come upon another secret staircase, or a trap-door, or a hidden jewel-casket, or a lost will."

"Why, as to jewel-caskets," said Mr. Montfort, smiling, "there is perhaps something that might be said; but as you say, it would never do to find out everything at once, May Margaret. Run away now, and examine your tea-kettles; there are about forty, if I remember rightly."

"Uncle John! is there really a jewel-casket? What do you mean? There cannot be any more than those Aunt Faith had, surely."

"Can't there?" said Mr. Montfort, with a provoking smile. "Doubtless you know best, my dear." And not another word would he say on the subject; but he told Margaret where to find the iron cupboard, and she ran off in such a flutter that Peggy would hardly have known her model and mentor. Old silver was one of Margaret's weak points; indeed, she had a strong feeling about heirlooms of every kind, and treasured carefully every scrap of paper even that had any association with past times.

Seeing Hugh in the library, she called to him. "Hugh! come with me and see the Treasure Chamber of the Montforts. Don't you want to see the ancestral silver?"

"Of course I do!" said Hugh, laying down his book and coming to join her. "Ancestral silver? My mother went to housekeeping with six teaspoons and a butter-knife, and thought herself rich. Uncle John wanted to send a trunkful of family silver, I have been told, but the Pater refused to be bothered with it. Poor Mother would have been glad enough of it, I fancy, but in those days he was masterful, and bent on roughing it, and would not hear of anything approaching luxury, or even convenience. Where is this wonderful treasury?"

"Come, and you shall see. Uncle John has told me how to find it. Come through this door; here we are in his own study, you see. Now—let me see! I will light this lamp—for the cupboard is dark—while you look and find Inigo Jones."

"Inigo Jones?"

"Yes. A tall blue morocco quarto, about the middle of the fourth shelf of the bookcase behind Uncle John's desk. Ah! I see him!"

Springing forward, Margaret drew the stately volume from its place. "Look!" she cried. "A keyhole. Hugh, isn't this exactly like the 'Mysteries of Udolpho?' 'Inigo Jones' is his joke, you see, or somebody's joke. Do you mind if I turn the key, Hugh?"

"Turn away!" said Hugh, much amused at the excitement of his staid little cousin.

With a trembling hand Margaret turned the key, and gave a pull, as she had been told. A section of the bookcase, with its load of books, swung slowly forward, revealing a dark opening. Margaret stepped in, and Hugh followed, holding the lamp aloft.

"Well, upon my word!" he said. "I never heard of anything like this, out of the 'Arabian Nights.'"

Margaret was looking about her, too much absorbed for words. The Iron Cupboard was a recess some ten feet deep and seven or eight wide, lined with shelves. These shelves were literally packed with silver, some in boxes, much in bags, glimmering in the half-light like dwarfish ghosts; but the greater part uncovered, glittering in tarnished splendor wherever the lamplight fell. Rows

upon rows of teapots, tall and squat, round and oval, chased, hammered, and plain; behind them, coffee-pots looking down, in every possible device. There were silver pitchers and silver bowls; porringers and fruit-dishes, salvers and platters. Such an array as might dazzle the eyes of any silversmith of moderate ambition.

"Well, Margaret," said Hugh, somewhat impressed, but more amused, at sight of all this hoarded treasure, "what do you say? I shall leave the expression of emotion to you."

But Margaret was in no jesting mood. With clasped hands she turned to her cousin. "Oh, Hugh," she cried, "isn't it wonderful? to think of all those beautiful things living here alone,—I don't mean alone, but all by themselves—year after year, with no one to see them, or take them out and polish them. Oh, I never saw such things! Look at this perfect pitcher, will you? did you ever see anything so graceful? This must come in, if nothing else does. The milk shall be poured from it from this day forward, as long as I am the Mistress of Fernley. That is just a play-name, of course," she hastened to explain, blushing as she did so. "Uncle John gave it to me in sport, when I first began to try to keep house."

"It seems to me a most appropriate name," said Hugh. "There has never been another, has there? in this generation, I mean. Uncle John was never married, was he?"

"No; isn't it a pity? I have so often wondered why. I asked Aunt Faith once,—well, Hugh, of course she was Mistress of Fernley as long as she lived, though she would always speak of herself as a visitor,—and she only sighed and shook her head, and said, 'Poor John! poor dear lad!' and then changed the subject. But —do you suppose any one can hear us here, Hugh?"

"I do not, Margaret. I should say that you might safely tell me anything, of however fearful a nature, in this iron-bound retreat."

"Oh, it really isn't anything—or perhaps it is not—but my own fancy. I have built up a kind of air-castle of the past, that is all. You know Uncle John's passion for roses? Well, and sometimes, when he is sitting quietly and has forgotten that any one is near, he will say to himself, 'Rose! Rose!' softly, just like that, and as if it were something he loved to say. I have wondered whether he once cared a great deal for some one whose name was Rose.—What do you think, Hugh? and she died, and that is why he has never married. There! I have never spoken of this before, not even to Peggy. Don't tell any one, will you?"

She looked anxiously in her cousin's face, and met the grave, sweet look that always made her feel safe and quiet; she did not know how else to express it.

"Tell any one? No indeed, my dear little cousin. It is a young girl's fancy, and a very sweet and graceful one."

"Then you don't think it may be true?" asked Margaret, disappointed.

"Certainly it may be true; I should think it highly probable that something of the sort had happened, to keep a man like Uncle John single all his days; but—well, I don't see that anything can be done about it now, do you?"

"Hugh, I am afraid you are practical, after all!" said Margaret. "And I was hoping you would turn out romantic."

Hugh only laughed, and asked her if she had chosen all the silver she wanted. This question put a stop at once to Margaret's romantic visions. Enough? but, she had only just begun, she said. Did he think she was going to take one pitcher and leave all the rest of these enchanting treasures?

"And we have not explored the boxes yet!" she cried. "See, they all have dear little ivory labels. Do reach me down that fat square box, please! 'Col. Montfort's Tankard, 1814.' Oh, that was our great-great-grandfather, Hugh! Do let us open this!"

The black leathern box, being opened, revealed a stately glass-bottomed tankard, with a dragon's curling tail for a handle. On the front was an inscription, "Presented to Col. Peter Montfort, in token of respect and affection, by the officers of his mess, July, 1814."

"His portrait is up in the long gallery," said Margaret. "Don't you remember, with the high ruffled stock? I don't see how he could speak, with his chin so very high in the air. Now I must have that oval green case; I am sure that is something interesting. 'General Washington's Gift.' Oh, Hugh!"

This time Hugh was as much interested as she, and both bent eagerly over the box as Margaret opened it. The case was of faded green morocco, lined with crimson satin. Within was an oval cup or bowl, of exquisite workmanship; it was what is called a loving-cup, and Margaret looked in vain for an inscription.

"There must be one!" said Hugh. "*Papa Patriæ* would not have been so unkind as to leave such a thing unmarked. Look on the bottom, Margaret!"

Margaret looked, and there, to be sure, was a tolerably long inscription, in minute script.

"Hold the light nearer, please; I can hardly read this, it is so fine. Oh, listen to this, Hugh! 'For my worthy Friend and Host, Roger Montfort Esquire, and his estimable Lady, in grateful Recollection of my agreeable Stay beneath their hospitable Roof. From their obliged Friend and Servant, G. Washington. 1776.'"

"That *is* a treasure!" said Hugh, handling the bowl with reverent care. "I knew that General Washington had spent some days at Fernley, but I never heard of this relic of his stay. Margaret, this is really extremely interesting. Go on, and open more of them. Perhaps we shall find tokens of all the Continental Congress. I shall look for at least a model of a kite in silver, with the compliments of B. Franklin. Suppose we try this next. It looks very inviting."

He took down an oblong box of curious pattern, and opened it. "What upon earth—Margaret, what are these? Grape-scissors? Asparagus-tongs? They don't look like either."

"I should think not!" said Margaret, taking the object from his hand. "Why, it is a pair of curling-tongs. What queer things! No inscription on these; there isn't room for one. Here is a piece of paper in the box, though."

She took up a yellowish scrap, and read: "'My niece Jemima's curling-tongs, with which she, being impatient to make a Show above her Sisters, did burn off one Side of her Hair. Preserved as a Warning to young Women by me, Tabitha Montfort. 1803.' Poor Jemima! She was punished enough, without being held up to posterity in this way."

"She was an extravagant young lady," said Hugh, "with her silver tongs; I think it may have been good for her soul, if not her hair, to suffer this infliction. Are you going to keep these out, Margaret, for use? I do hope you will be more careful than Aunt Jemima was. Your hair—excuse me!—looks as if you had not used the irons for some time."

Margaret laughed, and patted the smooth waves of her hair. "It *is* some time!" she said. "Yours, on the other hand, Hugh, has more curl than may be altogether natural. I may have suspected you of the tongs, but at least I have had the charity to keep my suspicions to myself."

"You are extremely good, Miss Montfort. What have you got hold of now?"

"'Dear Johnny's Rattle!'" said Margaret, reading the label on a small box. "I wonder if that was Uncle John. See! silver bells; what a sweet tone!"

She shook a merry peal from the tiny bells. Hugh, who had been rummaging at the other end of the cupboard, replied with a clear blast blown on a small silver trumpet, which he now held up in triumph. "Here we are!" he cried. "This is the instrument for me. This was presented to Captain Hugh Montfort of the navy. What on earth could the gallant commander do with this at sea?"

"Whistle for a wind, of course," said Margaret, merrily. "What else? Come here and look at Grandfather Montfort's gold-bowed spectacles; they are big enough for an ox."

So the talk went on merrily, and box after box, bag after bag, was opened, sometimes with astonishing results. The bygone Montforts seemed to have been fond of silver, and to have vied with one another in their ingenious applications of it to domestic uses.

Many of the objects had historic or personal interest, and the two cousins might have spent the day there, if Mr. Montfort had not suddenly appeared, asking whether he was to have any dinner or not. Margaret had her arms full by this time, while Hugh was trying his best to carry a splendid fruit-bowl, a salver, two pitchers, and three vases, all at once. Mr. Montfort burst out laughing at sight of the pair. "Cassim and Ali Baba!" he cried. "And I, the Robber Captain, with not a single one of all the Forty Thieves at my back. Margaret, for charity's sake! you are not going to bring all that rubbish into the house? Isn't there enough already? I'm sorry I told you anything about it."

Margaret looked up, guilty but happy, from her effort at capturing a fourth vase with her little finger, the only one left unencumbered. "Dear Uncle, you never would be so cruel!" she said. "See! I have only taken one chocolate-pot, and there are five, such beauties! Yes, I know we don't drink chocolate, but some of our guests might, and you would not have me neglect the guests, would you, Uncle John?"

"Sooner than have a guest take his chocolate from a china pot," said Mr. Montfort, gravely, "I would go to the stake. At present, if you will pardon a very old joke, my dear Margaret, I should prefer to go to the beefsteak, which I have reason to think is on the table at this moment. Come out, both of you young thieves, and let Inigo Jones go in again!"

CHAPTER VII.

MORE ARRIVALS

"SHE WAS A SLENDERER PEGGY, WITH THE SAME BLUE, HONEST EYES." **"SHE WAS A SLENDERER PEGGY, WITH THE SAME BLUE, HONEST EYES."**

The great day came, the day of the arrivals. Jean was the first to come, by an early train, having arrived in New York the night before, where Hugh met her and brought her in triumph to Fernley. Margaret was at the door to receive her, and Peggy's sister had no cause to complain of the warmth of her reception. She was a slenderer Peggy, with the same blue, honest eyes, the same flaxen hair and rosy cheeks. Her dress, however, was far more tasteful and neat than Peggy's had been on her first arrival. Margaret recalled the green flannel, all buttoned awry, and looked with approval on Jean's pretty gray travelling-dress.

"Dear Jean!" she said, kissing her cousin warmly. "Most welcome to Fernley, dear child! Oh, I am so glad to see you! I have been counting the days, Jean."

"Oh, so have I!" said Jean, looking up with a shy, sweet smile,—Peggy's very own smile. Margaret kissed her again for it. "The last day did seem awfully long, Cousin Margaret—well, Margaret, then! I'm sure I never call you anything but Peggy's Margaret when I think of you. Peggy hasn't come yet?"

"Not yet. She will be here this afternoon, on the three o'clock train. She knows nothing about your coming, Jean. In her very last letter, she was talking about being glad to come here, and so on, and she said the only thing wanting would be you."

"Oh, goody! I'm awfully glad—that she doesn't know, I mean. It will be just lovely to surprise her. Dear old Peg!" Jean relapsed into bashful silence when Margaret took her into the library to greet her uncle; but Mr. Montfort's smile and cordial greeting soon put her at her ease.

"Isn't he just lovely?" she whispered to Margaret, as they went up-stairs. "I was afraid he would be awful, somehow, but he isn't a bit; he's just lovely."

Margaret assented, making a mental note of the fact that this child seemed to have but two adjectives in her vocabulary. "Peggy will see to that!" she said to herself. "Peggy has improved so wonderfully in her English this last year. She will be quicker than I to notice and take up the little mistakes."

This was not strictly true, though modest Margaret meant it so. Peggy certainly had learned much at school, but her teachers had no expectation of her becoming an eminent English scholar.

"I have put you with Peggy," said Margaret, leading the way into the pretty room, hung with red-poppy chintz, where Peggy had spent a few sad and many happy hours. "I thought you would rather be together."

"Oh, yes, indeed! You are awfully kind, Cous—Margaret. I haven't seen Peggy for a year, you know. We missed her awfully at Christmas, of course, but she had a lovely time here; and it would have been awful if she had come home and got the measles, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, we did have a very good time. The children were here,—Basil and Susan D.,—and they and Peggy were fast friends. Oh, yes, it was a great holiday. Now, dear, you will want to rest a little, so I will leave you. Peggy will not be here till after lunch, so you will have time for a good rest, and to explore the garden, too, if you like. I am going now to arrange my flowers."

"Oh, might I help? I am not a bit tired, and I just love to arrange flowers. Do let me help, Margaret!"

"Very well," said Margaret, with a little inward sigh. She had her own ideas, and very definite ones, about the arrangement of flowers, in which she had exquisite taste; and her recollection of the way in which Peggy used to squeeze handfuls of blossoms tight into a vase, without regard to color or form, made her dread the assistance so heartily proffered; but Jean was quicker than Peggy had been at her age, and one glance at Margaret's first "effect," a rainbow combination of sweet-peas, showering over the side of a crystal bowl, filled her with ambition to emulate its beauty. The morning passed happily and busily, the more so that Hugh came in presently, with a chapter of Thoreau that Margaret "really must hear!" He read well, and his taste and Margaret's being much alike, they spent many pleasant hours together, he reading aloud, she with her flowers or her work. Jean, who had never heard of Thoreau, and was not bookish, tried to listen, but did not make much of it. She fell to meditating instead, and her bright eyes wandered curiously from one intent face to the other. Hugh never

thought of reading aloud at home. To be sure, he was the only one who cared about reading, or had time for it. He and Margaret seemed to know each other very well, seeing what a short time he had been here. Jean, with all the eager romance of fifteen, straightway began the building of an air-castle, which seemed to her a fine structure indeed. Meantime, Hugh and Margaret, all unconscious of her scrutiny, were enjoying themselves extremely.

"'As polishing expresses the vein in marble and grain in wood, so music brings out what of heroic lurks anywhere. . . . When we are in health, all sounds fife and drum to us; we hear notes of music in the air, or catch its echoes dying away when we awake in the dawn. Marching is when the pulse of the hero beats in unison with the pulse of Nature, and he steps to the measure of the universe; then there is true courage and invincible strength.'"

"How beautiful that is!" said Margaret.

"Yes; that is the particular passage I wanted to read to you. Have you ever had that feeling, fancying that you wake to the sound of music? I often have, when I have been sleeping out in the open—never within doors."

"No," said Margaret, "I don't think I ever have, Hugh; but what a pleasant thing it must be! I have never slept in the open, but even if I should, I fear my waking would be plain prose, like myself."

Hugh laughed, and glanced at her affectionately. "I haven't found much prose about you, Margaret," he said. "If I had, I should not have read you my secrets when Thoreau tells them for me. That reminds me, do you sing? I have not heard you, have I?"

"No; I wish I did, for I love music very much. Oh, I sing a very little, enough to join in a chorus—if there ever were a chorus at Fernley. I used to enjoy Rita's singing intensely; she has a very sweet voice."

"Some one was singing last night," Hugh went on; "I don't know why, but this passage reminds me—I heard a woman's voice singing,—a remarkable voice."

"Indeed? Where were you? Not in your room? I am sure there is no one in the house who sings."

"No; it was pretty warm, and the moon—well, you remember, it was all you could do to go to bed yourself, Margaret. After Virtue, in the shape of yourself and Uncle John, had gone to bed, Vice, in my shape, wandered about the garden,

I don't know how long. It was wonderful there, with the trees, and the smell of the roses and box, and—and the whole thing, you know. Down at the foot of the garden, over in the meadow below, some one was singing; some one with a remarkable voice; rather deep-toned, not loud, and yet full, with an extraordinary degree of melody; or, so it seemed at a distance. I wondered who it was, that was all. You have no idea, I suppose?"

"No! I wonder too, very much. No one from this house, I am sure of that. Now that I think of it, though, Polly sings—Polly, the under housemaid; she has a pretty little bird-like voice, but nothing such as you describe. I'll make inquiries, though—"

"Oh, pray don't!" said Hugh, hastily, "I'd rather not! I—I mean, of course, it is not of the smallest consequence, Margaret. It is pleasant to hear singing at night, but perhaps all the pleasanter when the singer is unseen and unknown. Now let us go on with our Thoreau."

"Margaret! Margaret! Margaret!"

It was all Peggy could say at first. All the way up the avenue her heart had been beating high; at sight of the brown chimney-stacks of Fernley, it seemed to give a great jump up in her throat; and when the carriage swept round the curve, and she saw the whole front of the great house, and Margaret, her own Margaret, standing on the steps, with arms outstretched to welcome her, there was nothing for it but to cry out, with the full power of her healthy lungs. Almost before Bannan could stop the horses, she had scrambled out, and was on her cousin's neck, strangling her with hugs, and smothering her with kisses at the same instant. "Margaret! Margaret! I am really here! Do you know that I am really here?"

Speech was impossible for Margaret, but a voice from behind broke in:

"Come, come! what is all this? My niece done to death on my own doorstep? Let go, Peggy, and come and kill me instead. I am older, and shall be less missed."

Peggy loosed her hold, somewhat abashed, but received an embrace from her uncle so warm that she brightened again instantly.

"Oh, Uncle John, how do you do? It was only that I was so glad to see my darling Margaret. Did I hurt you, dearest? I have pulled all your lovely hair down; Margaret, I am more clumsy than ever, I do believe."

"Dear Peggy! as if I cared whether you are clumsy or not! though it is convenient to have the use of my windpipe, I confess. Well, and here you are, indeed. Why, Peggy!"

"What is it, Margaret?"

"*Why, Peggy!*"

"Oh, dear! what is the matter? Is my hat wrong side before? I know my necktie is crooked, but I couldn't help that, truly I couldn't, Margaret; the strap is broken, and it will work round under my ear. I'll mend it—"

"I wasn't looking at your necktie, child. Peggy, you are taller than I am! How dare you, miss?"

"Oh, Margaret! I really thought I had done something—why, yes, so I am taller; but only just the least little bit, Margaret."

"And your shoulders—why, Peggy, you are a great big creature! How can any one grow so in six months? We shall have to call you Brynhild."

"What's that?" asked Peggy, simply. "I haven't grown enough to understand outlandish words, Margaret, so you need not try them on me. Oh,"—she looked around her with delighted eyes,—"how beautiful everything looks, Uncle John. Why, the yellow birch has grown as much as I have; it is quite a fat tree. And—you have put out more chestnuts, haven't you? And—oh, Uncle John, I haven't told you my great news! The most wonderful news! I wouldn't write about it, because I wanted to surprise you. Hugh, our Hugh, is coming East. He is—"

"What is he?" said another voice, and Hugh came forward laughing, and took his sister in his arms. "Well, little girl,—big, enormous, colossal little girl, how are you? Shut your eyes, Peg of Limavaddy, or they will drop out, and then what should we do?"

"Hugh! what does it mean? When—how did you get here? You weren't to start till next week."

"So I wasn't," said Hugh, composedly. "But you see I did. If you are not glad

to see me, Margaret will let me stay in the back kitchen, I am sure, till you go away."

Peggy's only reply was a hug as powerful as the one she had given Margaret; it set her brother coughing and laughing till the tears came to his eye. "My dear sister," he said, "have you been studying grips with a grizzly bear? I felt one rib go, if not two."

"Not really, Hugh? I didn't really hurt you?" cried Peggy, anxiously.

"No, no! not really. See now, Margaret wants you. Run along, Samsonina."

Peggy ran into the house, casting delighted glances all about her.

"How beautiful the hall looks! Oh, Margaret, what flowers! why, it is a perfect flower show! Did you do them all yourself? for me? Oh, you darling!" and again Margaret's breath was extinguished by a powerful embrace. "And, oh, the surprise of seeing Hugh! You know I love a surprise. You planned it for me, didn't you, darling Margaret? You are the most angelic—"

"Peggy! Peggy! Peggy! no extravagance!"

"No, Margaret, I won't. Only how can I help it, when I am so happy, and you are so—"

But here Margaret fairly laid her hand over Peggy's mouth. "I did not plan Hugh's coming," she said. "I was as much surprised, and as pleasantly, as you, Peggy. He came earlier than he had expected, on account of some business for Uncle James. Only, we all agreed that we would not tell you, because we knew your fondness for surprises. Do you think you could bear another, Peggy, or is this enough for to-day?"

"What do you mean, Margaret? There can't be anything more. Nothing could count after the joy of seeing Hugh. Oh, Margaret, isn't he dear? Don't you love him?"

"Indeed I do!" said Margaret, heartily. "You never said half enough about him, Peggy. Oh, we are such friends, Uncle John and Hugh and I. But is there no other thing you can think of that you would like, Peggy, dear? No one else you would like very, very much to see?"

They were now at the door of Peggy's room, and Margaret's hand was on the

door. Peggy turned and looked at her in wonder. "What do you mean, Margaret? Why do you look like that?" At this moment a sound was heard on the other side of the door, something between a cry, a sniffle, and a sob.

"Who is in there?" cried Peggy, her eyes opening to their fullest and roundest extent.

"Go in and see," said Margaret, and she opened the door and pushed Peggy gently in, and shut it again.

She heard a great cry. "Jean! my Jean!" "Oh, Peggy! Peggy!" then kissing and hugging; and then sounds which made her open the door and come quickly into the room. Peggy and Jean were seated on the floor, side by side, their heads on each other's shoulder, crying as if their hearts would break.

CHAPTER VIII.

HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF

"Well, Jean!"

"Well, Peggy!"

"What do you think of them?"

"Oh, I think they are just lovely. I like the tall one best, don't you? Though the red-haired one is awfully nice, too."

"Goose! I didn't mean them. I meant Uncle John and Margaret. Aren't they dear? Did I say half enough about them, Jean?"

"No, not half. Margaret is just too lovely for anything, and Uncle John—well, of course, I am awfully afraid of him, but he is just lovely, too."

"Look here, young one!" said Peggy the Venerable, gravely. "Can't you say anything except 'awful' and 'lovely?' I would enlarge my vocabulary, if I were you."

Jean opened her eyes to their roundest. "Vocabulary! What's that? Don't tell me that you are going to set up for a school-teacher, Peggy. Why, you used to say 'awful' yourself, all the time."

"Oh, no, Jean, not quite all the time."

"Well, awfully often, anyhow. I know you did."

"Oh, Jean, I know I did. But first Margaret told me about it, and then I began to notice for myself. I've been taking Special English this year, and I find I notice more and more. It's really a pity, as Margaret says, to have only two or three words and work them to death, when there are so many good ones that we never use at all. Grace used to call it 'Cruelty to Syllables.'"

"Well, what shall I say? I don't know anything else."

"Yes, you do; don't be absurd, child. Margaret made me a list of adjectives

and adverbs once, I remember, the first time I was here; I was just your age then, Jean, and I have no doubt I *did* say 'awfully' most of the time; anyhow, I did it enough to trouble Margaret aw—very much indeed. Let me see: there is 'very,' of course; 'remarkably, extremely, uncommonly, exceedingly, and excessively;' then for adjectives, 'charming, delightful, pretty, exquisite, pleasant, agreeable, entertaining,'—well, there were a great many more, but that is all I can think of now; all these will do instead of 'awful' and 'lovely,' Jean."

"Oh, Peggy, dear, you are a regular school-ma'am. Please don't let us talk about all these horrid things, the first night I am here. I am perfectly dying to know what you think about the two Mr. Merryweathers, and about Hugh and Margaret."

"Why, I think the Merryweathers seem very nice boys indeed. I like the funny one best, I think; Gerald, is his name? But the other one is nice, too. He has such kind eyes, and such a pleasant voice. Somehow he looks more like Gertrude than Gerald does, even though Gerald has her hair. Oh, Jean, I wish you could see my Snowy Owl! She is so dear, and beautiful, and strong; next to you and Margaret, she is the very dearest girl in the world, except one."

"May I come in?" said Margaret's voice at the door. She was greeted by a duet of "Come in, do!" and entering, found her two cousins seated on the floor, hair-brush in hand, brushing out their long fair hair.

"'Maud and Madge in their robes of white,
The prettiest nightgowns under the sun!'"

quoted Margaret. "How comfortable you look, girls! May I do my hair here, too? I knew you would be sitting up, chattering. Who is the very dearest girl in the world except one, Peggy? And who is the one? I heard the end of your sentence before I knocked."

"Yes, but you didn't hear the beginning," said Peggy, "or you would know that you two here are the *very* dearest, and that the others only come after you. I was speaking of Gertrude Merryweather; oh! how you and she will love each other, Margaret! I don't see how I can wait to have you know each other. And by the 'except one,' I meant Grace Wolfe, our Horny Owl, and our Goat, and a good many other things."

"Where is she now?" asked Margaret. "Have you heard from her lately?"

"No," said Peggy, sadly. "None of us have heard at school. She wrote Miss Russell some time ago that she was going to try a new departure, and expected either to go mad or make her fortune; but she didn't say what it was. She never writes many letters, you know. We have all written again and again, but it makes no difference. Hark! what is that noise?"

"What noise? I heard nothing," said Margaret.

"I thought I heard some one speak, outside the window."

They listened for a moment, but all was quiet.

"It may have been Uncle John and Hugh in the garden," said Margaret. "It is early yet, you know, not ten o'clock; they often walk about for an hour and more after we come up. Speaking of Grace Wolfe, Peggy,—"

"Tu-whit!" said a voice. "In this connection only, I may be permitted to remark, tu-whoo!"

"*Grace!*" cried Peggy, in such a voice that the other girls sprang to their feet. Peggy was at the window before them, snatching back the curtain. The night was warm, and the upper sash had been lowered completely. Leaning over the sash was a slender figure shimmering white in the moonlight. "Any admittance for the Goat?" said a deep, melodious voice. "Peace, Innocent!" for Peggy was trying to drag her in over the sash by main force.

"I address the mistress of the dwelling. Is there admittance for a miscellaneous quadruped, Margaret Montfort?"

But now Margaret had her other hand, and laughing and crying, the girls had her in, and again Peggy displayed the powerful development of her muscles in a strangling embrace, from which Grace emerged panting, but unruffled. Giving Peggy a sedate kiss, she turned to Margaret, who still held her hand, gazing in wonder and bewilderment; for this was Mrs. Peyton's companion.

"You pardon the informality?" she said; and her smile was like light in the room. "I could not come to call on Peggy, or on Peggy's Margaret, with my bonnet on. And it is a *great* wall to climb!" she added, wistfully. "I don't know when I have enjoyed myself so; there is little climbing in these sad days. Now you see why I did not want to be Miss Fox."

"Oh, my dear!" cried Margaret. "How could you keep me in the dark? How stupid—how utterly stupid of me, not to know you! And yet, how could I have guessed that Mrs. Peyton's companion was Peggy's own beloved Grace? You must be my Grace, too, please; I will have neither wolves nor foxes, but only Grace, or the Horned Owl."

She kissed Grace, who returned the kiss warmly. But now Peggy, who had been silent for a moment in sheer amazement, broke in:

"What does this all mean?" she cried. "Have you dropped from the moon, Grace Wolfe, or where do you come from? You and Margaret have met before? Where, and how, and when? I must know all about it, this very instant."

The situation was soon explained. Jean, who had hung back, shy and frightened, was brought forward and introduced; and soon all four girls were seated comfortably on the floor, talking as if nothing astonishing had happened. Only every few minutes Peggy would put her hand out and touch Grace's shoulder, as if to make sure that she was genuine flesh and blood, and not some phantom conjured up out of the moonlight.

"I have tried twice to see you," Margaret said. "Both times I seemed to have come just at the wrong moment. Do tell me how you are getting on, Grace! How has Mrs. Peyton been since you have been there? It is very seldom that I am so many days without seeing her."

"Singular lady!" said Grace. "Beautiful, but singular. She thinks me mad, so

matters are equal. Why, we get on—somewhere! I am not sure where. At present, I am in disgrace. She did not like her chocolate this morning, and being in a pet, bade me throw it out of window; I obeyed. It appears the cup was valuable, which was a pity, as its bones are scattered far and wide."

"You threw the cup, too? Grace!"

"Naturally I threw the cup. I am going on the principle of doing exactly what she tells me to do; thus she may discover the unreason of her conduct. Tu-whit! Yesterday she was displeased with an embroidered muslin jacket, and said she never wanted to see it again. I tore it up; she was displeased. To-night she took a dislike to my dress, and told me not to come near her till morning. Behold me here; I think it probable that at this moment she is raising the house for me and desiring greatly to be rubbed. These things are instructive to her. I have put her to sleep every night by rubbing, and now she will not sleep. Poor lady; so sad for her!"

All this was said quietly, pensively, with an air of mild consideration. Margaret looked at her, wondering. No one had ever crossed Mrs. Peyton before. One "companion" after another had been engaged, been tyrannized over for a few weeks, and then dismissed. What would be the effect of this opposite treatment? Timid herself, she had always met the vagaries of her beautiful friend with, at most, a gentle protest. If matters were too bad, she stayed away for a week, and was sure to find the lady in her most winning mood at the end of that time; but she had never attempted any more severe measure than this.

"Do you think—do you feel as if you were getting hold of her at all, Grace?" she asked. "She is really very fascinating, when she wants to be."

"I am not fascinated!" said Grace; and for a moment the half-whimsical, half-reckless look, which was her usual expression, gave way to one that was stern enough. "Mrs. Peyton appears to me to be a wholly selfish person; a thing rarely met with in such entirety. I have promised my Good Physician that I will try to rouse her, and see if there is any scrap of woman left inside this pretty shell; I am going to do my best. I think it doubtful if there is, but I am going to do my best."

Peggy gazed at her with adoring eyes and felt absolute assurance that Mrs. Peyton would shortly be converted into an angel. Did not Grace always do what she undertook to do?

With one of her sudden movements, Grace turned to her, and put her hands on

her shoulders. "Behold my Innocent happy!" she said. "What of the other Owls, Babe? Do they hoot happily, and flap friskily?"

"Oh, Grace, they want to hear from you so much! The Snowy is really anxious. She is afraid you are sick, or—or something. Do write to her, dear; won't you?"

"The Snowy," said Grace, "is one of the few wholly satisfactory persons in the world. I have an immense respect for the Snowy, as well as a strong affection. If I could write to anybody, I think it would be to her. It may even be done, Innocent. Who knows?"

"She was afraid—" Peggy hesitated.

"She was afraid," said Grace, coolly, "that I was going on the variety stage. Yes; but you see, I did not. But I admit there are grounds—yes, I will write, Innocent. And now I must go," she added, rising. "I may come again, Margaret? Tie a white ribbon on the window-tassel when you do not want me. Good night!"

"Oh, but, my dear, you are not going out in that way!" cried Margaret, in distress. "Why not go down-stairs and out of the door, like a Christian?"

"There is nothing distinctively unchristian, I hold, in going by way of the window," replied Grace, her hand already on the sash. "Consider, I pray you, the rapture of the one method, the futile stupidity of the other. Enough! I am gone."

She slipped lightly over the sill and was gone, leaving the others staring at each other. Peggy ran to the window and looked after her. "She is all right, Margaret!" she cried; for Margaret was visibly distressed and alarmed. "The woodbine is very thick and strong, and there is the spout, too. There! She is down now, all safe. Good night! oh, good night, dear Goat!"

About this time, Hugh Montfort, having said good night to his uncle and the two Merryweathers, sauntered down the garden walk, for one more turn, one more look at the night. It was a wonderful night. The moon was full, and Fernley lay bathed in a flood of silver light, that seemed to transform the old brown house into a fairy palace, stately and splendid. There was no wind, and no sound broke the stillness; yes, it might well be an enchanted palace, where every living thing lay fast bound by some mighty spell. The leaves drooped motionless from the branches; beyond the dark masses of trees, the broad lawns lay in green and silver.

"It's more like something Greek!" said Hugh. "Tempe, or some such place. If a dryad, now, were to come out from that great tulip-tree—good heavens!"

He stopped short, in the deep shadow of a clump of chestnut-trees. Something moved, behind the very tree he was looking at. A figure came lightly out into the open; a woman's figure, slight and supple, clad in shadowy white. A dryad? No! the girl he had seen in the summer-house. He knew the face, as it shone upturned in the moonlight; knew the firm mouth and chin, the blue eyes, the look of careless power; seen once only, it was as if he had known the face all his life.

What was she doing? A smile lighted her grave eyes suddenly. She extended her arms, her face still raised to the moon. Her whole figure, light as thistle-down, began to sway, to drift hither and thither over the silver-green lawn. Dancing, was she? It was no human dance, surely; the name was too common for this marvel of motion. A wave cresting and curling toward its break; a cloud blown lightly along a summer sky by a gentle wind; a field of grain, bending and rippling under the same wind. Hugh thought of all these things, and rejected each in turn, as unworthy of comparison to this, the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. He watched her, as if in a dream of delight; each moment it seemed that he must wake, and find the lovely vision gone. It was too rare, too perfect to be real. It seemed as if all the moonlight in the world were drawn to this one spot, to shine on that white figure, dancing, swaying, hither and thither—

Ah! it was over. She stopped; threw, it seemed, some words upward toward the moon, accompanying them with a wave of her hand. Then she turned away, and passed slowly out of sight, under the dark trees. As she went, she began to sing; softly at first, a mere breath of sound; but as she passed farther and farther on, her song rang out clear and sweet; the voice and the song that he had heard the night before, in the field beyond the wall:

"Trois anges sont venus ce soir,
M'apportaient de bien belles choses!"

CHAPTER IX.

ABOUT NOTHING IN PARTICULAR

"Jerusalem!" said Philip Merryweather.

"And Madagascar!" responded his twin brother. "Well, what did I tell you, old Towser?"

"Yes, I know; but last night, you see, I was half-asleep, and didn't see it all. This is what I call a room."

Phil sat up in bed, and looked about the great nursery, into which the early sun was shining brightly.

"The bigness of it!" he said, "if nothing more. You could have quite a track round this, do you know it? Most rooms are all walls; I hate walls. Shove the furniture into the middle, and chalk a six-foot track—hey? What do you say?"

"This!" replied Gerald, throwing a pillow with accurate aim. "Does it occur to your arboreal, if not river-drift mind, that there are people under this room? Heehaw! excuse me for not sooner addressing you in your own language. Here, belay that! I want to know what you think of them all."

"Jolly!" was Phil's brief but emphatic verdict. But Gerald seemed to demand something more. "Isn't Mr. Montfort the most corking person you ever saw?"

"Except three, I should say he was. That lame chap is a corker, too. Reminds me a bit of the Codger, I don't know why."

"So he does!" said Gerald, eagerly. "I didn't see it before. Queer stunt, too, because she always makes me think of Hildegarde."

"Who? Miss Peggy? I don't—"

"No, no! Who said anything about Miss Peggy? Miss Montfort, of course."

"They are all Miss Montforts. You mean Miss Margaret? Well—I see what you mean. She hasn't Hildegarde's beauty, though. Very attractive, but—"

"That's what I mean!" said Gerald, eagerly. "There's something of that quiet way, that takes hold of you and—oh, I didn't mean that they would be taken for sisters. Look here, Elderly Ape, was you thinking of getting up, or should I bring his gruel, and feed him wiz a 'poon, a pretty toddlekins?"

"A pretty toddlekins will break your pretty noddlekins," replied Philip. "Avast there, and heave sponges!" And the conversation ended in a grand splashing duet executed in two enormous bath-tubs that stood in different corners of the great room.

It was a merry party that met at breakfast. John Montfort looked round the table with pleasure, and wondered how he had ever sat here alone, year after year, when this kind of thing was to be had, apparently for the asking. Margaret's sweet face, opposite him, was radiant; it struck Mr. Montfort that he had never seen her look so pretty before. The delicate rose-flush on her cheek, the light in her eyes, an indescribable air of gaiety, of lightness, about her whole figure—

"Why, this is what she needed!" said Mr. Montfort to himself. "The children were all very well; I am all very well myself, for an old uncle, but children and old uncles are not all that a lassie needs. Ah, well, it is all as it should be. We remember, Rose!"

Gerald, at Margaret's left hand, was talking eagerly. If her face was radiant, his was sparkling. For the first time in his life, it is probable, he seemed to take little heed of his breakfast.

"Do you remember the thunder-storm, Miss Montfort? and the way that little chap ran around the long corridor? He's going to make a great runner some day. Cork—very nice little fellow. You say he isn't here now? I'm sorry! I wanted the Ape to see him."

"The Ape?"

"The Old Un. My brother, Long-leggius Ridiculus. Christian name Philip, but what has he done that I should call him that?"

Margaret laughed. She did not fully understand, but everything Gerald said seemed to her funny. "What does he call you?" she asked. "Or do you invent new names every day? Last night I heard you calling him—what was it? Ornithorhynchus Paradoxus?"

"It might have been!" said Gerald, with modest pride. "I can 'gleek upon

occasion.' I can also sling a syllable with the next man. It is only at monosyllables that I draw the line. When I call him Ape, I have to tack an adjective to it, or things happen. Miss Montfort, you don't know how glad I was to come. It was awfully kind of Mr. Montfort to ask us. I've always wanted to come again, and I didn't know when I should have a chance. There—there isn't any other place like this in the world, I believe. I've told the Ape a lot about it, and he was keen to see it, too. What a cork—that is, what an extremely fine fellow your cousin appears to be."

"Do you mind if I ask," said Margaret; "is 'cork' a complimentary term?"

Gerald blushed. "Why, you see," he said, rather ruefully, "I made up my mind that I would drop it when I came here. 'Corker,' and 'corking'—well, it means that a person is all right, don't you know? That he's awfully jolly, and—and—corking, in short. It's the thing fellows say nowadays. I get into the way of it, and then I go home, and the Mater says things to me. She doesn't like slang, and of course you don't either, Miss Montfort. I'll try not to do it again, truly I will."

"Oh, but I don't mind that kind of slang!" said Margaret; and she wondered at herself even as she spoke. "It—it seems so funny, somehow. I suppose when slang is really funny—"

She looked up and caught her uncle looking at her with an expression of amusement. She blushed in her turn, stammered, and took refuge behind her coffee-urn.

Meantime Peggy and Philip had fallen deep in conversation. He was the brother of Gertrude Merryweather, the beloved Snowy Owl of Peggy's happiest school-days; that was enough for Peggy. She was used to boys and brothers, and felt none of the shyness that often made Margaret's tongue trip and stammer in spite of her two years' advantage. Peggy was full of eager questionings:

"How is she looking? dear lovely thing! Do you think she will go to college this fall? Oh, do try to make her! I do so want to have her back again,—near us, I mean. The Fluffy enters this fall, you know; the Snowy ought to come, too. Do try to make her, won't you, Mr. Merryweather?"

Phil looked grave. "Said the kangaroo to the duck, this requires a little reflection!" he said. "The child Toots has her good points, as you observe, Miss Montfort. She is a rather nice child, and we like to have her at home. She has been at this old school three years, and I don't see the good of sisters if they are

somewhere else all the time. Not that I should wish to stand in the way of the child Toots; but you see, Bell is off, too, and the Mater has been having things the matter with her,—rheumatism and that,—and the child Toots is useful at home,—uncommon useful she is."

"Oh! but—of course I'm aw—dreadfully sorry your mother isn't well; but—but Gertrude wants to come, doesn't she? Oh, well, I shall hope it will be all right. And oh! what do you think, Mr. Merryweather? The most astonishing thing happened last night. I must write and tell Gertrude all about it. The Horny is near here."

"The Horny? Not—"

"Yes, Grace Wolfe. Think of it! Do you know her? Well, of course Gertrude has told you all about her. She is the most wonderful person in the world, and she is living close by here, taking care of some one,—you know she means to be a nurse. You know how wonderful she was when that poor girl was so sick at school—and she has been staying at Doctor Flower's, and he persuaded her to come and take care of this lady. You must see her,—I want everybody to see her. She isn't like anybody else, you know. Why, just when you look at her you feel that; I don't know what it is,—I can't explain,—but it's there. And then her voice! When she sings, it's—it's like magic, somehow. Oh, dear! I wish I could express myself; I never know how to say things."

"You are saying them beautifully!" said gallant Philip. "Besides, of course, Toots has told me a good deal about your wonderful friend. Does she still go climbing all about, disdaining doors and stairs, and using windows instead?"

"Oh, hush!" said Peggy. "I don't know whether we are to speak of it or not, but—she came up the wall, and in at our window last night."

"No!"

"Yes, she did. Don't tell anybody, because she might not like it. She fluttered in like a bird, and stayed awhile, and then fluttered out again. And then—we heard her singing in the distance as she went back, and really and truly, it seemed like fairy music."

Something made Peggy look up at this moment, and she caught Hugh Montfort's eyes fixed on her with so intent a gaze that she stumbled and blushed, and thought she had said something wrong. "Don't ask me anything about it,"

she murmured to her neighbor. "Perhaps—they may not like to have people climb up the walls here; I wouldn't get Grace into trouble for twenty worlds."

"Hugh," said Mr. Montfort, "I am going to get you to do the honors of the garden and stables to these young gentlemen, as I am busy this morning. The girls have a dozen plans, no doubt; but perhaps Peggy and Jean would like to go with you and see the puppies, while Margaret sees to her housekeeping. How does that suit you all?"

Every one acquiesced in the arrangement, and, as they went out into the garden, Peggy managed to slip beside her brother.

"What did I say that was wrong, Hugh? You were looking at me as if I had done all kinds of things. Would Uncle John mind her climbing up the wall, do you think? She couldn't possibly hurt it; she is light as a feather; and Margaret didn't say anything about her not doing it again."

A faint color crept into Hugh's brown cheek.

"My dear little Peggy," he said, "you must not be so imaginative. It is a new trait in you. What possible objection could there be to a young lady climbing up the wall if she enjoys it? It seemed—a little unusual, I suppose, and so I was interested. Was I indiscreet? I hardly supposed you would be having confidences with young Merryweather quite so soon."

"Hugh, don't be ridiculous. Then it's all right, and I am so glad! Thank you, dear."

She was springing away, but Hugh called her back.

"One moment, Peggy. This—this friend of yours seems to be a remarkable person. Has she other accomplishments besides climbing? Did I hear you speak of singing?"

"Oh, Hugh, I wish you could hear her sing! You might have heard her last night, if you had only been out. It was full moon, and the moon makes her mad, she says. Anyhow, when the moon is out she is wilder than ever, fuller of—whatever it is that she is full of; I don't know, something like a spirit, or a bird. Once I saw her dance in the moonlight, and I shall never forget it as long as I live."

"No more shall I," said Hugh, under his breath. "Thank you, Peggy," he said

aloud. "Don't let me keep you, my dear; or were you coming with us?"

"Oh, I don't know, Hugh; I want to do so many things, all at once. I want to show Jean the house, and the garden, and the summer-houses, and—oh! oh, you darlings! you beauties! Hugh, do look at these lovely duckies!"

The "lovely duckies" were Nip and Tuck, who came leaping and dancing up the walk, wagging and sneezing, with every demonstration of frantic joy.

"Which is which? Nip, oh, you dear! Give a paw! Do they know how to give a paw, Hugh?"

"They know how to fetch," said Hugh. "Here, Tuck! here, boys! What have I got?"

He held up a stick; straightway the dogs went mad, and yelled and danced, sneezed and yapped, like wild creatures. "Fetch!" said Hugh, throwing the stick. Together the puppies flashed off in pursuit; fell upon the stick and each other, and rolled over and over, still in frenzied voice and motion; finally came to an understanding, and, taking each an end in his mouth, came cantering abreast up to Hugh, and, laying the stick at his feet, looked up and asked for more, as plainly as ever did Oliver Twist. Here was a pleasant amusement for young people. The grave Hugh and the gay Merryweathers, Peggy and Jean, all became absorbed in picking up sticks and throwing them. There was no end to the puppies' enthusiasm, apparently; they yelled, and rushed, and yelled and rushed again; and when Margaret came out an hour afterward, anxious lest her guests should find time hang heavy on their hands, she found one and all flushed and breathless, hurling sticks and stones, and making almost half as much noise as the dogs themselves. At sight of Margaret, cool and pearly in her white dress, Gerald and Peggy dropped their sticks, and looked abashed; but Hugh called to her merrily: "Margaret, they are making great progress. I think my pupil has got farther than yours, though. Miss Margaret and I are training them for a prize contest," he added, turning to Gerald. "This is an extension of their usual practice, that is all."

"Hurrah!" said Gerald, much relieved. "I was afraid she would think—I didn't know whether she would approve," he concluded, somewhat lamely.

It *was* amazing. It was rather as if the Venus of Milo had begun to sing light opera, Gerald thought; but after all, how much pleasanter if she should, than to stand there all day and wonder how she was going to eat her breakfast without

any arms. With this shocking reflection, Master Gerald betook himself once more to the throwing of sticks, and the sport went on till Margaret called the puppies off, declaring that they would be too tired for their afternoon run.

"She takes care of everything, you see!" said Gerald, aside to his brother. "All without any fuss; that's just like Hilda, too."

"Yes," said Phil. "Appears to be a corker!"

"I wish you wouldn't talk so much slang, Phil!" said Gerald. "What kind of word is that to use in speaking of Miss Montfort?"

Philip looked up in amazement, and saw his brother flushed, and evidently annoyed in earnest.

"Well, may I be split and buttered!" said Phil.

"I wish you were!" said Gerald, forcing a laugh. "Come along, and don't be an ass!"

CHAPTER X.

GRACE'S SYSTEM

"Margaret!"

"Yes, Mrs. Peyton."

"Is that door shut? lock it, will you? and—just go and look out of the window, please. No one there? Thank you!"

She sank back on her pillows with a sigh of relief.

"What is it?" asked Margaret, soothingly. "What troubles you, dear Mrs. Peyton?"

"I am frightened!" said Emily Peyton.

"Frightened?"

"Yes. I am afraid of that girl, Margaret."

"What girl? You cannot possibly mean Grace?"

Mrs. Peyton glanced around her. Evidently she did mean Grace.

"She behaves so!" she said, in a low voice. "I don't think she is in her right mind, to begin with; it is terrible to be with a person who may break out into madness at any moment."

"My dear," said Margaret, "you are absolutely and wholly mistaken. Grace is as sane as I am. She is one of the sanest persons I have ever known, it seems to me. Of course she is singular—eccentric, if you like. But what has she been doing, to disturb you so?"

Mrs. Peyton glanced around her again, with an apprehensive glance. "Well!" she said, "I—I suppose I may as well tell you, Margaret. I have been ill so long, I may have become—a little unreasonable. There is nobody who cares; I never saw any reason why I should be reasonable. Having to lie here, it is a pity if I may not have my own way, don't you think so? I have had it, at any rate; I don't

say that it has always been a sensible way; I detest sensible things and people. I can't imagine how I have endured you so long. I should not, if you were not pretty and prim."

"Thank you!" said Margaret, soberly.

"Don't interrupt me! This has been on my mind for two weeks, and I want to get rid of it. There is nobody else I can tell. Doctor Flower, like a veritable fiend, after sending me this firebrand, goes off to Europe. A physician should be indicted for going to Europe. Well—I don't know what to tell you, or where to begin. She—she frightens me, I say. I never know what she is going to do next. Yesterday—I felt wretchedly yesterday, Margaret; I was in acute pain all day. I suppose I was pretty impatient. I—well, I threw something out of the window in a pet,—my amethyst rope it was,—and she stood and looked at me quietly, as if she were taking notes of my appearance. I couldn't bear it; I told her to go after it. Just a little impatient cry, it was. My dear, in an instant she was out of the window. Gone, out of sight like a flash. I shrieked; no one heard me. I—you will not believe this, Margaret—I got out of bed, and dragged myself to the window, expecting to see her dead and shattered at the bottom. There she stood, cool as crystal, shaking the leaves from her dress. She looked up and saw me, and if ever I saw an elfish look—do you believe in witchcraft, Margaret? my nurse did; she told me some strange tales when I was a child."

"No need of witchcraft in this case," said Margaret, smiling. "Grace is as active as a cat, and her special delight is to climb up and down walls. There is a grape-vine under this window, isn't there? That would be quite enough for the Goat, as they called her at school."

"That isn't all," said Mrs. Peyton. "She's not right, I tell you; not canny, as Nurse used to say. You may laugh, Margaret Montfort. I tell you, lying here year after year, one gets to thinking all kinds of things. I could tell you—who knows the old woman was not right after all?—listen to this. Yesterday, this very yesterday, she was standing there by the mantel-piece, talking as quietly as we are talking now. Suddenly, without a word, down she falls in a swoon, or trance, or something unearthly. I had let the maids go out; we two were alone in the house. There she lay, and I thought she was dead. I got up again! No one knows what it cost me, Margaret. I have forgotten how to walk; I merely dragged myself across to where she lay. She was breathing; I could not see that she was paler than usual—she never has any color, you know. I called and screamed; I raved and wept, I believe; you cannot fancy how terrible it was, that living,

breathing form, lying there, the lips almost smiling, but no sign, no twitching of an eyelid, only the beating of the heart, to tell me that she was not dead. Hush! do you know the story of Christy Moran? My nurse's grandmother used to know her. She was—I don't know what she was—but she used to do this very thing. They would find her sitting in her chair, breathing, but without speech or motion, and afterward they would hear of some devilish act or other, committed at that very hour, in some distant town or village, by a figure wearing her likeness. Don't laugh! don't laugh! I tell you, we don't know everything in this civilization that we talk so much about. I tried to say a prayer, Margaret,—I used to say them regularly,—but—and I had hardly begun before she opened her eyes and smiled at me like a child. 'Did you ever hear of catalepsy?' she says, and she went out of the room without another word, and left me to get back to bed as best I could."

Margaret was silent, not knowing what to say. She had no doubt that Grace was acting upon some theory of her own, and was playing these wild pranks in the hope of rousing her patient to action and exercise. Certainly, to get Mrs. Peyton out of bed twice in two days was no small feat; still, Margaret's gentle mind shrank from the thought of forcing one so frail, so enfeebled by years of invalidism, into sudden activity which might be injurious, or even fatal to her. She could not betray Grace—what should she say? But there was no need of her saying anything, for Mrs. Peyton went on, hurriedly, hardly glancing at her auditor. Evidently it was a relief to her to free her mind.

"Why don't I send her away, you may ask. Margaret, I ask myself the same question twenty times a day. My dear, she is too fascinating! She interests me so! Have you heard her sing, and tell stories? I have not been so interested for years. She makes me restless, I tell you; she makes me think of things I had forgotten, or that I said good-by to years and years ago. Look! she sits down on the floor here, beside the bed—in the night, often, when I cannot sleep, and she has been rubbing me—that is another reason why I do not let her go, Margaret; her touch is like healing balm; there is magic in it, I tell you. She sits down there, with her long hair falling all about her, in the moonlight, looking like nothing earthly, and she talks—or chants, rather,—there isn't anything like it, so I don't know what to call it—about foreign countries. She has never seen them, or she says she never has. That is a little matter to her; she knows all about them, twenty times as much as I do, though I used to travel till I hated the sight of a railway or a steamer. She tells me things about Sicily, and Norway, and the Hebrides,—old Icelandic legends,—about Burnt Njal, and those people; she makes me want to see the places, actually. There are plenty of places I have not seen. She says

Iceland is a flower-garden in summer. Margaret, don't laugh at what I am going to say!"

"Indeed, I am not laughing, dear Mrs. Peyton."

"She says—this girl says—she thinks I could—get up. Get up and do things, I mean, like other people. Did you ever hear of such nonsense?"

Mrs. Peyton laughed; but she looked eagerly at Margaret, and there was something in her eyes that had never been there before.

Margaret leaned over her, and kissed the beautiful forehead. "I am sure you could!" she said; and at the moment she did feel sure. Something of Grace's spirit seemed to pass into her, and she felt a hope, a confidence, that had never come into her mind before. Why not? Why should it not be? Mrs. Peyton was still in middle life; she ought to have years of life before her. Why might she not be roused, be taught over again how to live, and to enjoy the good and glorious earth? Margaret's eyes kindled.

"I am sure you could!" she repeated. "Let us try! Let me help Grace, and let us all try our very best, dear Mrs. Peyton. Just think how wonderful it would be to get well; to go about again, and be alive among live people. Oh, my dear, let us try!"

But the lady's mood changed. In a flash, even as Margaret was gazing at her with eager, loving eyes,—eyes in which stood tears of affection and anxiety,—she changed. The mocking smile crept back to her lips, the light of interest died from her eyes.

"Bah!" she said. "Little goose, what do you know about life and live people? It was to get away from them that I took to my bed, do you hear? There, go away! I have been talking great nonsense; forget all about it! Sick folks often talk nonsense. Give me something to play with, and go away! I had a new toy yesterday, an amber ball. It's in the top drawer. Ah! isn't that a beauty? Give it to me! See, how smooth and cool it is, Margaret! Do you think an amber necklace would be becoming to me? I can wear yellow, you know; blondes of my type rarely can, but it always suited me. Do you remember a story about the Amber Gods? It is one of the few stories I ever cared for. To-morrow I'll order a set of amber jewelry, bracelets and necklace, and—"

She stopped suddenly, seeing the grave compassion in Margaret's eyes.

"SHE LOOKED UP, AND SAW GRACE SITTING ON A BROAD, LOW BRANCH." **"SHE LOOKED UP, AND SAW GRACE SITTING ON A BROAD, LOW BRANCH."**

"Don't speak to me!" she cried, angrily. "You are thinking—I know what you are thinking—that I cannot wear necklaces in bed. You think I am a wretched, helpless, faded old woman. I hate you! Go away!" and Margaret went.

As she passed along the garden-walk with bent head, musing soberly enough, something struck her lightly on the head,—a cherry, which fell at her feet. She looked up, and saw Grace sitting on a broad, low branch.

"Come up!" said the Goat.

Margaret smiled, and shook her head. "My dear Grace, I never climbed a tree in my life. I should not know where to begin."

"Time you learned!" said Grace, gravely. "There is no knowing when the race will return to arboreal habits. Come, Margaret, I want you!"

Margaret hesitated, and was lost. She looked about, half fearing, half hoping that somebody was in sight. No! no gardener came with his watering-can, no boy with his wheelbarrow. She turned back, to meet once more the compelling glance, and see the hand stretched out to help her. How it was accomplished, Margaret never knew, but, after a breathless moment, she found herself seated on the branch, too, clinging fast to the rugged bark, and not daring to look below.

"All right!" said Grace, composedly. "See, now, what good cherries these are! I have permission from Madame to kill myself with them, and am doing my best. They are white oxhearts, the finest cherry that grows!"

"Oh, but I daren't let go my hold of the branch," said poor Margaret; "and my head is so dizzy. Dear Grace, how shall I ever get down again? Won't you help me?"

"Not now! Now it is necessary that you should stay for a space, and learn to accept this, as other situations. Begin gradually to look down and about you. Fix your eye on that apple-tree, the one with the hump-back; then let your eyes travel slowly, slowly, over the ground, till they come here, under our feet. There! you see it is easy. Is the dizziness gone?"

"It is certainly much better. I think perhaps, in a little while, I may get used to

it, but I am quite sure I never shall like it. Why do you like to climb so, Grace? Why is it more comfortable to sit in a tree than on a pleasant, safe seat on the grass?"

Grace shrugged her shoulders. "Who can say?" she said. "I have always supposed that the soul of my grandam inhabited a bird. Shakespeare! And you know I am an owl myself in regular, if not in good, standing. What would you? It is my nature. And how do we find the Patient to-day? Did she tell you that she left her bed twice yesterday?"

"Yes. Grace, it frightens me, all this wild work. Are you sure what you are doing?"

"I am sure that there is nothing the matter with this lady. I think she can be brought back to health by foul means, but not by fair. I think that in this case the end justifies the means. *Voilà!*"

Margaret looked at her earnestly; she met a gaze so full, so clear, so brave, that her own spirit rose to meet it.

Suddenly Grace held out her hand. "Come!" she said. "Trust me, Margaret! I am not a hobgoblin, though I may pose as one now and then. Trust me; and—by and by—try to love me a little, for I loved you before ever I saw you."

Margaret took the slender hand and pressed it cordially. "I will trust you!" she said. "I have doubted, Grace, I confess; doubted and feared; but now I shall not fear any more. Only—oh, my dear, don't frighten her more than you have to. She really thinks you are—not right; and some of the things she told me were certainly rather terrifying. That trance, or whatever it was—well—what was it, Grace?"

Grace laughed, a laugh so merry and clear that the robins left off eating cherries to see what the sound might be. "What was it? My child, it was nothing. I fell down, I shut my eyes—again, *voilà!* Her mind was prepared for the marvellous, and she found it. Nothing simpler than that."

"But you said something about—catalepsy! the very sound of that word always frightens me, because of a story I read once. I don't wonder it frightened Mrs. Peyton."

"I asked her if she had ever heard of it. A simple question! Apparently she had. Come, let us eat cherries, and strive to approximate the lettuce. Do you feel

any green crinkles in your veins yet? And how is the Innocent to-day? I love that child."

"Dear Peggy! I left her trying to teach Tuck to keep a biscuit on his nose while she counted twenty. When I left, he could not get beyond ten, when it was devoured with yelps of joy. But I have no doubt Peggy will succeed in time; she has plenty of patience, and plenty of perseverance."

Grace nodded sagely. "Plenty of patience and plenty of perseverance!" she repeated. "Great qualities, Margaret. I wonder if I have them. I am going to find out. Now—who is the tall person who is lame, and sits in a summer-house?"

Margaret laughed. "He doesn't sit in a summer-house all the time," she said. "That is Peggy's brother, Hugh Montfort. I want you to know him, Grace; he is so delightful; I know you will be friends. Come over to tea this evening, won't you? Mrs. Peyton promised me you should; you know we have been trying for you ever since Peggy came. Do come! Uncle John is planning something for us; he will not tell me what, but it is sure to be something delightful. Promise that you will come; and then you must really help me get down, my dear, for the girls will be wondering where I am."

"Your hands here—so! Let yourself swing clear—don't be afraid; hang still—now drop easily! There! was that so very dreadful? Good-by, cool, green, lovely one! I will come to-night; good-by!"

"What will Rita say," Margaret questioned herself as she took her way homeward, "when I write her that I have been climbing cherry-trees, and getting down from them without a ladder?"

CHAPTER XI.

THE MYSTERIES OF FERNLEY

"Now, Uncle John!"

"Now, Margaret!"

"Don't be tormenting, sir! You know that you promised us a new Mystery of Fernley, if we would all be good. We have been good; virtue shines from every one of us, doesn't it, Hugh?"

"My eyes are dazzled," replied her cousin. "Most of it seems to come from the feminine side of the house, though, I fear. All that the boys and I have done has been to abstain from actual crime."

"Oh, cherries!" said Phil.

"Up into the tree of cherry,
Who should climb but little Jerry?"

"Pooh! pooh!" said Mr. Montfort. "What are cherries for except to eat, I should like to know? Yes, you have all been good children, and it is true that I promised—something. Sit down now, all of you, and I will tell you the story of the Lost Casket."

The young people clustered about him, sitting on the floor, on cushions and footstools, on anything rather than the prosaic seat of an ordinary chair. Mr. Montfort looked around on their bright, eager faces. Margaret sat next him, his own Margaret, fair and sweet in her white dress, with the bright, joyous look that had grown so habitual to her of late. Next to her was Gerald Merryweather; it struck Mr. Montfort suddenly that Gerald Merryweather usually was beside Margaret. Beyond them again, Peggy and Jean, with Phil between them; Phil, who as yet preferred his sister Gertrude's society to that of any girl he had ever seen. At the other side of the ring, Grace Wolfe, sitting a little apart, with the curious air of solitariness that seemed to surround her even in company. Hugh Montfort was not far off, though, and his deep brown eyes were gazing at her intently.

"Once upon a time," Mr. Montfort began, and was greeted with a chorus of disappointment. "Oh, Uncle John! You said it was true."

"Not a fairy story this time, sir, please; give us the real thing!"

"Will you be quiet, you impetuous creatures?" asked Uncle John. "It is true, so far as I know. And if you interrupt me again—"

"We will not!"

"Hear us swear!" cried the young people.

"Once upon a time, then, some hundred and fifty years ago, there lived here at Fernley Mr. Peter Montfort, the great-great-grandfather of some of you. He was a worthy gentleman, with a pretty taste for engravings; that Raphael Morghen print of the Transfiguration, Margaret, that you are so fond of, is from his collection. He travelled about Europe a good deal, buying engravings; that is the only thing I know about him, except the fact that he married twice; and on this marrying twice hangs our story. Listen now, and you shall hear. His first wife (she was a Miss Rhinefels) died, leaving him with an only daughter, Christina

Montfort. The only time the name Christina appears, I believe, in the family annals. At the time of her mother's death Christina was a woman grown; a handsome person, to judge from her miniature, and of strong feelings. She kept house for her father, and expected to do so all her days, as an early disappointment had disinclined her for marriage. When, after a couple of years, her father, being then a man of seventy, brought home a wife of twenty-five, Christina was, not unnaturally, incensed. She refused to speak to the newcomer, shut herself up in her own apartments, and had a special servant to wait upon her. This uncomfortable state of things continued for some time, when she sickened of some acute distemper, and died in a short time. She possessed some fine jewels, which she had inherited from her mother, and she was heard to say repeatedly that her stepmother should never lay a finger on one of them. It is supposed that she, or her servant acting under her orders, hid the casket containing these jewels somewhere in this house; at all events, they were never found after her death, and have never, it is said, been seen to this day."

"Oh, Uncle John! but has any one looked for them?"

"My dear Peggy, every one has looked for them. I cannot tell you how many Montfort ladies, in all these generations, have fretted their nerves and worn out their finger-nails, hunting for this Lost Casket. I specially requested your Aunt Faith, Margaret, not to mention it to you or your cousins when you were here together. I had seen so many vain searches, and heard of so many heart-burnings, in connection with it, that I thought it best to defer the information till—till later. This, however, seems a very favorable time. You are all too sensible, girls, to be unhappy if you do not find it. To tell the truth, I used to hunt for it when I was a boy. But you can have a grand game of hide and seek, with an object, imaginary or actual, at the end of it; and I wish you a merry game, young people, and I return to my conversation with the Sieur de Montaigne."

He was surrounded in an instant, kissed, caressed, and thanked till he declared his life was in danger, and threatened to take up the hearth-broom in self-defence; finally they trooped off, to hold a consultation in the hall.

"ON THE SECOND LANDING THEY PAUSED TO SALUTE THE OLD PORTRAITS." **"ON THE SECOND LANDING THEY PAUSED TO SALUTE THE OLD PORTRAITS."**

"Shall we divide our forces and go in small parties?" inquired Hugh, looking at Grace.

"I say we go just as it happens," said Peggy. "I think that will be much more exciting."

"Perhaps it will," said Hugh, becoming resigned, as he saw Peggy link her arm in Grace's. "Come on, then, girls and boys! Suppose we begin with the garret; Margaret has been promising to show me its wonders ever since I came."

On the second landing they paused to salute the old portraits, and Hugh must point out this or that one that had a familiar look.

"This might be Margaret's self, I always think, Miss Wolfe; this sweet-faced lady in the silvery green gown. See! she has the same clear, quiet, true eyes, and her hair is the same shade of soft brown. A lovely face."

"Are you looking at the Sea-green Me?" asked Margaret over his shoulder. "Our dear Rita liked it, and used to call it her Sea-green Margaret. But come now and look at the glorious Regina, who actually has a look of Rita herself. And I want Grace to see Hugo, too."

She passed on, and Grace was about to follow, but Hugh detained her. "Just one moment," he said, speaking low. "This is a fine collection, Miss Wolfe, but I see no portrait of the Wood-nymph."

"The Wood-nymph?"

"Yes. Do you not know that a dryad haunts this garden of Fernley? Sometimes she is not seen, only heard in the dusk, singing magical songs, that fill whoever hears them with a strange feeling akin to madness. But sometimes —sometimes she leaves her tree, and comes out in the moonlight, and—dances —"

He paused. Grace had started, and now looked up at him with a curious expression, in which anger, mirth, and fear seemed struggling for the upper hand. Before she could reply, a terrific scream rang through the gallery, startling the whole party. Turning, they saw Jean, who had run on before the rest in her eagerness to explore, standing at the farther end of the corridor, with open mouth and staring eyes, the very image of terror.

"My dear child," cried Margaret, running toward her, "what is it? Are you hurt?"

"What is it, Jeanie?" said Peggy, who was the first to reach her sister, and

already had her in her arms. "Jean, don't gasp so! You have seen something; is that it? Margaret, what did I always tell you?"

Jean nodded, still gasping, and clung to Peggy with eager, trembling hands. "Oh!" she moaned. "Peggy, save me! take me away! the closet; oh, the closet!"

"What closet, dear? This one? Why, this is the broom closet. There is nothing here to frighten you, Jean."

"The woman!" murmured Jean. "The dreadful dead woman! Peggy, I saw her eyes, and her long hair. Oh, I shall die, I know I shall!"

"Oh, you poor lamb!" cried Margaret, laughing in spite of her compassion. She hurried to the closet and flung the door wide open. "It is only Mrs. Body!" she said. "Come and look again, Jean; it is the lay-figure, dear, nothing else in the world."

"Lay figure?" faltered Jean, still trembling and hanging back.

"Yes, the model. Grandmother Montfort used to paint a great deal, and she had this creature made to stand for the figure. Come and look at it, dear child."

Gently and persuasively she drew the trembling girl forward; the others all pressed behind her.

There on the floor of the closet lay a figure which might at the first glance have alarmed a stouter heart than fifteen-year-old Jean's,—the figure of a woman, scantily draped in white. The arms were stretched out stiffly, the face, with its staring eyeballs, over which fell some lank wisps of hair, was turned toward the door. No wonder Jean was terrified.

"I am so sorry!" said Margaret. "The children, Basil and Susan D., found her in the garret last winter. They begged to be allowed to have her for a plaything, so they kept her in here, and had great fun with her. Her name is Mrs. Body, but she can take any part, from Ophelia to Simple Susan. She took tea with us once, when Uncle John was away, and she behaved beautifully; so you see you really must not mind her, Jean, dear."

"It's no wonder she was frightened, though," said Gerald. "My right arm cleaves to the roof of my mouth, even now that I know who she is. Mrs. Body, my respects to you, ma'am, and I desire you of less acquaintance."

While they were all laughing over Mrs. Body, and commenting upon her various points, Gerald slipped round to Margaret's side.

"Miss Montfort," he said, speaking in a low tone, "do you remember the roarer?"

"Indeed I do, Mr. Merryweather. Do you know, you never showed me the place. You had to go away the next day, you remember."

"That is just what I was thinking," said Gerald. "I have never forgotten that burning moment when Mrs. Cook and I foregathered in the dark. I was thinking, what if the Lost Casket should happen to be somewhere about that place in the wall? and anyhow, it would be fun to explore it, and I promised to show it to you, and I like to keep my promises, because virtue is my only joy. Won't you come with me now, and let the rest go on? Awfully nice in the garret, I am sure, but—won't you come, please?"

"Oh," said Margaret, "that would be delightful! But—it is quite dark, isn't it? and they have all the candles."

"All except this," said Gerald, drawing a slender cylinder from his pocket. "Electric candle; you have seen them, of course. I brought it with me, intending some such exploration, if permitted. I ran up and got it, at Mr. Montfort's first word of this search. Come! the down-stairs hall. This way; oh, please, this way."

Margaret hesitated, looking doubtfully at him. "I—don't know if I ought," she said. "I should like it of all things, if I thought—"

"Don't think!" said Gerald, hastily. "Great mistake to think; wastes the tissues awfully. Action first, thought afterward! aphorism! Or if you must indulge in the baneful pursuit, think how much poor Jerry wants you. Poor Jerry! child of misfortune!"

"Is that the way you get everything you want?" said Margaret, laughing, as she followed him half-reluctantly down-stairs.

"One way; there are others. This is the best, since it procures me your company. See, now! in this niche here, behind the big picture!"

He passed his hand along a panel; it swung back, revealing blackness.

Margaret stared. "I never knew that was a door!" she said. "Mr.

Merryweather, do you know, I think the person who built this house must have been a smuggler, a magician, and a detective, all in one."

"Fine combination!" said Gerald. "I should like to have known the old codg—I mean gentleman. No deep mystery here, though, beyond the secret door. He did love secret doors, that ancestor of yours. He may have been an architect, and have thought door-handles unsightly, as they are. But see!"

They were now standing in a deep recess, and he waved his candle to and fro. "This would appear to have been originally used as a kind of store-room, or drying-room. See those hooks; probably for hams—if not for hanging," he added. "If you prefer tragedy, Miss Montfort, you shall have it. There is room for ten persons to hang here, without touching. Their ghastly upturned faces, their blood-stained robes, glimmering spectral white in the—"

"Oh, don't!" said Margaret. "You really frighten me. Yes, they must be for hams; now I think of it, I have heard Frances speak of the drying-closet. This wall is warm; it must be close against the kitchen chimney."

"Jerusalem!" exclaimed Gerald. "Here are steps, Miss Montfort. Stone steps, leading down to a trap-door. Shall I help you down, or—no, I will go alone. When I open the door, a hollow groan will be heard, and the clank of iron fetters. Would you rather have me descend to Hades with a loud squeak, or shall a headless spectre arise, grinning and—beg pardon! anatomy at fault; grinning requires a head. That's the way! my genius is always checked in its soaring flight, and pulled back to earth by idiot facts."

Running on thus, Gerald descended the stone steps, Margaret following to their top, timidly. Sure enough, there was a trap-door at the bottom, with a ring in it; a perfectly orthodox trap-door, suitable for the Arabian Nights or anything else. Gerald took hold of the ring, prepared for a vigorous pull; then paused, and looked at his companion. "I hear voices!" he said. "Hark!"

They listened. A low murmur came up from below; the voices were muffled, by distance or intervening substances, and could not be distinguished.

"Oh, do you think we'd better open it?" said Margaret, who had such a wholesome awe of the Mysteries of Fernley that she was prepared for anything in the way of the marvellous.

"That is what I think!" said Gerald, cheerfully. "That's what it was made for,

you see. A door that does not fulfil its destiny might just as well be something else, skittles, or a pump, or—other things. Now this—"

As he spoke, he gave a vigorous pull; the door lifted, but at the same instant the candle slipped from his hand, and fell rattling into some unseen depth below, leaving them in blank darkness. Margaret uttered a cry of alarm. "Don't fall! Oh, pray be careful, Mr. Merryweather!"

"All right!" said Gerald. "Stay just where you are, for a moment, while I explore this—aperture. Ha! the steps continue. You don't mind if I leave you in the dark for just a minute, Miss Montfort?"

Margaret did not mind, once assured that her companion was not engaged in the congenial pursuit of breaking his neck. She began feeling about her in the darkness, darkness so thick it was like black velvet, she said to herself. She found the wall; it was warm, as she said; she began passing her hand mechanically along the bricks, counting them.

A cheerful voice came up from below: "I have found the doughnuts—good ones!—and the—seem to be—yes! sweet pickles. Corking! And—now you've done it, my son! Jam, by all that's adhesive! Put my whole hand in. Jerusalem and Mad—"

At this instant there was a sound as of a door thrown violently open; a flood of light filled the place; light, and an angry voice.

"Who's this here in my pantry? Come out of that, ye rascal, before I set the dogs on ye!"

Gerald Merryweather uttered a yell of delight. "Destiny!" he shouted. "My fate cries out. Quits, Mrs. Cook, quits! Come to my arms!"

And Margaret, peeping fearfully down through the trap-door, beheld her guest waving one hand, a crimson one, in the air, and with the other embracing the ample form of Frances the cook; while behind them the grave Elizabeth looked wide-eyed, shading her candle with her hand.

"For shame, sir!" said Frances. "Do behave, now, Mr. Gerald! I never see such a bold boy since born I was."

"No, no! not bold; don't say bold, Mrs. Cook! Witness my blushing eyes, my tearful cheek, my stammering nose! Hush, listen, there's a good soul. Your

doughnuts are food for the gods; also for Jerry. Poor Jerry; never had enough doughnuts in his life. You weep for him; let him dry the starting tear!"

Drawing out his pocket-handkerchief, he gravely applied it to Frances's eyes and went on. "We are looking for the Lost Casket, Miss Montfort and I. If you can help us to it, Mrs. Cook,—

"I'll dress thee all in pongo silk,
And crown thee with a bowl of milk;
And hail thee, till my last breath passes,
The queen of sugar and molasses.

A poet, as you observe. Nothing to what I can do, give me time and a yard measure. Now tell me—"

Margaret's voice from above interrupted him.

"Mr. Merryweather, there is a loose brick here. I can pull it quite out; and—yes—there is a space behind it, and—oh, can you bring the light?"

To snatch the lamp from Frances's hand, blow her a kiss, and scramble up the steps again, was the work of an instant with Gerald. He found Margaret pale, with shining eyes, holding something in her hands.

"No!" cried Gerald. "I say, you haven't—you have! eccentric Jiminy, you have found it!"

"I think I have!" said Margaret, who was fairly trembling with excitement. "Look! the letters on the lid! oh, Mr. Merryweather!"

The object she held was a box some eight inches square, of ebony or some other dark wood, banded with silver. On the lid were inlaid, also in silver, the letters C. M.

"Christina Montfort!" said Margaret. "Oh, to think of my being the one to find it!"

"I should like to know who else had the right to find it!" said Gerald. "Punch their—I mean, of course, if they were fellows; I beg your pardon, Miss Montfort."

"It is locked," said Margaret. "We must wait, and try some of Uncle John's keys."

"Take care!" exclaimed Gerald. "The bottom is dropping out. Hold your hand under it!"

As he spoke, the bottom of the box, which was of some soft wood and had rotted through, dropped, and something rolled out and fell into Margaret's hand. She held it up to the light. It was a hawk's egg, neatly blown.

CHAPTER XII.

THE EGG OF COLUMBUS

"Why, yes!" said Mr. Montfort. "It is my egg, certainly."

"Oh, Uncle John!"

"Well, sir, then—"

"Then you know all the—"

"Was it—"

"Did you—"

"Tell am what—"

Mr. Montfort put his hands resolutely over his ears, and shut his eyes. "When you are still," he said, "I will tell you all about it; till then I am a blind deaf-mute, with no benefit of modern instruction."

A swift rustle, followed by dead silence. Cautiously opening his eyes, Mr. Montfort saw the whole company seated on the floor around his chair, gazing at him with imploring eyes, but motionless and mute. He laughed heartily, and threw himself back in his chair.

"I promised you a merry game," he said. "Have you had it?"

The young people nodded like mandarins, but uttered no sound.

"I promised you nothing more. In fact, I warned you not to expect anything more. On your own heads be egg and emptiness.

"Well, well!" he added, "since you are so good and dutiful, you shall have the whole truth. I found the box some forty years ago, when I first stumbled on that closet. My dear mother was timid, and had a great dread of the Mysteries of Fernley, imagining a secret staircase in every wall, and an oubliette under every floor. Somebody had frightened her when she came here as a child, by showing her I forget what dark passage or closet. So we were never officially told of the

various pleasant places devised by the eccentric old ancestor, Peter, who, I have always believed, was a smuggler before he was a patriot, and hid kegs as well as commanders in his smoke-closet. You know the story of General Blankley and the hams, Hugh? Remind me to tell you some day. Well, this being so, of course we youngsters were keen set on discovery; and we formed a league, called the Hovering Hawks. Each of us had his private totem or sign; and when he made a discovery, he left a totem to tell that he had been there. Jim's was an oyster-shell, because he considered the world his oyster; Dick's was a ship, because he always meant to be a sailor; Roger's was a book, of course, for obvious reasons; and mine was an egg, Columbus's egg, because I meant to find things out. You see there was no overstock of modesty among us, more than there is among most healthy boys. We were ready for anything and everything. I dare say some of you may have found oyster-shells about, in various inaccessible places?"

Grace started, and blushed; then hung her head. "I—I found one," she admitted. "It was in a cubbyhole in the parapet of the roof. I thought of bringing it away, but it seemed as if some one had wanted to leave it there, so I didn't touch it."

"Jim's Retreat," said Mr. Montfort. "He stayed up there two days once, in a fit of sulks, and frightened my poor dear mother almost into an illness. Father Montfort was away from home the first day; the second day he came home, and went up after Master James. He was a powerful man, Father Montfort, and an excellent climber. Yes, poor old Jim! he did not climb again for several days. Well, as I was saying, after all this very egotistical digression, I found the box in question some forty years ago. I withdrew the—a—contents—and substituted for them my totem. The contents I put—elsewhere."

He looked round the circle, smiling. Margaret, gazing earnestly at him, saw his face, for the second time since she had known him, change from that of a grave, thoughtful man into that of a mischievous boy, the eager eyes alight with fun, the lips twitching with laughter.

"Wouldn't—you—like—to—know?" he began slowly, his eyes turning from one to the other. Suddenly he broke off.

"There! the play is over, children. Margaret, you found the casket, you shall find the—run your hand along the back of my chair here, my dear; where it feels cold, press downward."

Margaret obeyed. A long narrow box or drawer shot out from the rolling back

of the great mahogany chair. Obeying Mr. Montfort's gesture, Margaret lifted out of the nest of silky cotton something that sparkled and glittered in the firelight. There was a long-drawn sigh from the girls, a grunt of surprise from the men, but still no one spoke.

"The pearls are for you, Margaret. I always meant them for you, my dear. I have taken them out every birthday and Christmas and looked at them, but there was always something else I wanted to give you just then, so I put the pretty playthings back again. Peggy, these pink topazes were made expressly for you, even if they have been waiting some time. No earrings, thank heaven! I could not see my girls in earrings. The diamonds I sent to Rita as a wedding present; you remember them, Margaret. Deceitful, was I, not to tell you their history? My child, I said they were family jewels, and so they were. The turquoises must be Jean's; put them on at once, little girl! Very pretty; very becoming. Now,—any more? It seems to me I remember one more article—ah!"

Margaret drew out a long, delicate, glittering chain. At sight of it, Grace uttered a low cry of delight. "What is it?" she said. "I never saw anything so beautiful. Water and moonlight? What are the stones, Mr. Montfort, please?"

"Aquamarine," said Mr. Montfort. "They are beautiful, though not of great value. Now what shall I do with this last trinket, I wonder?"

"There is only one person who can possibly wear it," said Hugh, under his breath. His uncle heard him, and shot a keen, quizzical glance at him, which caused the philosopher to retire suddenly behind the shadow of the curtain. Margaret glided to her uncle's side, and whispered in his ear. Mr. Montfort nodded, smiling. "Just what I was thinking, Margaret," he said. "You read my thoughts accurately. My dear Miss Grace—by the way, isn't it time for me to leave off the 'Miss,' considering my age, and how well we know each other? 'Miss Grace' suggests 'disgrace,' which can have no possible connection with you. My dear Grace, then, as Margaret and others have said, there is only one person present who ought to wear this chain, and that person is yourself. Will you accept it as a little gift from Margaret and me, and from Cousin Christina?"

Grace drew back, her eyebrows coming together in a look Peggy knew well. "I—You must excuse me," she began; but Mr. Montfort, going to her, took her hand kindly: "My child, do not refuse me this little pleasure. You surely do not expect me to wear the chain myself? and Margaret has more trumpery than is good for her already. Besides, as I said, the thing was manifestly made for you,

and for you alone. And, besides, again, Grace,"—he drew her nearer, and spoke low,—"besides, again, you are an explorer, too; if you had lived twenty-five years ago, we should have had great excursions together. Take it, my dear, if for no other reason, because it is the gift of the boy who put the egg in the box!"

CHAPTER XIII.

IN THE TWILIGHT

"How strange it seems without the boys!" said Jean.

"And Uncle John!" said Margaret.

"And Hugh!" said Peggy. "I wish they hadn't gone."

"Oh, no, you don't, Peggy!" said Margaret. "It was such a great chance, to have the day on that wonderful yacht. Just think what a good time they are having! I only wish you could have gone too, but it is a bachelor party, you see."

"Of course! Oh, I want them to have the fun, and it was very good of Captain Storm to let Uncle John take them all. Yes, they will have a glorious time; only—well, we miss them so horribly. Dear me, Margaret, isn't it strange that you should get to know people so well in such a short time? Why, I seem to know Gerald and Phil as well—better, in some ways, than I know Hugh. But then, I never feel as if I understood Hugh, he is so—he knows so much. Margaret, dear, it makes me happy all through to have you and Hugh know each other, and be such friends."

"Indeed, it cannot make you so happy as it does me, Peggy," said Margaret, smiling. "He is a wonderful person, that brother of yours. Yes, he does know a most amazing amount, but he never makes one uncomfortable with his knowledge, as some clever people do. He is like a delightful book, that you can read when you want to, and when you don't it stays quiet on its shelf. When I want to know about anything, and Uncle John is somewhere else, or is busy, I just turn over a page of Hugh, and there I have it. Oh, by the bye, Grace, what was that stanza he was quoting to you this morning, just before he went away? Don't you remember? we were coming through the orchard, he and I, and we met you, and he said this. I have been trying all day to recall it."

"Keats!" said Grace, briefly.

"Yes, I know that; it was from 'La Belle Dame sans Merci,' but I cannot get the whole stanza. Won't you repeat it? I know you have almost the whole of

Keats by heart."

Grace hesitated, and murmured something about "a time for everything," but finally, half-reluctantly, she repeated the stanza:

"'I met a lady in the meads,
Full beautiful, a fairy's child;
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild.'"

"Yes," said Margaret. "Well—thank you, Grace! I just wanted to hear it in your voice; what I was thinking of was, that Hugh always knows just what to say about everything and everybody. He has the whole Golden Treasury in his head, and he always turns the right page. Do you remember the other day, when Michael was so stupid!"

"Michael is always stupid!" said Jean.

"Poor Michael! He is not very clever." (Michael was the stable-boy at Fernley, a new importation from Ireland, with a good deal of peat-bog still sticking to his brains.) "Well, the other day he was more stupid than usual, for he was sent in town to get some rolled oats that Frances wanted. Well, he brought back just plain oats; and when Frances wanted to know what he meant by that, he said, 'Sure, it's meself can rowl 'em about for yez, as well as that feller in the white jacket.' Frances explained the situation to him with more force than amiability. She was in a perfect storm, and poor Michael stood meekly, feeling of his ear as if she had actually boxed it, though really she only threatened to, and wondering what it was all about. Well, Hugh and I came along, and Hugh just looked at him, and said:

"'The ass upon the pivot of his skull
Turned round a long left ear!'

There is no other quotation in the English language that would have fitted the case so perfectly."

"You and Grace seem to know Hugh about a hundred times as well as Peggy and I do," said Jean, pouting a little.

"Because they are clever, my dear, and we are not," said Peggy, cheerfully. "If you would learn things, Jean, English literature and all that, you might be able to talk to Hugh. As it is—"

"Well, I think Phil and Gerald are ever so much more fun, anyhow!" said Jean, saucily. "Hugh is poky!"

Seeing an elder-sisterly cloud gathering on Peggy's brow, Margaret hastened to interfere. "Girls," she said, "I have a confession to make. I was just going to make it, when the quotations turned me off the track. You know what Peggy was saying, about our all getting to know each other so well from staying in the house together. That reminded me of something, something I am very much ashamed of; and I think it would be good for my soul to confess it. But you must promise never to tell."

"We promise! We promise!" cried all the girls.

"Margaret," said Grace, "I have been looking for your sins ever since I came, but you were too clever for me; now I shall learn."

"Not my fault," said Margaret, merrily, "if you are a bat as well as a dozen other animals, my dear. Well, girls—oh, I am ashamed, and it really is most astonishingly virtuous of me to tell you about it. Peggy, just before you came, I was very blue; deeply, darkly, most unbeautifully blue!"

"Margaret! you, blue?"

"Hear Peggy making rhymes! Yes, I, blue. You see, the children were gone, and I did miss them so, I hardly knew how to bear it. It is impossible for any one to have any idea, girls, how children, children that are little enough to need one's care, you know, and—and watching, and thinking about, and all—how they get inside your heart and just live there, all curled up in it, bless them! and these particular children are the very dearest ones that ever lived, I do believe. Well, so they were gone, and my heart seemed empty; wickedly and abominably empty, for there was my own dearest uncle, and there were you, my own Peggy, coming to spend the whole summer with me, and as if that were not joy enough for three people, let alone one, I made all kinds of plans, about studying, and teaching you housekeeping, and embroidery, and all kinds of things. We were going to read so many hours a day, and work so many hours,—my poor Peggy! you would have had an unmerciful kind of time!—and everything was going to be quiet and regular and cheerful; I never got beyond cheerfulness in my brightest dreams of the summer. But even the cheerfulness was far ahead, and just then—before you came—I really had difficulty sometimes in keeping a cheerful face for Uncle John when he came in. Why—must I tell the whole?"

"Yes, Margaret, every word!"

"I used to go up to Susan D.'s room and cry over her little pinafores and things. As for my pincushion, I fairly soaked it with tears when I first found it. I told you about the pincushion, didn't I? Why, that little lamb, for days before she went, was working away at something, she would not let me see what. After she was gone, I went up to my room for a quiet cry, and there was a gorgeous new pincushion, and 'I love you,' on it in pins. My dear little girl! Well, girls, so—that was the way I felt, and the way I acted, most absurdly; and then—all this happened. First Hugh dropped from the skies; and then Uncle proposed the house party, and you came, Jean, and the Merryweathers; and then you, Peggy; and we discovered our dear Grace; and so, instead of a quiet, rather humdrum summer, I am having the most enchanting, Arabian-nights kind of time that ever was. And how do you think I feel?"

"Phil would say 'like thirty cents!'" said Jean, who was certainly a little inclined to be pert.

"If I hear you say anything of the kind, young one, I'll swat—"

"Peggy, dearest!" murmured Margaret, softly.

"I'll speak to you very severely. I am ashamed of you, Kidderminster!"

"Look here, Peggy, I won't stand that!" said Jean. "You promised me, when I first came, that you wouldn't call me that."

"Then don't behave like a kid!" retorted Peggy. "There, that's enough. Yes, Margaret, it has all been perfectly delightful and fairy-like; and then the Mysteries, too, and the hunting, and the Silver Closet, and all. Oh, I am so glad we didn't find out everything that first summer. I suppose Uncle John thought we were too young and silly then; not that you were ever silly, you dear darling thing. But, Margaret, there is one thing wanting to it all, and only you and I know what that is."

Margaret nodded. "Yes," she said, with a little sigh. "We want our Princess, Peggy. Oh, Grace, if you only knew our Rita! How you and she would love each other! Peggy, you said that just at the right moment, for I have her last letter in my pocket, on purpose to read to you, and I am sure the others would like to hear it, too. Would you, girls?"

There seemed no possible doubt on the subject. All the girls gathered about

Margaret, sitting on the floor, as they liked best to do. Margaret herself took possession of her favorite low chair, and drawing the letter from her pocket, began to read:

"BELOVED MARGUERITE:—I am of return only yesterday from an expedition to the hills, and I find your precious letter waiting for me. No need to tell you that I pressed it to my heart, covered it with kisses. Jack says your letters are the sole thing of which he is jealous. I grieve to hear that you must lose those little ones whom you love so well, even for a short time; but courage, *Margarita mia;* there are other flowers besides roses, and summer is a pleasant time. You will have Peggy with you, dear Peggy! She sends me a photograph, which shows her little changed in the face; still the dimples, still the soft roundness of cheek and chin. Best of Peggys; if I had her here, what great joy! But I must tell you of our ride. We went, Jack and I, up to the hill camp, where we went last year, after the terrible ride you know of. There we spent three happy days, camping in the green hollow among the hills, with only Juan to cook for us and care for the horses. Ah, Marguerite, what a time was that! We visited every spot made sacred to us by our love. The hiding-place, near poor Don Annunzio's house, where I first saw my hero, swinging in his hammock. Have I told you that I thought him a skulker, a coward hiding to escape warfare? How often we have laughed over that! Then we passed along the road, so peaceful now, so wild and horrent then (how is this word, 'horrent,' Marguerite? I find it in a poem, it seems to me noble; I tell Jack, he laughs, and says something like 'high falu—' I cannot tell what!). We paused to weep over the gray heap where once smiled the *residencia*, where that kind old woman and her good vast husband sheltered the wandering maiden, protected her at the risk of their own lives, and—one of them, as you know—died to save her and others. Then farther, to Carlos's old camp, where Manuela and I lived, and where I first learned to be of a little use in the world. Ah, the memories, how they came crowding back! I have told you that Manuela is married to Pepe? Yes; two months ago. The wedding was charming! I gave her her wedding-gown, of finest muslin, suitable to her condition, with plenty of lace and ribbons, which the poor child values highly, and I dressed her hair (poor Manuela! She would have done it far better herself; she has a wonderful gift. My present maid

is a poor creature, but Manuela is to give her lessons), and arranged the veil and wreath. She was a vision of enchantment, and really thrown away on poor Pepe, who never looked at either dress or veil. Jack says 'neither did he.' My dear, these men! To what purpose do we adorn ourselves, exhaust the treasure of our souls, in efforts to please them? But I wander from my story. My child, this expedition, carrying back heart as well as body to the scenes of before our marriage, has told me over again the story of my happiness. Marguerite, how to deserve it, this wonderful bliss? I study, I try, the dear Saint teaches me always many things—in vain! I am debtor to the whole world, and how much more to the gracious Power above worlds! But enough of this, my Pearl! Your time will come; till then you know nothing of it. I pant for your awakening, I burn, Marguerite, but I am powerless. If I had you here, there is a friend of ours, a paladin, a Roland, second only to my Jack—no! This makes you laugh, I feel it, I see your cool, pearly smile. I am angry with you for laughing, yet I laugh, too. So! now of other things. I think of you always; Jack also; I have told him so much, he assassinates himself with desire to see you all. The time will come! Marguerite—no matter! One word only! Our beloved Uncle's birthday; I remember the day, the Fourteenth. You will honor it, I know, as such a day should be honored, the day which blessed the earth with the best man—except one—that breathes mortal breath. Marguerite, if on that day a trifle should come from the far-away cousins, you will receive it kindly? Ah, how well I know the answer! Bless you, my treasure! I must go to my housekeeping. Dear Donito Miguelito is staying with us now; you can fancy the joy of tending this saintly old man in his feebleness. I prepare myself the little dishes that please him; it is a sacred task; it is like feeding a holy butterfly.

"Adios, my Marguerite!

"Ever and ever your devoted

"RITA.

"You ask of Concepcion. She is married to Diego Moreno, and, as I hear, is very unhappy. Poor woman, I compassionate her!"

After the reading of the letter, Grace slipped away to return to her patient, and the three cousins sat together, talking in low tones of Rita, and of Grace herself. Jean maintained stoutly that Rita could not be so fascinating as Grace. Peggy and

Margaret insisted that, though totally different in quality, neither could outdo the other in amount of charm.

"They are both the kind of girls you would do anything for!" said Peggy; "just anything in the world, no matter how foolish, just because they wanted you to. It isn't a thing you can describe; it just *is*, and nobody can help it."

"Well, I should think the difference would be in the kind of thing they would ask you to do," said Jean, with wisdom beyond her years. "Grace wouldn't ask you anything foolish, and I should think Cousin Rita might."

"Grace!" exclaimed Peggy; and then checked herself loyally. "Grace wasn't always so wise as she is now, young one!" she said, simply.

"Well, she's a dear, anyhow; I think Mrs. Peyton might have let her stay all night. It's horribly poky, with Uncle John and the boys and everybody away. Why, Margaret, there isn't a single man about the place, is there? Bannan drove them over, and then he was going to the cattle-show, and so was Michael. Suppose there should be robbers, or anything!"

"Suppose there should!" said Peggy, coolly. "If Frances and I and the dogs could not arrange matters with a robber, it would be a pity. Margaret—what is this queer light? Has everything turned red, all of a sudden?"

"A TALL, SLENDER FIGURE HALF RAN, HALF TOTTERED INTO THE ROOM."

"A TALL, SLENDER FIGURE HALF RAN, HALF TOTTERED INTO THE ROOM."

"The moon rises late to-night," said Margaret."I have no idea what time it is now. It seems an hour since Grace went."

"The moon isn't red, anyhow!" said Peggy. "I believe—"

As she spoke, she rose and went to the window. "Girls!" she cried. "There is a fire somewhere near. Come and look!"

Margaret and Jean pressed hastily forward to the window. It was a strange scene on which they looked. All of a sudden, the world seemed turned to red and black. A crimson light suffused the sky; against it the trees stood black as ebony. Even as they looked, a crest of flame sprang up above the tree-tops, wavered, and broke into a shower of sparks; at the same instant their nostrils were filled

with the acrid, pungent smell of wood smoke.

"Oh, what is it? Where can it be?" cried Margaret.

"Maybe it's only a bonfire!" said Jean.

Peggy shook her head. "Too big for a bonfire!" she said. "I'll go out and see, Margaret. What a pity the boys should miss it! I'll come back and let you know —mercy! what's this?"

The door opened, and a tall, slender figure half ran, half tottered into the room. "Margaret!" cried a wild voice of terror. "Margaret Montfort, save me!"

"Good heavens! Mrs. Peyton!"

"Yes, Emily Peyton. My house is burning. I ran all the way here. I—"

Margaret and Peggy caught her as she fell forward, and laid her on the sofa, and while Jean ran for water and Elizabeth, chafed her hands and her temples, looking the while anxiously at each other.

"Can you tell us what happened?" asked Margaret, trying to keep her voice quiet and even, for Mrs. Peyton was in the wildest agitation. "You escaped, thank Heaven! but—is the fire serious? Who is there now? Where is Grace Wolfe?"

"Don't leave me!" said the sick woman, with a ghastly look. "Margaret, if you leave me I shall die. She—she went back for the jewels. She is in the house now."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FIRE

The three girls reached the door in the same instant, but Mrs. Peyton followed, and still held Margaret's arm in a desperate clutch.

"Don't leave me!" she repeated. "Margaret, don't leave me to die!"

But Margaret put the clinging hands away. "You are not going to die," she said. "You are going to sit down in this chair, Mrs. Peyton, and be quiet till I come back. See, here is Elizabeth, with water and cologne, and everything comfortable. By and by you shall go up-stairs, but rest here now; nothing can happen to you, and I will come back as soon as I can."

Wondering at her own hardihood, Margaret ran out, shunning the wild pleading of the beautiful eyes which she knew were bent upon her. Jean was waiting for her on the step, but Peggy had disappeared.

"She said we were to go on," said Jean, "and she would catch us up. Which way, Margaret? I don't know the way."

Margaret led the way through the garden, running as she had never run before. They had not gone a hundred yards when Peggy was at their side. She had a coil of rope slung over her arm.

"It may be wanted," she said. "I remembered where it always hung. Oh, if the boys were only here!"

They ran on in silence, Margaret echoing the cry in her heart. At every step the glare grew brighter, the rolling smoke thicker. Margaret noticed, and wondered at herself for noticing, that the under side of some of the leaves above her head shone red like copper, while others were yellow as gold. Every patch of fern and brake, every leaf of box or holly, stood out, clear as at noonday.

On, down the long cedar alley, the dew dripping from the branches as they closed behind them; over the sunk fence, and across the lower garden to the summer-house, Hugh's summer-house. Once Margaret would have shuddered at the drop into the meadow below, but Grace's climbing lessons had not been

given in vain, and, without a moment's hesitation, she followed Peggy down the old willow-tree, landing knee-deep in fern below.

Now they could hear the roar of the flames, the crackling and snapping of burning wood, and, looking up, they saw on the brow of the rise beyond, the flames tossing and beckoning over the dark firs of Silverfield.

Five minutes more, and, breathless with running, they stood on the lawn before the burning house.

The side facing them was already wrapped in flames. Long wavering tongues shot through the open windows, and curled round the woodwork, lapping it; they purred and chuckled like live creatures over their food; they leaped up toward the roof, running along its edge, feeling their way higher and higher, while now and then one sprang aloft, tossing its scarlet crest over the rooftree itself. Evidently the fire had started in the upper story, for in the lower one, though the smoke poured dense and black through the open windows, there were no flames to be seen yet. Furniture, books, and knick-knacks of every description were scattered about the lawn in wild confusion, and two men, half stifled with smoke, were struggling frantically with a grand piano, one hacking at the window-frame with an axe to widen the opening, the other trying desperately to unscrew the legs, as if that would mend matters. Seven people out of ten, at a fire, will leave untouched pictures and books that can never be replaced, and spend their time and energies in trying to save the piano.

The group of frightened women huddled together on the lawn had made their attempt, too, to save some of their mistress's property. Even in her terror and anguish, Margaret could hardly keep back the thought of a smile at their aspect. One clasped a sofa-pillow, one a pair of vases. A stout woman, evidently the cook, had a porcelain kettle on either arm, and another on her head, while her hands clutched a variety of spoons, ladles, cups, and dippers. She evidently had her wits about her more than the others, and she was scolding the parlor-maid, a trembling, weeping creature, who was holding a small china bowl in both hands, as if it were a royal treasure.

"She likes her malted milk in it, you know she does, Mary," said the girl. "Only yesterday she was telling me never bring her any bowl except this. It's cruel of you to harry me for trying to save what she likes."

"You green goose! What will she want wid the bowl and you not leaving her a spoon to sup wid! Where is the key of the safe, I'm askin' ye! Maybe James

could get it out yet."

"Oh, I don't know! I don't know! I expect I dropped it. I was going to get the silver myself; I'd ha' got all of it, without you telling me, but when I opened the pantry door, the fire leapt out at me, roaring like the pit, and I dropped the key and run. I'm awful sorry, but I've got the bowl, and I do wish you'd let me be."

A little apart stood Antonia, the French maid, bearing on her outstretched arms a superb tea-gown of violet velvet, embroidered with pearls. On it lay a pile of costly laces, slightly blackened by smoke, but uninjured. Antonia had done her best, and had saved the treasure of her heart. Margaret ran up to her.

"Antonia, where is Miss Wolfe?"

The woman did not seem to hear the question, but burst into agitated speech. "Oh, mademoiselle, mademoiselle!" she cried. "Ah, the tragedy! of all the robes arrived from Paris last week, but only last week, this only remaining! It was all I could save, all! I tried; I burned myself the hands, mademoiselle, to rescue the others, the blue crape, the adorable lace *jacquettes*, the *satin rose-thè*—in vain, all gone, all devoured! *Mon Dieu*, and madame had not even had them on! But the lace, Mademoiselle Montfort, the point d'Alençon, the Valenciennes, all, I have it safe. See, mademoiselle, regard for yourself, *un peu noirci*, a leetle blackened, *voilà tout!* It is without price, the point d'Alençon, you know, Mademoiselle Marguerite."

"Antonia, do you hear me? What do I care about the laces? Where is Miss Wolfe?"

"She's mazed, miss!" said Mary, the cook. "She can't talk about nothin' but that stuff. Sure Miss Wolfe is at Fernley wid the mistress. It's wondher ye didn't meet them on the way, miss. She went wid Mrs. Peyton, and me and the other girls stopped behind to see what we could save."

"Oh, no!" cried Margaret. "Mrs. Peyton came alone. She said Miss Wolfe came back—for the jewels. She said she was in the house now."

"Lord help her then!" said the parlor-maid. "If she's in the house now, she's as good as dead, and worse, too. The stairs has fallen in; Thomas seen 'em fall. Oh, dear! oh, dear! what an awful time!"

"Be still, Eliza!" said the cook. "Where's Jenny? She was in the sewing-room, next to Miss Wolfe's; maybe she'd know something. Who saw Jenny since we

come out? Good Lord, where is the child? I thought she come with me."

"Oh, Jenny's all right!" moaned Eliza. "She'll have gone straight home. She was going home to spend the night anyway, Mary; don't be scaring us worse. It's bad enough to lose Miss Wolfe, poor young lady, and she so bold and daring!"

"*Hold your tongue!*" said Peggy. "Listen to me, girls, and answer plainly, and not all at once like a flock of foolish sheep. Did any one see Miss Wolfe go into the house?"

"No, miss, no; we see her go with Mrs. Peyton, and we never thought but she was all right."

"She may not be there after all!" said Peggy. "Her room is on the other side, isn't it, Margaret? Come on!"

They ran round to the other side of the house. This was apparently still untouched, though the fiery tongues came darting over the rooftree every now and then, hissing and lapping, and the roof itself was covered with sparks and great patches of burning tinder, fragments of the costly stuffs and tissues that the house-owner had so dearly prized. The windows were closed and silent, but all was bright as day in the red glare of the fire.

"Call, Peggy!" whispered Margaret. "I have no voice."

Even as she spoke, a window in the second story was thrown up, and there stood Grace herself, very pale, but quiet as usual.

"There's a young woman faint here," she said. "Too much smoke. The stairs are gone. Is there a ladder, Peggy? Ah, rope! Much better. Clever child! When I say three—throw!"

Oh, the good days on the Western farm, when little Peggy, on her rough pony, scampered here and there, lassoing the sheep and calves, and getting well scolded in consequence! Oh, the other good days at school, where nerve and muscle learned to follow the quick eye, so that thought and action seemed to flash together!

The rope hissed upward like a flying snake, but a cloud of smoke drove past the window, and the outstretched hands missed it. Again it flew, and this time it was caught, drawn up, and knotted tight inside the window.

"Now if I had a ladder!" muttered Peggy.

"I saw one," cried Margaret; "I am sure I did. Wait!"

She flew off, and returned followed by a boy with a ladder. It proved short by several feet.

"Oh, what shall we do!" cried Margaret.

"Hold the ladder steady!" said Peggy. "She'll see to that end, and I can manage this. Hold it!"

Margaret and the boy grasped the ladder; Peggy ran up it, and stood on the top rung, holding the lower end of the rope.

"All ready, Goat!" she called.

"Ay, ay!" said the quiet voice within. "Coming, Innocent!"

The women had followed Margaret and Peggy, and now a cry broke from them.

"She's got her!"

'"Tis Jenny! She was in there all the time!"

"She's dead!"

"She's not; she's living, I see her move. Oh, Mother of Mercy, they'll both be killed before their own eyes!"

What was Grace doing? The form she held in her arms was that of a slight girl of fifteen or so. She was knotting something round her, under arms and over breast; something half sling, half rope; towels, perhaps, tied strongly together. Now she brought the ends over her own shoulders, bending forward.

"Now, Peggy!"

"Now!"

With the unconscious child bound to her back, Grace leaned out and grasped the rope; another moment and she was swinging on it, clinging with hands and feet, the old school way.

Margaret covered her face with her hand and prayed. Peggy, steadying the

rope with one hand, held out the other, and waited.

Down, hand over hand! Slender hands, to bear the double burden. Delicate shoulders, to carry the dead weight that hangs on them. Are they elastic steel, those fingers that grip the rope, never slipping, never relaxing their hold?

Down, hand over hand! the hands are bleeding now; no matter! the white dress is black with smoke, and blood drips on it here and there; what of that? it is nearly over.

"Now?" Peggy asked, quietly.

"Now!"

Steadying herself, Peggy left the rope, and received the burden in her arms. Grace, holding the rope with one hand, with the other loosed the knot, and laid the limp arms over Peggy's neck.

"All right?" she said.

"All right!"

"*Ainsi long!*" and as Peggy carefully slowly descended the ladder, Grace turned and began quickly and steadily to climb the rope again.

"Grace! Grace!" cried Margaret. "For God's sake, what are you about? Come down! There is no time to lose; come down!"

"And behold, all is vanity!" said Grace; and she disappeared inside the burning house.

But Margaret could bear no more. She helped to take the senseless girl from Peggy's arms and lay her on the grass; then the world seemed to slip from her, and she dropped quietly with her head on Jenny's shoulder.

CHAPTER XV.

JEWELS: AND AN AWAKENING

"Are you better?" said Gerald. "Are you truly better, Miss Margaret? I am going to drown myself anyhow in the first bucket I find, and if you don't feel better I shall make it a dipper, and that would be so inconvenient, don't you know?"

Margaret looked at him, only half hearing what he said.

"Yes, I am better; I am very well, thank you. What happened? Did I faint?"

"Yes! you fainted, just as we came up. They wanted to pour water over you, but I always think it's such a shame, in books, to spoil their clothes, and you have such pretty clothes. So I wouldn't let them. It wasn't Peggy, it was a lot of fool cooks and things."

"Did something hurt me?" asked Margaret, vaguely, still feeling that she was somebody else making friendly inquiries about herself.

"Yes, I—I pinched you, you dear, sweet, pretty—at least, I don't mean that! at least I do mean it, every word, only highly improper under the circumstances, but I don't care so long as you are better."

Making a strong effort, Margaret sat up and looked about her. She was still on the Silverfield lawn, but some one had drawn her away from the neighborhood of the burning house, now a shapeless mass, though still burning fiercely, and had pillowed her head on a rolled-up coat. Her companion was in his shirt-sleeves, so it was evident whose coat it was.

As she gazed at the blazing ruins, memory came back in a flood.

"Grace!" she cried, wildly. "Where is Grace?"

"Safe," said Gerald, quickly. "Safe and sound. Not a hair singed, though it sounds impossible. Most astonishing person I ever saw in my life. Came down the rope like a foretopman, hung all over with jewels: brooches, chains, and owches, you know,—Scripture,—kind of rope-walking Tiffany. You never saw

such a thing in your life. Hadn't much more than touched the ground, when the roof fell in. Standing luck of the British Army, I call that!"

"Oh, thank God! thank God! but where is she? where are they all?"

"Mostly gone to take the fainted girl home. She didn't come to just right; choked with the smoke, Hugh thought. Phil and Peggy are carrying her, and Miss Wolfe giving moral support. Hugh has gone for the nearest doctor. The fool cooks have gone in search of their wits, I suppose; they didn't seem to be anywhere round here."

"And—Jean? she was here too; is she all right?"

Gerald hung his head. "She was left to take care of you," he said. "I told her I was a medical man, which is strictly untrue, and asked her to go back to Fernley to get something, cologne, or rum, or mustard,—I forget what I did say. The women bothered and made a noise, so I advised them to proceed in the direction of Jericho. Great place, Jericho! They went—there or elsewhere. Don't get up yet, please don't! it's always better to lie still after a fire, or a faint; how much more after both combined!"

"Oh, I must!" said Margaret. "I must go home at once, Mr. Merryweather, truly. Oh, thank you, but I can get up perfectly well—only my head is queer still. I wish—why did you send Jean away?"

"I didn't want her," said Gerald, meekly. "You looked so pretty—"

"Please don't talk nonsense!"

"I'm not. It's my truthful nature. It comes out in spots, like measles, in spite of me. When I was only six years old, I told my nurse she was a hideous old squunt, and she was. Fact, or at least justifiable fiction. If you must get up, won't you take poor Jerry's arm? just once, before he drowns himself? it's your last chance!"

"What *do* you mean? Why should you drown yourself?"

"Because I missed all the fun, and let you faint, and Miss Wolfe get nearly burned up, and Miss Peggy a sight to behold with smoke and water, and Hugh all tied up in t l k's, and all for a day's yachting. Not that it wasn't great yachting, but there is a sense of proportion."

"What are t l k's?" asked Margaret, smiling faintly. She was recovering her composure, and Gerald noted with inward thankfulness her returning color. His running fire of nonsense, kept up in the hope of rousing her to interest, covered an anxious heart, but he gave no sign.

"T l k's? true lover's knots! none of my business, of course, but the professor appears to be interested in the fair acrobat—acrobatess—acrobatia—what you will! Give you my word, when he came round the corner and saw her coming down that rope, I thought he would curl up into knots himself. Jolly stunt! when I first came I was awfully afraid—" Gerald pulled himself up suddenly, and blushed scarlet.

"Afraid?" said Margaret, innocently. "Afraid of what?"

"Of bats! When they squeak, I desire to pass away."

"Mr. Merryweather!"

"If you call me Mr. Merryweather any more, I *shall* pass away, without benefit of buckets. Say Gerald! just try it, and see how pretty it sounds. Gerald! 'tis a melting mouthful! Sentimental, if you will, but what then?"

Margaret laughed in spite of herself. "I must say, as Frances did, I never see such a bold boy since born I was!" she said. "Well, Gerald, then; and now, Gerald, here we are at the house, and would you please go round the north way, and not come into the library just now? Thank you ever so much for helping me! No, I must go in, I truly must."

Mrs. Peyton was sitting bolt upright on the sofa on which they had laid her. Her face was absolutely colorless; it might have been an ivory statue, but for the ghastly look of the blue eyes. She fixed her eyes on Margaret, but said nothing. Margaret ran to her, and put her arms round her. "Oh, how could they leave you alone?" she cried. "She is safe; every one is safe, dear Mrs. Peyton. No one hurt, only Jenny overcome with the smoke a little. I thought Jean would have told you."

The ivory figure began to tremble. With shaking hands she tried to put Margaret away from her; then, with a sudden revulsion of feeling, she clung to

her and burst into tears.

"I sent them away!" she whispered through her sobs. "I would not have them look at me. Margaret—are you sure? that girl, is she truly safe?"

"Truly and honestly, dear Mrs. Peyton. It was a most marvellous escape, but she is absolutely unharmed, and she saved another life beside her own. But for Grace, poor little Jenny must have been lost. She is a heroine, our Grace!"

"I did not mean to kill her!" said the poor woman. "I did not realize what it meant. I said, 'My jewels! my jewels!' and I don't know what other nonsense. She never said a word, just turned and went back. Then—oh! then, when you were all gone, I understood, I saw, that I had sent her to her death for those—those horrible things. Never—never let me see them again! I have been sitting here—years, it seems to me—waiting to hear that she was dead; perhaps to see her body brought in, all—"

"Oh, hush, hush, Mrs. Peyton! You will make yourself ill. You are only distressing yourself beyond all need. She is safe, I tell you. In a few moments you will see for yourself—"

At this moment the door opened, and Grace stood before them. She was a strange figure indeed. Black with smoke, her fair hair gray with ashes, her dress torn and discolored; but sparkling with jewels as never was any ballroom belle. Superb necklaces of diamond and emerald hung around her neck; her arms glittered with bracelets, her fingers were loaded with rings, while ropes of amethyst and pearl were wound around her head and even about her waist.

"All the way over," said Grace, "I have been pitying the robber who didn't meet me, and so lost the great chance of his life. So sad for him!"

Margaret recalled Gerald's expression, "a rope-walking Tiffany," and could not help smiling in spite of her anxiety; but Mrs. Peyton hid her face in her hands.

"Take them away!" she said. "Take them off, Grace! I never want to see them again. Horrible things, all blood and flame! who knows how many other lives they have cost? and it is no fault of mine that they have not cost yours. No fault of mine!"

This was so true, that neither Grace nor Margaret spoke. Mrs. Peyton rose, and moved restlessly about the room.

"Incidentally," she said, "I have got well."

Grace glanced at Margaret, but still neither spoke. Mrs. Peyton gave Grace a strange look. "You didn't set fire to the house deliberately, I suppose?" she said.

"I did not!" said Grace, bluntly. "To be honest, I have thought of it—thought, I mean, of the effect it might produce; but it isn't a thing one does in general society."

"I remember!" said Mrs. Peyton, dreamily. "I remember. I did it myself."

"Did it yourself?" cried Margaret, aghast. Grace was silent.

"I threw the candle down. I had been looking in the glass, and I found a new wrinkle, a horrible one. I threw the candle down, and it fell on a roll of cotton wool. How it went! I can hear the sound now, and see the fire run—run!"

"I wouldn't talk about it any more," said Grace, quietly.

"I must. I must tell it all. She—Grace, there—found me; it had caught my bed, and the curtains were blazing. She carried me out of the room and down the stairs herself. What is she made of? She isn't so tall as I. Then—at the door—she set me down and told me to run, and I ran. We ran together, till the devil brought these things into my mind, and I sent her back to be burned up for my vanity."

"I wasn't burned up," said Grace, composedly; "and as you remarked just now, Mrs. Peyton, you have got well. Do you want to know what I think?"

"Yes, Grace—"

"I think—that the game was worth the candle!"

CHAPTER XVI.

FOR AULD LANG SYNE

"Confess that I have surprised you, John Montfort!" said Mrs. Peyton.

"I do confess it, Emily," Mr. Montfort answered, gravely. "But I am truly glad that my house has been able to afford you shelter when you were in need of it."

"That is as much as to say, that under other circumstances—never mind! I am not going to quarrel with you, John."

"I trust not," said Mr. Montfort, still speaking with grave courtesy.

If Margaret had been present, she would have wondered at the change in her uncle's face. The warmth, the genial light of kindness, was clean gone out of it; it was an older and a sterner man who sat in the great armchair and looked steadily and quietly at his visitor.

Mrs. Peyton smiled, then frowned; at last she sighed.

"I never meant to hurt you, John," she said, softly. "Thirty years is a long time to hate a person who—who never hated you."

"I have never hated you, Emily," said Mr. Montfort, not unkindly. "Our paths have not crossed—"

Mrs. Peyton laughed. "No, they have not crossed. You took care of that. They have only run alongside each other—with the garden wall between."

"And nothing else?" said John Montfort.

She was silent for a moment. Then, "I never meant to make trouble between you and Rose!"

"You never did," said Mr. Montfort, tranquilly.

"I know! but—you thought I tried. I did tell you a lie that night, when I said she would not see you. How could I know that she was going to die before you came back from the West? I—I wanted to see you myself; that was no such

dreadful sin, was it? I was sorry—sorry, I tell you, when I heard of her death. Thirty years ago, and I have never been able to speak to you alone till to-day. I—I had to burn my house down to get a chance to make my peace with you, John Montfort. No, I don't mean that I did it on purpose, though I am not sure that it wouldn't—aren't you going to forgive me, John, after all these years?"

Mr. Montfort rose. He was very pale, but he spoke steadily. "Emily, it is hardly strange that I do not care to open old wounds. If I have been unkind, I am sorry for it. I do forgive you, fully and freely. Now, let the past alone. What can I do for you in the present, and how help you to provide for the future? I have not been a good neighbor, I confess it; I will try to prove myself a better one henceforward."

Mrs. Peyton laughed her little mocking laugh. "It will be easier than you think, John. I am going to Europe, and I don't know whether I shall ever come back."

"Going to Europe, Emily? Are you strong enough?"

"I am perfectly well!" said Mrs. Peyton, simply. "Doctor Flower has been telling me for several years that there was nothing really the matter with me any more, and that I could be well if I wanted. Grace Wolfe made me feel the same thing. Well, now I do want it. The fire lighted up a good many things for me, and showed me the way. I have no house to live in; I am alone in the world; I may as well be doing things as staying in bed, of which I am really very tired. I am writing to my man of business to take places for Antonia and me on next week's steamer for Paris. I've half a mind to take Grace Wolfe, too, if she will go."

"I have asked Grace to make her home with us for the present," said Mr. Montfort, quickly. "Next year I expect to take her and Margaret abroad together."

Mrs. Peyton laughed again. "I can't even have her! Well—never mind. I love her, but she frightens me. She might have catalepsy again,—though I rather think that was a clever device for getting me out of bed,—and I want to forget everything connected with sickness. But—John—there is something you can do for me. This girl risked her life to save my jewels, the playthings I have tried to amuse myself with these many years. I want you to sell them for me, and give her the money."

"Sell your jewels, Emily!"

"Yes. I never want to see them again." She shuddered slightly, but her voice was firm and steady.

"They are all here, in this basket. Lock them up now, and the next time you go to town sell them, and invest the money for Grace Wolfe. Will you do this for me, John? It is the only thing I shall ever be likely to ask you."

"Indeed I will, Emily!" said Mr. Montfort, speaking with much more warmth than he had hitherto shown. "It will be a grateful commission. Shall I look?—these things are of great value, Emily. There are thousands of dollars' worth of trump—of trinkets here."

"So much the better for Grace!"

"There is nothing you would like to keep? None of these diamonds?"

"No; I detest diamonds! When a complexion begins to go—never mind! Stay, though! Margaret liked that pink pearl; sweet little prim Margaret, who has given me most of the little pleasure I have had these last three years. You'll let her have it, John? I beg you to let me give it to her!"

"Surely, surely, my dear Emily. It is a beautiful gem, and I am glad that my Margaret should have something to remember you by while you are gone. And now shake hands, for I must be off."

"You are going away?"

"For the night only. I was to have spent two or three days in town on business, but hurried home on hearing of the fire. I shall be back to-morrow, or next day at latest."

"And—I may stay here till then, John?"

"My dear Emily, I earnestly beg that you will stay as long as it is convenient to you. You must have many things to arrange; pray consider Fernley as your own house until you have everything comfortably settled."

"Thank you, John! I heard your own voice then, the kindest voice that—good-by, John Montfort!"

"Gone, you say, Margaret? When did she go? I fully expected to see her again."

"This afternoon, Uncle John. We could not persuade her to stay longer. Her man of business came down this morning early, and arranged everything with the farmer and the servants, and finally took her and Antonia back with him. It is very sudden! I should be frightened at her attempting the voyage, but Grace says it is just what Doctor Flower has been wishing and hoping for. Poor Mrs. Peyton! I shall miss her very much, Uncle John. She is very, very lovable; and, somehow, these few days have so softened and changed her—I hardly know how to put it, but it is as if her heart had waked up after a long sleep."

"Perhaps it has!" said Mr. Montfort, thoughtfully. "Poor Emily! she has had an unhappy life; yet when she was your age, Margaret, Emily Silverton thought she had the world at her feet. Life is instructive, my child. Did she tell you what she had done about Grace?"

Margaret shook her head. "She said you would have something to tell me, but she would not say anything more. She was bent on keeping control over her nerves, I think, so I tried just to keep things quiet and cheerful, and I saw that was what she wanted. What is it about Grace?"

Thereupon Mr. Montfort told the story of the jewels, and how he had taken them to town with him the day before. "It will be a great change for our Grace," he said. "She has had very little money, I think you told me, Margaret?"

"Oh, almost none, Uncle John. She has had a very, very hard time; and since her father died last year—she seems to have no other relations—she has supported herself entirely. Oh, this is a kind thing of Mrs. Peyton; and I understand just how she feels and why she wants to do it. Aren't the jewels worth a good deal, Uncle John?"

"Guess how much, little girl!"

"How can I? Perhaps as much as a thousand dollars? Oh, Uncle John!"

"Perhaps, Margaret; my child, Tiffany's head man thinks,—he could not price them all exactly,—but, roughly speaking, he thinks—that this collection is worth —fifty thousand dollars. Grace is, comparatively speaking, a rich woman."

Margaret stood speechless, in utter amazement. At this moment there was a sound, as of a book falling to the ground, and a smothered exclamation. Both

started and looked round, as Hugh Montfort rose from the corner where he had been seated and came slowly forward. He was very pale, and seemed to bear more heavily on his stick than usual.

"You knew I was here, Margaret?" he said, with a look that tried to be unconcerned. "I trust I have not overheard anything that I should not. I was writing, and thought you saw me when you came in."

"No secrets, my boy, no secrets!" said Mr. Montfort, heartily. "You heard this great piece of news about our little friend, did you? She does not know it herself yet; Margaret must tell her. Margaret, you have deserved this pleasure, my dear, and I rejoice in making it over to you."

The good man was glowing with pleasure and good will; but for once he met no response from Hugh, who, pale and gloomy, stared before him as if he had seen a ghost.

"My dear fellow," cried Mr. Montfort, changing his tone at once, "you are not well. How pale you are! or—you have had no bad news, Hugh? Nobody ill at home, eh? Your father—"

"No, no, sir, all well! Father is in perfect trim; I have just been reading a letter from him, Uncle John; you must hear it, sometime when you are not busy. Don't look at me like that, Margaret! I—my head aches a little, if I must confess. Did you never see any one with a headache before?"

Was it possible that Hugh was out of temper? Neither Mr. Montfort nor Margaret could believe it at first; both gazed at him, expecting the usual kindly smile to begin in his eyes and break gradually over his face; but no smile came. Mr. Montfort, who had lived many years and seen many things, was the first to recover himself; he passed Hugh with a friendly pat on the shoulder, and, nodding to Margaret, went out of the room. Margaret remained still, looking earnestly in her cousin's face, unconscious of offence.

"Dear Hugh," she said, affectionately, "I am so sorry! Let me get you something—one of those tablets that relieved you last time."

"No, no!" said Hugh. "It is nothing, Margaret, nothing at all. So Miss Wolfe is a rich woman, is she, and spoilt for life? And you are glad, you and Uncle John! Well, I am sorry, for my part; sorry from the bottom of my heart. It is an iniquity."

"Hugh!"

"It is! She will grow into an idle fine lady, like this very Mrs. Peyton, who throws about her gewgaws at every whim. Her life will be frittered away over dresses and frippery and fashion. Instead of a worker, a real woman, with a woman's work and aims, you will have a butterfly, pretty and useless, fluttering about in the sunshine, unable to bear rough weather. A fine piece of work it will be, the ruining of a girl like that."

Margaret stood aghast, and for a few moments found no words. Her cousin's face showed that he was only too deeply in earnest; his eyes glowed with sombre fire, and a dark red spot burned in his cheek. When Margaret did speak at last, her eyes were tender, but her voice was grave, almost stern. "Hugh," she said, "I hardly know you; and I see that you do not know Grace in the least. I thought—I thought you did—understand her, better perhaps than any one else did; but if you can say such things as these, I see I was utterly mistaken. She, spoiled by a little prosperity? Oh, how can you? For shame, Hugh!"

Hugh looked up at her suddenly. "Oh, Margaret!" he said. "Margaret, have patience with me! I—I am not myself to-day. My head—there is something wrong with me."

"Yes, dear," said Margaret, tenderly. "Go and lie down, Hugh, won't you? And I'll bring you some cracked ice. That always helps a little."

"I don't want to lie down, and I don't want any cracked ice; thank you all the same, good little sister-cousin! I'll go out into the garden, I think. The trees will be the best thing for me to-day. And—Margaret—forget what I said, will you? It is none of my business, of course; only—good-by, little girl!"

CHAPTER XVII.

IN THE GARDEN

"But, Grace—"

"But-ter, Margaret!"

"My dear, please don't be absurd!"

"My angel, I am not half so absurd as you are. Why, in the name of all that is incongruous, should I take this lady's money? Is thy servant a dog, that she should do this thing?"

"Listen, Grace! You are wholly, utterly wrong. Listen to me! Let us sit down here by the summer-house and have it out. No, you have said enough; it is my turn now. You talk about yourself, and your independence and freedom, and I don't know what. My dear, I want you to forget yourself, and think of her."

"Of her? What difference does it make to her?"

"All the difference in the world, it may be. What is that noise?"

"It is I!" said Hugh, emerging from the summer-house. "I seem fated to be an eavesdropper, and yet I am not one by nature. Pardon me, young ladies!"

He was about to pass them with a formal bow, but Margaret, with a sudden inspiration, caught his arm. "No!" she cried, "I want you to hear what I am going to say. You, too, misunderstand—sit down, Hugh, and listen! Please!" she added, in the tone that seldom failed to win any heart.

Hugh hesitated, but finally sat down, looking very grim, and stared at the box-tree in front of him. Margaret went on, hurriedly, moved for once out of her gentle calm.

"This lady—I must speak plainly, though she is my friend—has lived a selfish, empty, idle life. She was very beautiful and very rich, really one of the great beauties and heiresses, and—and that was all. She was brought up by a worldly aunt—her mother died when she was little—and married to some one

whom she cannot have cared for very much, I am afraid; and she never had any children. Then came all this ill health. Oh, Grace, I can't help it if it wasn't all real, she certainly has suffered a great deal; and through it all she has been alone, loving no one, and with no one to love her. She will not see any of her own people, cousins—she has no one nearer; she says they are all mercenary. I don't know, of course, but it is one of the terrible things about having a great deal of money, that you think everybody wants it, whether they do or not. Now, at last, before it was too late,—oh, I am so thankful for that,—the change has come. She has waked up, and it is all owing to you, Grace. Yes, it is! I have been fond of her, and she has petted me, and been very good to me, and given me things, but I never could open her eyes, try as I would. Now, you have done it, dear. You not only saved her life actually—yes, you did, Grace; she told me all about it; she never would have got out of that room alive but for you—you not only saved her life, but you have given her some idea of how to live. She wants to do something in return. It is the first time, I do believe, that she has wanted *really* to help some one else. When she gave me prettinesses, it was because it amused her to do it, not because I needed them, nor because she was thinking specially about me.

"Grace, if you refuse this; if you shut back the kindly impulse, the desire to help some one, I tell you you will be doing a wrong thing. It is nothing in the world but pride, selfish pride, that is speaking in you. Tell me again—tell Hugh, what Mrs. Peyton said to you when she went away."

"She said—" Grace's voice had not its usual cool evenness, but was husky, and faltered now and then—"she said, 'Do not refuse my last wish! I do not tell you what it is, for fear you should refuse at once, and shut me up with myself again. Do not refuse, for the sake of Christian kindness, of which I have known nothing hitherto, but which I mean to learn something about if I can.'"

"And then?"

"And then—she kissed me—Margaret, it is brutal of you to make me tell this! —she kissed me twice, and said—" Grace's voice broke. "I—cannot!" she faltered.

Margaret rose to her feet with a sudden impulse. "Hark!" she said. "Is that Uncle John calling me? Wait here, please, both of you!" and she ran off, never looking behind her. It was the first and last deceitful act of Margaret Montfort's life.

There was a long silence. Hugh Montfort stared at the box-tree. Grace cried a

little, quietly; then wiped away her tears, not noticing them much, and observed an ant running along the path. At last, "Well?" said Hugh.

"Well!" said Grace. "I am sorry to have made such a spectacle of myself. Is there anything to say?"

Hugh plucked a box-leaf and scrutinized it carefully.

"They make these things so even!" he said.

"Machinery never could—Let me tell you a story. Do you mind? Once upon a time there was a man—or—well, call him a man! He was part of one, anyhow, as much as accident allowed. He was not strong, but he could work, and he meant to work, and do things he cared about, and lead as good a life as he knew how. He had been a good deal alone, somehow, though he had dear good people of his own; he was an odd stick, I suppose, as odd as the one he walked with."

He stopped, glanced at his stick, with its handle worn smooth as glass; then he went on.

"He had never seen much of women, except his own family; never thought about them much as individuals, though always in his mind there was a dream—I suppose all men have it—of some one he should meet some day, who would turn the world from gray to gold. One day—he saw a vision; and—after that—he learned, not all at once, but little by little, that life was not full and rounded, as he had thought it, but empty and one-sided and unprofitable, if this vision could not be always before his eyes; if this one woman could not come into his life, to be his star, his light, his joy and happiness. She was poor, like himself. He thought of working for her, of sharing with her the honest, laborious, perhaps helpful life he had planned, the life of a Western forester, living among the woods and mountains, studying the trees he loved, learning the secrets of nature at first hand, teaching his beloved all the little he knew, and learning more, a thousandfold more, from every look of her eyes, every tone of her wonderful voice.

"Well—while he dreamed—something happened. Suddenly, by a wave of a wand, as in the fairy tales, his maiden was transformed. Instead of the orphan girl, working bravely with her brave hands to earn her bread, he saw—a rich woman! saw the woman he loved condemned by the idle whim of an idle pleasure-seeker to sit with folded hands, or play with toys and trinkets. He was filled with rage; he hated the very sound of the word money, because—it seemed

to him that this money would rob him of his darling. I—he—"

Hugh broke off suddenly. "I am the greatest fool in the world!" he said. "Grace, do you understand me? Do you know what I am trying to say?"

It was the merest whisper that replied, "I don't—know—"

"Yes, you do." Hugh caught the slender hands, and held them close. "You know, you must know, that I have cared for you ever since that first wonderful moment, when you broke through the leaves like sunshine, and I saw the face I had dreamed of all my life. You must have felt it, all these weeks. Oh, Margaret is right, I suppose. All she says is true enough; if you can help this poor woman by taking her wretched money, I suppose you will have to do it. But—but I lose my princess, before ever I could win her. I can't ask a rich woman to be my wife."

While Hugh was speaking, Grace's head had drooped lower and lower, as if she shrank under the weight that was laid upon her; but now she looked up bravely, with a lovely light in her eyes. "Can't you, Hugh?" she said. "It's a pity you can't, Hugh, because—you could have her for the asking."

CHAPTER XVIII.

UNCLE JOHN'S BIRTHDAY

If Timothy Bannan has had scant mention in these pages, it is not because he was not an important personage at Fernley. King of the stable, governor of the dogs, chief authority on all matters pertaining to what Gerald called "four-leggers," he was as much a part of the establishment as Frances herself. In person he was a small man, with reddish-gray whiskers, an obstinate chin, and a kindly twinkling eye. He usually wore a red waistcoat with black sleeves, and he was suspected of matrimonial designs on Elizabeth.

One morning, not long after the events of which I have been telling, Bannan approached his master, who was tying up roses, Margaret, as usual, attending him with shears and ball of twine.

"If you please, sir," said Bannan, touching his hat, "would it be convenient for me to take a horse this evening, sir?"

Mr. Montfort straightened himself, and looked with friendly interest at his retainer.

"A horse, Bannan? Certainly! What horse do you want?"

Bannan looked embarrassed. "I was thinking of taking Chief, if you was anyways willing, sir." Now Chief was the pride of the Fernley stable. Mr. Montfort opened his eyes a little.

"Going far, Bannan?"

"N—not so very far, sir. I was wishful to try him with the new cart, if you had no objections."

The new cart was a particularly stylish and comfortable wagonette, bought for Margaret to take her young friends out in, and Mr. Montfort's eyes opened still wider.

"Well, Bannan—of course you will be careful. You want to take some friends out, eh?"

This simple question seemed to embarrass Bannan strangely. He reddened, and taking off his cap, turned it round and round in his hands. "No, sir, I shouldn't presume—that is to say, not exactly friends, sir, and yet not anyways the reverse. But if it's not agreeable to you, sir, I'll take the old mare and the Concord wagon."

"No, no," said Mr. Montfort, kindly. "Take Chief and the cart by all means, Bannan. I wish you a pleasant drive with your—friends." Bannan thanked him and withdrew, and Mr. Montfort turned to Margaret with a smile and a sigh. "Does that mean Elizabeth and matrimony, Margaret? What will Frances say?"

"Indeed, Uncle, I am quite sure that Elizabeth would disapprove as much as Frances of Bannan's taking Chief and the wagonette. You are too indulgent, dear sir."

"I suppose I am," said Mr. Montfort. "I suppose, also, that I am too old to change. But I never knew Bannan to do such a thing before."

Meanwhile, Bannan was standing at the kitchen door, fuming. "If ever I do sich a thing again, Frances, you may cut me up and serve me in a gravy-boat."

"Nobody'd touch ye!" said Frances. "Ye've got to have juice to make gravy, ye little bones-bag. I told ye let me see to it; men-folks always messes when they try to manage nice things. It's like as if you started to whip cream with a garding hose."

"I don't care!" said Bannan. "'Twas me the telegram come to, and 'twas me they expected to see to it. You'd like to boss everything and everybody on the place, Frances."

"I'll boss you with this mop, little man, if you give me any sauce," said Frances, with massive calm. "Go away now and feed your beasts; it's what you're best at."

"But you'll have the supper ready and all, Frances? If I can feed beasts, you can feed their masters, I'm bound to own that," said Bannan, presenting this transparent sop with an air of hopeful diffidence.

"Go 'long with ye!" said Frances, loftily, yet with a suggestion of softening in her voice. "I've kep' Mr. John's birthday for twenty years, but I reckon you'd better tell me how to do it this time."

"And you'll tell nobody about—them—"

But here Frances raised the mop with such a businesslike air that Bannan took himself off, grumbling and shaking his head.

Left alone, Frances fell into a frenzy of preparation, and when Margaret found her half an hour later, she was beating eggs, stoning raisins, and creaming butter, apparently all at the same moment. An ardent consultation followed. What flavor would Mr. John (Frances would never say Mr. Montfort) like best for the ice-cream? and the cake—would a caramel frosting be best, or a boiled frosting with candied fruits chopped into it? and for the small cakes, now, and the tartlets?

Mr. Montfort's birthday came, as most birthdays do, once a year. Considering this, it was a singular thing that he, the most methodical of men, who turned his calendar as regularly as he wound his watch, never seemed to remember it. He never failed to be astonished at Margaret's morning greeting. More than this, he apparently forgot it as soon as it was over, for he always had a fresh stock of astonishment on hand for the health-imperilling feast that Frances was sure to arrange for the evening. To-day he took no notice of the fact that wherever he went he came upon some girl or boy carrying armfuls of flowers and ferns, or arranging them in bowls, jars, and vases. When he found his desk heaped with a tangle of clematis and wild lilies,—Peggy had dropped them there "just for a minute," half an hour before,—this excellent man merely said "Charming," and rescued his pet Montaigne from the wet sprays which covered it. In the course of the morning, Fernley House was transformed into a bower of greenery, lit up with masses of splendid color. Everywhere drooped or nodded clusters of ferns, the ostrich fern and the great Osmunda Regalis, with here and there masses of maiden-hair, most delicate and beautiful of all. In the library, especially, the ferns were arranged with all the skill and care that Margaret possessed. They outlined the oaken shelves, their delicate tracery seeming to lie lovingly against the rich mellow tints of morocco and vellum; they waved from tall vases of crystal and porcelain; they spread their lace-like fronds in flat bowls and dishes. "I don't see how there can be any left," said Peggy; "it seems as if we had all the ferns in the world, and yet in the woods it didn't seem to make any difference. Oh, Jean, isn't it just splendid!"

"Corking!" said Jean.

"Jean, I won't have you say that."

"Well, the Merryweathers say it all the time, Peggy. They never say anything else, except when Margaret is round; you know they don't."

"The Merryweathers are boys, and you are a girl, and there is all the difference in the world," said Peggy, loftily. "Jean, it is high time you went to school."

"Oh, bother school! I have two ponies to break this fall, and Pa has promised to let me drive the reaper around the hundred-acre field."

Peggy said nothing, being a wise as well as an affectionate elder sister; but she resolved to consult Hugh, and to write to "Pa" without delay.

So the morning passed in preparation and mystery. Then in the afternoon came a drive in the great open car, a delightful vehicle, holding eight people comfortably. Peggy sat on the box—happy Peggy!—and drove the spirited black horses. Uncle John was by her side, and they recalled merrily the day when, as John Strong, he took his first drive with her, and decided that she was to be trusted with a horse.

"Oh, what fun we did have that summer!" cried Peggy. "Only—we had no Uncle John. Oh, Uncle, if we had Rita here, wouldn't it be too absolutely perfect for anything?"

"It would be very delightful," said Mr. Montfort. "I would give a good deal to see that dark-eyed lassie and her gallant Jack. I think I must take you and Margaret to Cuba one of these days, Peggy, to see them. How would you like that, Missy?"

"Oh, Uncle John!" cried Peggy; and she almost dropped the whip, in the effort to squeeze his arm and turn a corner at the same moment.

But the best of all was when the whole family assembled in the library before supper, the girls in their very prettiest dresses, with flowers in their hair, the lads brave in white duck waistcoats, with roses and ferns in their buttonholes. Then the girls presented the gifts they had made for the beloved uncle; Margaret's book, a fine old copy of the "Colloquies of Erasmus," bound by her own hands in gold-stamped brown leather, Peggy's mermaid-penwiper, with a long tail of sea-green sewing silk, and the pincushion on which Jean had spent many painful hours in her efforts to make the ferns look like ferns instead of like green hen feathers. Grace had woven a basket of sweet rushes, of quaint and graceful

pattern, which Mr. Montfort declared was what he had dreamed of all his life, while Hugh produced a box of wonderful cigars, which had a history as mysterious and subtle as their fragrance. Lastly, the Merryweathers, declaring that they had no gift but themselves, and that if Mr. Montfort would be graciously pleased to accept them, they were his, proceeded to go through a series of acrobatic performances, which brought cries of admiration from all the beholders.

While this was going on, Margaret took advantage of the interlude (though she was loth to lose one of Gerald's graceful postures) to run out and see if supper was ready. She came back with a rueful countenance, and whispered to Peggy, "Supper will not be ready for ten minutes yet, and Frances is in a most frightful temper. She actually drove me out of the kitchen; said she would not be bothered with foolish children, and she would not send supper in till Bannan came back, if it cost her her place."

"Bannan? What has Bannan to do with supper?"

"Bringing something, I suppose; some extra frill she has prepared as a surprise. She is always savage when she has a surprise on foot. Hark! There are wheels now. Listen! Yes, they are going round to the back door. Bannan has come, then, and we may hope for food. Oh, do look at those boys! Did you ever see anything like that?"

All eyes were fixed on the twins, who, after every variety of separate antic, now proceeded to perform what they called a patent reversible waltz. Standing on their hands, they twined their feet together in the air, and revolved gracefully, moving in unison, and keeping time to the waltz they whistled. The whole company was watching this proceeding with such absorbed attention that no one saw the door at the back of the hall open silently; no one noticed the figure that stole noiselessly through, and now stood motionless in the doorway. A young woman, slender, richly dressed, beautiful exceedingly; with a certain foreign grace, which struck the eye even more than her beauty. But it was neither the grace nor the beauty that was first to be seen now; it was the light of love in the large dark eyes, the soft fire of joy and tenderness and mirth that shone from them, and seemed to irradiate her whole figure as she stood there, erect, yet seeming to sway forward, her hand on the door, her eyes bent on the group before her. Her gaze wandered for a moment to the guests: the revolving boys, Grace and Hugh in their quiet corner together, Jean staring with open eyes and mouth; but after a wondering look, it came back and settled again on the central

group, Mr. Montfort, in his great armchair, Peggy and Margaret each on a stool beside him, leaning against his knees. Was the group complete? or was there room for another by that good man's side?

Jean was the first to look up and see the newcomer. She started violently. "My goodness!" she cried, "who is that?" The next instant a cry rang out, as Margaret and Peggy sprang forward, "Rita! Rita!"

But Rita was too quick for them. Before they were well on their feet she had them both in her arms, and was weeping, sobbing, laughing, and kissing, all in a breath. With the next breath she had sunk at Mr. Montfort's feet, and, seizing his hand, pressed it passionately to her lips.

"My dear child," cried Uncle John, blushing like a girl, and drawing away his hand in great discomposure. "Don't, my love; pray don't. Rita! is it possible that this is really you? What does it mean?"

"What does it mean, my uncle? It means that even in Cuba we know the days of the month. Dearest and best of men, I wish you a thousand returns of the day, —five, ten thousand returns, and each one more blissful than the last. Marguerite, my angel, you are more beautiful than ever. Angel is no longer the word; you are a seraph! Embrace me again! Peggy, you are a mountain; but a veritable mountain of roses and cream! Dear little huge creature, I adore you. But where, then, is the rest of me? Jack! Figure to yourself a husband who skulks in doorways at a moment like this! Come forth, thou!"

Jack Del Monte advanced laughing; behind him in the passage the three conspirators, Frances, Elizabeth, and Bannan, peered triumphant. "My dear," said Jack, "I was merely waiting for my cue. You would not have had me spoil your entrance, you know you would not. Uncle John—I may say Uncle John? thanks!—I hope you will forgive Rita's little stratagem for the sake of the pleasure it has given her."

"My dear nephew," said Uncle John, "you have brought me the most enchanting birthday gift that ever a man had. Let me look at you again, Rita! If ever happiness agreed with a person—but I must not begin upon compliments now. I want you to know these cousins and friends. Here is Hugh Montfort and Jean; here is Grace Wolfe, who is to be your cousin one of these good days; and here are our friends Gerald and Philip Merryweather. You have all heard of one another; let us all be friends at once, without further ceremony, and keep this joyful feast together."

"Supper is served, sir," said Elizabeth.

A joyful feast it was indeed. The table, decked with ferns and roses, was covered with every good thing that Frances could think of, and she could think of a good many. The candles shed their cheerful light on all, though the faces hardly needed the artificial light. Amid general mirth, Rita told of her plan; her letter of inquiry to Frances and Elizabeth, asking if all were well, and if their coming would make any inconvenience. Then the telegram to Bannan, and the arrival, to find him awaiting them with the best horse the stable afforded; and, finally, their stealthy entrance at the back door. All had been triumphantly successful, and as Rita told her story, she laughed and clapped her hands with the glee of a child, while every face glowed responsive.

"'I PROPOSE . . . THE HEALTH OF THE BEST MAN . . . THAT LIVES UPON THIS EARTH TO-DAY; . . . THE HEALTH OF MY UNCLE JOHN!'"

"'I PROPOSE . . . THE HEALTH OF THE BEST MAN . . . THAT LIVES UPON THIS EARTH TO-DAY; . . . THE HEALTH OF MY UNCLE JOHN!'"

"And now," said Rita Del Monte, springing to her feet, and lifting high her glass, "I wish to propose a toast—the only fitting toast for this night. I propose, dear friends, and dear strangers whom I hope to have for friends, the health of the best man—ah, Jack, you have not had time yet, nor you others; but courage, time is before you!—of the best man, I say, that lives upon this earth to-day; the dearest, the kindest—oh, all please drink to the health of my Uncle John!"

One and all were upon their feet; all bending forward, glass in hand, eager and joyous, their eyes shining with love and admiration; and from one and all came the same glad cry, "Uncle John!"

"Because if one hasn't the luck to be really his nephew," said Gerald, "the least one can do is to make a bluff at it."

And here, at this happy moment, let us leave our friends. Good-by, Margaret—dear Margaret! Good-by, Peggy and Rita, Hugh and Grace, Gerald and Phil,—we may see you again, boys,—Jean and Jack! Good-by, and good luck to you! Last of all, good-by to you, John Montfort. If you are not the best man in the world, you are at least a good one! Wise and strong, courteous and kindly, brave and true, long may you live, as now you sit, in your own beautiful home, surrounded by those you love best in the world. Love, kindness, and truth; having these, what more do you lack? Good-by, John Montfort.

THE END.

Transcriber's Notes:

Obvious punctuation errors repaired.

The remaining corrections made are indicated by dotted lines under the corrections. Scroll the mouse over the word and the original text will appear.

States.

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