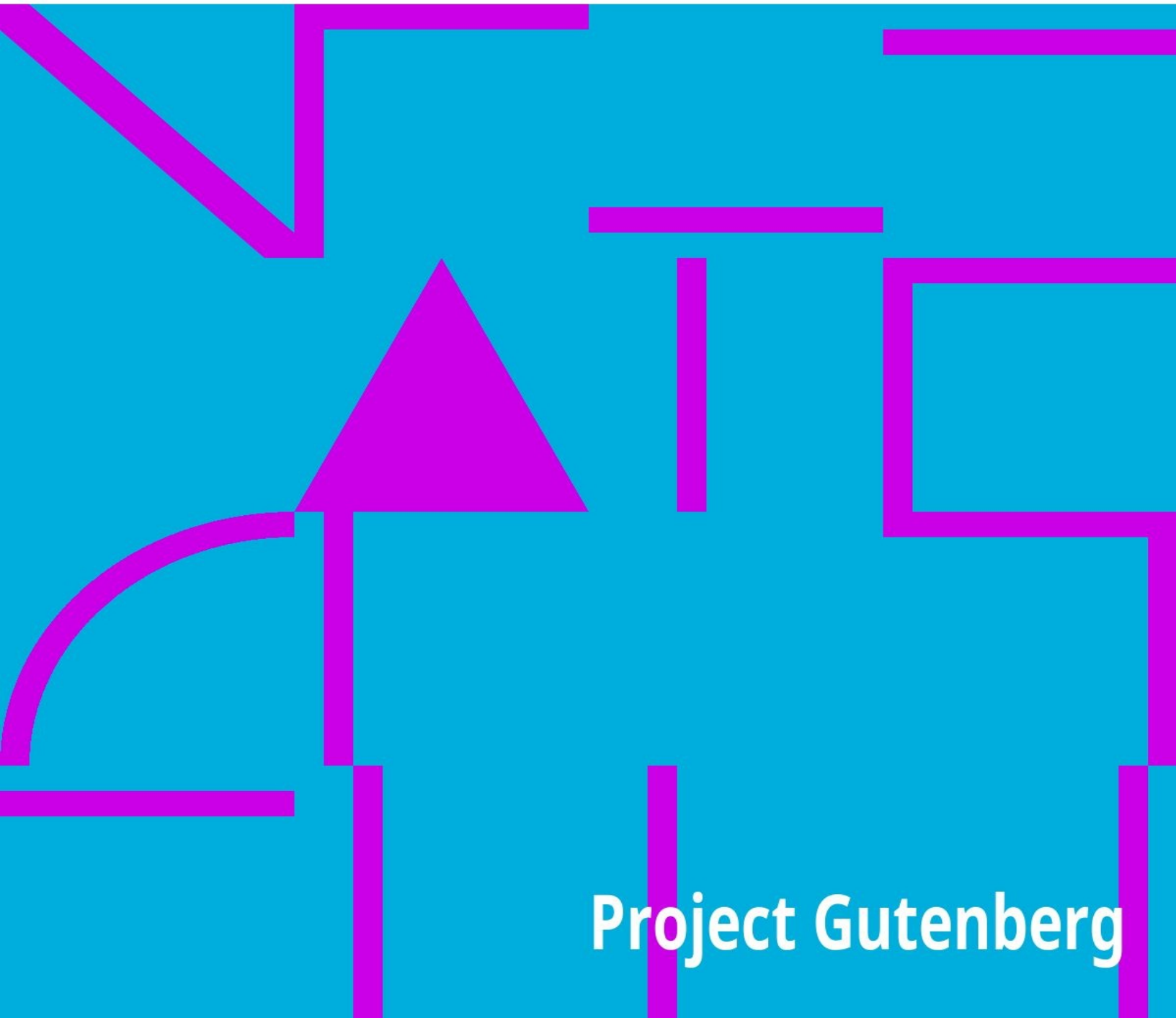
More About Peggy

Mrs. George de Horne Vaizey



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Mrs G de Horne Vaizey

Chapter One.

It was mid-January, and at home in England the ground was white with snow, but the sun shone down with brazen glare on the blue waters of the Bay of Bengal, along which a P and O steamer was gliding on its homeward way. An awning was hoisted over the deck, but not a breath of wind fluttered its borders, and the passengers lay back in their deck-chairs too limp and idle to do more than flick over the pages of the books which they were pretending to read. It was only twenty-four hours since they had left Calcutta, and they were still in that early stage of journeying when they looked askance at their fellows, decided that never, no, never had Fate placed them in the midst of such uninteresting companions, and determined to keep severely to themselves during the rest of the voyage.

The stout lady in the white *piqué* stared stonily at the thin lady in drill, and decided that she was an “Impossible Person,” blissfully unconscious of the fact that before Aden was reached she would pour all her inmost secrets into the “Impossible Person’s” ear, and weep salt tears at parting from her at Marseilles. The mother of the sickly little girls in muslin swept them away to the other end of the deck when she discovered them playing with the children who inhabited the next state-room, and the men stared at one another stolidly across the smoking-room. The more experienced travellers knew that ere a week had passed the scene would be changed, that a laughing babel of voices would succeed the silence, and deck sports and other entertainments take the place of inaction; but the younger members of the party saw no such alleviation ahead, and resigned themselves to a month of frosty solitude.

The ladies dozed amongst their cushions, but the men strolled up and down the deck smoking their cigars with that air of resigned dejection which seems to be the monopoly of Englishmen of the upper classes. The quick movements, animated gestures, and sparkling eyes of the Southerner were all lacking in these strongly built, well-dressed, well-set-up men, who managed to conceal all signs of animation so successfully

that no one looking at them could have believed that one was the wit of his regiment, another celebrated throughout an Indian province for his courage and daring, and a third an expectant bridegroom!

About eleven o'clock a diversion was made on the upper deck by the appearance of two more travellers—an elegant-looking woman accompanied by her husband, who came forward in search of the deck-chairs which had been placed in readiness for their use. They were not a young couple by any means, yet the eyes of the passengers followed their movements with interest, for they were not only exceedingly good to look upon, but had an air of enjoyment in their surroundings and in each other's society which is unfortunately not universal among middle-aged couples. The man was tall and slight, with the weather-beaten, dried-up skin which tells of a long residence under burning suns, and he had a long nose, and eyes which appeared almost startlingly blue against the brown of his skin. They were curious eyes, with a kind of latent fierceness in their good humour, but just now they shone in holiday mood, and softened into tenderness as he waited on his wife.

No sooner had this interesting couple seated themselves in their chairs than a chirrup of welcome sounded in their ears, and a beaming little figure in grey alpaca darted forward to greet them. Though the majority of passengers in an ocean-going boat may be unsociably inclined at the start, there are always one or two exceptions to the rule to be found, in the shape of ultra-friendly souls, who, willy-nilly, insist upon playing the part of devoted friends to some unresponsive stranger, and the old lady in question was one of these exceptions. She had begun operations the night before by quarrelling violently over the possession of a cabin, had then proceeded to borrow half-a-dozen necessities of the toilet which she had forgotten, and had advanced to the length of terms of endearment before the bell sounded for dinner. It was only natural then that she should exhibit a breathless anxiety to know how her new friend had fared during the night, and the invalid braced herself to bear the attack with composure.

"So glad to see you up this morning, dear!" she cried. "I was afraid you might be ill, but I asked your daughter about you, and was so relieved to hear good news. We met on deck before breakfast, and had a nice, long talk. Such a sweet creature! So different from the fast, loud-voiced

specimens one meets nowadays. Quite an old-world girl, I declare; sweet, and mild, and gentle... ‘A violet by a mossy dell, half-hidden from the eye’—as dear old What’s-his-name has it! It does me good to be with her, and feel her restful influence. You are to be congratulated on owning such a daughter!”

“Thank you!” said the mild girl’s mother softly. She dropped her eyelids, and twisted the rings round and round on her slender fingers, as if for some reason she did not wish to meet the speaker’s eye, while her husband rose suddenly and walked to the end of the deck. When he came back, five minutes later, he remarked to his wife that there was no depending on weather signals nowadays; at which innocent remark she laughed so heartily that the friendly old lady instantly put down hysterics as the probable explanation of her delicate appearance, and felt a chilling of sympathy. In a few minutes she took herself off to some other friends, and the husband and wife whispered smilingly together, and, after the invariable custom on shipboard, fell to criticising their companions.

Perhaps the most striking figure which met their eyes was that of a young man some thirty years of age, whose walk and carriage plainly marked him out as an officer in the army. A certain pallor showing through his tanned skin made it seem possible that he was returning home on sick-leave, but he was a handsome fellow all the same with aquiline features and a heavy moustache, and he scanned the scene around him with an air of languid patronage, as one who felt that the P and O Company might feel themselves honoured to have the privilege of accommodating his noble self, and expected that even the ocean should show its best aspect for his benefit. Of the passengers by whom he was surrounded the lordly stranger appeared entirely oblivious, not deigning to throw even a glance in their direction; and so strange a thing is human nature that the feminine portion, at least, felt their interest heightened by this indifference, and were increasingly anxious to make his acquaintance. It did not seem likely that their desire would be granted on this occasion, at least, for as the morning wore on and the heat of the sun grew ever stronger and stronger, the object of their admiration took counsel with himself, and decided that it would be wisdom to retire within the shelter of the reading-room, and pass the hour before lunch in the company of a novel which he had brought on board with his effects. He had carried the book upstairs earlier in the morning, and placed it in a corner of the room

where he believed it would be safe from alien hands; but, alas! the best-laid plans “gang aft a-gley,” and when he went in search, he met with a shock of disappointment. The book had been appropriated, and the thief was seated in the very corner which he had destined for himself, bending over the pages with every appearance of absorption. Her face was hidden from view, and all that could be seen was a trim little figure in a trim white gown, a pair of trim little feet, a sleek brown head, and a well-rounded cheek. No one could deny that it was a pleasing figure, but the lordly stranger was too much ruffled in his feelings to be influenced by appearances. His manner was perhaps a trifle less haughty than it would have been, had the thief taken the shape of an elderly gentleman, but he never wavered in his intention, and only stopped for an imperceptible moment in his progress up the room to demand a return of the volume.

“Excuse me. Ah! *My* book, I think! Sorry to interrupt you, but—”

The young lady laid down the book and lifted her face to his. A flicker as of mingled surprise and pleasure passed over her features as she saw who it was that stood before her, but she showed not the slightest sign of discomfiture.

“I beg a thousand pardons!” she said, and inclined her head in such a bow as an empress might bestow on a blundering and ignorant supplicant. It was such a very grand air for such a small person that the big officer drew a breath of surprise, and gazed down with a startled interest. The girl’s features were delicately modelled; the brows might have been drawn with a pencil, so clear and perfect was the arch which they described, and the brilliant hazel eyes met his with a mocking glance. For almost the first time in his life a spasm of discomfiture seized him, a struggling suspicion that his conduct had not been altogether above reproach. He stood with the book in his hand, hesitating, uncertain.

“If you would care to read it, pray keep it! I shall be most happy to lend it to you.”

The girl waved her hand with a gracious patronage.

“Not for the world, until you have finished! When you have no more use

for it yourself, perhaps you will be good enough to renew the offer. Meantime, there are plenty of other books. The library seems very large."

"I make a point of never reading the ship's books. You never—aw—know who has had them last!" drawled the stranger, sweeping a scathing glance over the well-filled shelves; "and, as a rule, they are in such shocking condition. People seem to take a malign satisfaction in tearing out the most important pages, so that, after wading through a whole volume, you are left in uncertainty as to what really happened."

"But sometimes that is a blessing in disguise, for by exercising a little imagination you can make the story end as you like, and spare yourself the pain of disappointment. I rarely read a book without reflecting how much better I could have finished it myself," remarked the young lady, with an assurance which evoked a smile on the officer's impassive countenance.

"You don't look much like an authoress," he said, surveying the dainty little figure approvingly, and calling up a mental picture of the spectacled and cadaverous female invariably associated with a literary career in the masculine mind. "I am afraid my imagination will hardly stand such a strain; but books are the only refuge for the destitute on a voyage, especially during the first few days, when you find yourself shut up with a herd of strangers whom you have never met before in the course of your life. There is only one thing to do under the circumstances, and that is to lie low, and speak to no one until you have found your bearings and discovered who is who. If you go about talking to strangers, you can never tell in what sort of a set you may land yourself."

"You can't, indeed! It's appalling to think of!" agreed the young lady, with a dramatic gesture of dismay which brought her little ringed hands together in decided emphasis. "For my own part I get on well enough," she proceeded, contradicting herself with unruffled composure, "for I can find something interesting in all of my fellow-creatures; but I feel it for my maid! The couriers and valets are so *very* exclusive that she has been snubbed more than once because of our inferior station. Naturally she feels it keenly. I observe that those people are most sensitive about their position who have the least claim to distinction; but as she does my hair better than any one else, and is an admirable dressmaker, I am, of

course, anxious to keep her happy."

The big man looked down with a suspicious glance. Through his not very keen sensibilities there had penetrated the suspicion that the small person in the white frock was daring to smile at him and amuse herself at his expense; but his suspicion died at once before the glance of infantile sweetness which met his own. Pretty little thing! there was something marvellously taking in her appearance. For one moment, as she had spoken of inferior station, he had had an uneasy fear lest he had made the acquaintance of some vulgar upstart, with whom he could not possibly associate. But no! If ever the signs of race and breeding were distinguishable in personal appearance, they were so in the case of the girl before him. A glance at the head in its graceful setting, the delicate features, the dainty hands and feet, was sufficient to settle the question in the mind of a man who prided himself on being an adept in such matters. To his own surprise, he found himself floundering through a complimentary denial of her own estimate of herself, and being rescued from a breakdown by a gracious acknowledgment.

"Praise," murmured the young lady sweetly—"praise from Major Darcy is praise indeed! When 'Haughty Hector' deigns to approve—"

The big man jumped as if he had been shot, and turned a flushed, excited face upon her.

"Wh–at?" he gasped. "What do you say? You know me—you know my old home name! Who are you, then? Who can you be?"

The girl rose to her feet and stood before him. The top of her smooth little head barely reached his shoulders, but she held herself with an air of dignity which gave an appearance of far greater height. For one long minute they stared at one another in silence; then she stretched out her hand and laid it frankly in his own.

"Why, I'm Peggy!" she cried. "Don't you remember me? I'm Peggy Saville!"

Chapter Two.

Hector Darcy knitted his brows, and started in bewilderment at the little figure before him. “Peggy Saville!” he repeated blankly. “No, you cannot mean it! The little girl who had lessons with Rob, and who saved Rosalind’s life at the time of the fire? The little girl I met at The Larches with the pale face, and the pink sash, and the pigtail down her back?”

“The self-same Peggy—at your service!”—and Miss Saville swept a curtesy in which dignity mingled with mischief. Her eyes were sparkling with pleasure, and Major the Honourable Hector Darcy—to give that gentleman his full title—looked hardly less radiant than herself. Here was a piece of luck—to make the acquaintance of an interesting and attractive girl at the very beginning of a voyage, and then to discover in her an intimate friend of the family! True, he himself had seen little of her personally, but the name of Peggy Saville was a household word with his people, and one memorable Christmas week, which they had spent together at The Larches in years gone by, might be safely accepted as the foundation of a friendship.

“Of course I remember you!” he cried. “We had fine romps together, you and I. You danced me off my feet one night, and gave me my death of cold putting up a snow man the next day. I have never forgotten Peggy Saville, but you have changed so much that I did not recognise you, and I did not see your name.”

“I noticed yours in the list of passengers, and then I looked out for you, and recognised you at once. There was a Darcy look about the back of your head which could not be mistaken! I meant to ask father to introduce you to me after lunch, but the book has taken his place. So you think I have changed! I have ‘growed,’ of course, and the pigtail has disappeared; but in other respects there is not so much alteration as could be desired. My father tells me, on an average three times a day, that I shall remain the same ‘Peggy-Pickle’ all my life.”

“That sounds bad! So far as my remembrance goes, you used to be a mischievous little person, always getting into scrapes and frightening the wits out of your companions.”

“Ah!” sighed Miss Saville dolorously. “Ah–h!” She shook her head with a broken-hearted air, and looked so overwhelmed with compunction for her

misdeeds, that if it had not been for a treacherous dimple that defied her control, the major would have felt remorseful at awakening a painful memory. As it was he laughed heartily, and cried aloud:

“When you look like that, I can see you again with the pigtail and the white frock, just as you looked that Christmas half-a-dozen years ago! Your father is right—you have not changed a bit from the little Peggy I used to know!”

“I’m a full-fledged young lady now, Major Darcy, and have been ‘out’ for three whole years. I’ve grown into ‘Miss Saville,’ or at the very least into ‘Mariquita.’”

“But not to me. I’m part of the old times; Rosalind’s brother—Rob’s brother—you cannot treat me like a stranger. Peggy you have been, and Peggy you must be, so far as I am concerned, for I could not recognise you by another name. Sit down and tell me all about yourself. How long have you been in India, and where are you bound for now?”

“I came out three years ago, when I was eighteen, and now we are going home for good. I’m so glad, for though I’ve enjoyed India immensely, there is no place like the old country. Mother is not strong, so we are going to stay on the Continent until it is warm enough to return safely. We shall land at Marseilles, stay a month in the Riviera, and gradually work our way homewards. When I say home, of course you understand that we have no home as yet, but we are going to look round for a house as soon as possible. We know exactly what we want, so it ought to be easy to get it. A dear old place in the country—the *real* country, not a suburb, but within half an hour’s rail of town. A house covered with roses and creepers, and surrounded by a garden. Oh! think of seeing English grass again—the green, *green* grass, and walking along between hedges of wild roses and honeysuckle; and the smell of the earth after it has rained, and all the little leaves are glistening with water—do you remember—oh! do you remember?” cried Peggy, clasping her eager hands, and gazing at her companion with a sudden glimmer of tears which rose from very excess of happiness. “I don’t say so to mother, because it would seem as if I had not been happy abroad; but I *ache* for England! Sometimes in the midst of the Indian glare I used to have a curious wild longing, not for the Country... that was always there—but for the dull, old Tottenham Court

Road! Don’t laugh! It was no laughing matter. You know how dull that road looks, how ugly and grimy, and how grey, grey, grey in rainy weather? Well, amidst the glare of Eastern surroundings that scene used to come back to me as something so thoroughly, typically English, that its very dreariness made the attraction. I have stood in the midst of palm and aloes, and just longed my very heart out for Tottenham Court Road!”

Major Darcy laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

“I know the feeling—had it myself; but you will lose it soon enough. In the East you gasp and long for England; in England you shudder and long for the East. It’s the way of the world. What you haven’t got seems always the thing you want; but no sooner have you got it than you realise its defects. England will strike you as intolerably dreary when you are really there.”

Peggy shook her head obstinately.

“Never! I was ablaze with patriotism before I left, and I have been growing worse and worse all the time I have been abroad. And it will *not* be dreary! What is the use of imagining disagreeable things? You might just as well imagine nice ones while you are about it. Now *I* imagine that it is going to be a perfect summer—clear, and fine, and warm, with the delicious warmth which is so utterly different from that dreadful India scald. And father and I are going to turn gardeners, and trot about all day long tending our plants. Did I tell you that we were going to have a garden? Oh yes—a beauty!—with soft turf paths, bordered with roses, and every flower that blooms growing in the borders. We will have an orchard, too, where the spring bulbs come up among the grass; and I’ve set my heart on a moat. It has been the dream of my life to have a moat. ‘Mariquita of the Moated Grange!’... Sounds well, doesn’t it? It would be good for me to have an address like that, for I possess a strong instinct of fitness, and make a point of living up to my surroundings.” Peggy lay back in her seat and coughed in the languid, Anglo-Indian fashion which was her latest accomplishment. “I suppose you don’t happen to know the sort of house that would suit us?”

“Within half an hour of London? No! That is too much to ask. It’s a Chateau en Espagne, Peggy, and not to be had in Middlesex. You will

have to do like the rest of the world, and settle down in a red brick villa, with a plot of uncultivated land out of which to manufacture your garden. There will be neither green sward nor festoons of roses; but, on the other hand, the house will contain every modern convenience, and there will be hot and cold water, electric light—"

"Don't!" cried Peggy hastily. She lifted her hand with a gesture of entreaty, and Hector was startled to see how seriously she had taken his jesting words. "Don't laugh at me! I've been dreaming of it so long, and it's such a dear, dear dream. Do you realise that in all my life I have never had a permanent home? It has been a few years here, a few years there, with always the certainty of another change ahead; but now we mean to find a real home, where we can take refuge, with all our possessions around us. Mother and I have talked about it until we can *see* every nook and corner, and it is waiting for us somewhere—I know it is! So don't be sceptical, and pretend that it is not! We won't talk about houses any more, but you shall tell me your own news. It is four years since I saw Rob and Rosalind, as they were abroad for the year before I left England. But you have been home since then, I know."

"Yes; only eighteen months ago. I should not be back so soon, but I've had an attack of fever, and am taking a few months off, to pull myself together. I'm glad our home-goings have taken place at the same time. What do you want to know? My people were much as usual when I saw them last; but the mater has not been at all well for some months back. She has had to leave the house in charge of her sister, Mrs Everett, and go off to some baths in Germany for a course of treatment, and I believe she will not return to England until the autumn. Rosalind—"

"Yes—Rosalind?"

The major's handsome face softened into a smile, which showed that the subject of his young sister was pleasant to his mind.

"Rosalind," he said slowly, "is a circumstance—decidedly a circumstance to be taken into account! We look to her to redeem the fortunes of the family, and the mater considers nobody under a royal duke worthy of her acceptance. She is certainly a lovely girl, and a more agreeable one into the bargain than I expected her to turn out. She was a spoiled, affected

child, but she took a turn for the better after her accident. My parents, I believe,"—Major Darcy looked at his companion with a brightening glance,—"my parents ascribe a great part of the change to your beneficial influence."

Peggy's cheeks flushed with pleasure, for she had by no means outgrown her childish love of a compliment; but she shrugged her shoulders, and replied in a tone of would-be indifference:

"Plus the wholesome discipline of having her hair cut short. Poor Rosalind! Never shall I forget her confiding to me that she was 'wesigned to becoming a hideous fwight,' while all the time she was admiring her profile in the mirror and arranging her curls to hide the scar. We had been on very distant terms before that accident; but when we were both convalescent we took courage, and spoke faithfully to one another on the subject of our several failings. I told Rosalind, in effect, that she was a conceited doll, and she replied that I was a consequential minx. It cleared the air so much that we exchanged vows of undying friendship, which have been kept to the extent of some half-a-dozen letters a year. I know much more about Rosalind than I do about Rob. Please tell me all you can about Rob!"

"Oh, Rob, you know, was always a boor," said Rob's brother lightly, "and, upon my word, he is a boor still! He did remarkably well at Oxford, as no doubt you heard, and then went travelling about for a couple of years through a number of uncomfortable and insanitary lands. He has always been a great gardener and naturalist, and he brought home some new varieties of shrubs and flowers, out of which he makes a fair amount of money. His principal craze, however, as I understand it, was to add to his knowledge on the engrossing subject of *Beetles*. He has written some papers on them since his return, and they tell me he has made his mark, and will soon be considered a leading authority. I must say, however, that the whole thing seems to me of supreme unimportance. What on earth can it matter whether there are ten varieties of beetles or ten thousand? Rob is just the sort of hard-headed, determined fellow who could have made himself felt in whatever *rôle* he had taken up, and it seems hard luck that he should have chosen one so extremely dull and unremunerative." Hector leant his head against the wall with an air of patronising disgust, for his own profession being one of avowed

readiness to kill as many as possible of his fellow-creatures, he felt a natural impatience with a man who trifled away his time in the study of animal nature. He sighed, and turned to his companion in an appeal for sympathy. “Hard lines, isn’t it, when a fellow has society practically at his feet, that he should run off the lines like that?”

“De-plorable!” said Peggy firmly, and her expression matched the word. She shook her head and gazed solemnly into space, as if overpowered by the littleness of the reflection. “Poor Rob—he is incorrigible! I suppose, then, he doesn’t care a bit for dinners, or dances, or standing against a wall at a reception, or riding in a string in the Park, but prefers to pore over his microscope, and roam over the country, poking about for specimens in the ditches and hedgerows?”

“Exactly. The mater can hardly induce him to go out, and he is never so happy as when he can get on a flannel shirt and transform himself into a tramp. You remember Rob’s appearance in his school-days? He is almost as disreputable to-day, with his hair hanging in that straight heavy lock over his forehead, and his shoulders bowed by poring over that everlasting microscope.”

A light passed swiftly across Peggy’s face, and her eyes sparkled. One of the most trying features of a long absence from home is that the face which one most longs to remember has a way of growing dim, and elusively refusing to be recalled. In those hot Indian days, Peggy had often seated herself in her mental picture gallery, and summoned one friend after another before her: the vicar, with his kindly smiles; Mrs Asplin, with the loving eyes, and the tired flush on the dear, thin cheeks; Esther, with her long, solemn visage; Mellicent, plump and rosy; Rex, with his handsome features and budding moustache; Oswald, immaculately blond—they could all be called up at will, and would remain contentedly in their frames until such times as she chose to dismiss them; but Rob’s face refused to be recalled in the same easy fashion. Now and again, from out the gloom, a pair of stormy eyes would flash upon her, or she would catch her breath as a stooping figure seemed to rise suddenly beside the palm-trees; but Rob, as a whole, had refused to be recalled, until at his brother’s words his image had appeared before her in so vivid and characteristic a guise that it seemed almost as if Rob himself stood by her side. She drew a long breath, and chimed in with an

eager—

“Yes, yes! And his great long arms waving about—I never knew any one with such long arms as Rob. And a pair of thick, nailed boots, with all four tabs sticking out, and a tie slipping round to the back of his neck. It’s exactly like him. I can see him now!”

Hector Darcy shrugged his shoulders.

“Don’t, please! It’s not a pleasant prospect. I try to let distance lend enchantment to the view, for it’s bad enough having to go about with him when I am at home. The fellow would not be bad-looking, if he took a little care of himself; but he is absolutely regardless of appearances.”

“He must have an idea that there are other things of more importance. He was always a ridiculous boy!” murmured Miss Saville sweetly. The major glanced at her with a suspicious eye, once more disturbed by the suspicion that she was being sarcastic at his expense, but Peggy was gazing dreamily through the opposite windows, her delicately cut profile thrown into relief against the dark wood of the background. She looked so young, so fragile and innocent, that it seemed quite criminal to have harboured such a suspicion. He was convinced that she was far too sweet and unassuming a girl to laugh at such a superior person as Major Hector Darcy.

Chapter Three.

A fortnight later the passengers on board the steamer were congratulating themselves on having accomplished half their journey, and being within ten days’ sail of England. The waters of the Mediterranean surrounded them, clear and blue as the sky overhead, a healthful breeze supplanted the calm, and the spirits of the travellers rose ever higher and higher. Homeward bound is a very different thing from outward bound, and every soul on board had some dear one waiting for them in Old England, some one who had loved them faithfully through the years of absence, and who was even now counting the days until their return. The mothers boasted to each other concerning the doings of the children whom they had left at school, and in the midst of laughter turned aside

suddenly to conceal their tears; the men thought lovingly of the wives from whom they had parted years before; and one or two radiant bridegrooms exhibited photographs of the brides whom they were going to carry back to cheer their exile.

After a fortnight at sea the company on board this particular steamer might be said to be divided into four distinct cliques—namely, members of military and diplomatic services, Civil Service employees, second-class passengers, and—Miss Mariquita Saville. The young lady must be taken as representing a class by herself, because while each of the other divisions kept, or was kept, severely to itself, Peggy mixed impartially with all, and was received with equal cordiality wherever she turned. The little person had made such a unique position for herself that there is no doubt that if a vote had been taken to discover the most popular person on board, she would have headed the list by a large majority; but whether her unfailing affability was due more to pride or humility, Hector Darcy, among others, found it difficult to determine.

Major Darcy had attached himself to the Saville party with a determination hardly to be expected in so languid a man, had even lowered his dignity to the extent of asking the fellow-passenger who occupied the coveted seat at table to exchange places with himself, so that breakfast, lunch, and dinner found him seated at Peggy's side, finding ever-fresh surprises in her society. Sometimes the surprise was the reverse of pleasant, for Miss Saville was a prickly little person, and upon occasion would snap him up in the middle of an argument with a lack of respect which took away his breath. When any difference arose between them, she never seemed to have a shadow of a doubt that she was in the right, and as Hector was equally positive about his own position, relationships frequently grew so strained that Peggy would rise from the table half-way through the meal, and stalk majestically out of the saloon. She invariably repented her hastiness by the time she reached the deck, for dessert was the part of the meal which she most enjoyed, so that when the major followed ten minutes later on, bearing a plate of carefully selected fruit as a peace-offering, he was sure of a gracious welcome.

"But you must never contradict me on Tuesdays, I can't support it!" she said on one of these occasions, as he seated himself beside her, and

watched her raising the grapes to her lips with her little finger cocked well in the air. “Especially when I am in the right, as you must admit—”

“I admit nothing; but I pray and beseech you not to begin the discussion over again. I am nine years older than you, and must surely be supposed to know a little more.”

“If you only realised it, that is just the reason why you don’t. The world advances so rapidly with every decade, that you of the last generation have necessarily enjoyed fewer opportunities than myself and my contemporaries, and are therefore behind the times. It’s not your fault, of course, and I don’t advance it in any way as a reproach, but still—”

Major Darcy stared at her, struck dumb by an insinuation of age which was even more hurtful than that of inferior knowledge; but before he had recovered himself sufficiently to reply, his companion had finished her dessert, presented him calmly with the empty plate, and risen to take her departure.

“Where are you going?” he queried in an injured tone; for it was one of his pet grievances that the girl refused to be appropriated by himself whenever he wished to enjoy her society. “Can’t you sit still for an hour at least? You have been rushing about all the morning. Surely now you can take a rest!”

But Peggy shook her head.

“Impossible! I’m engaged straight away from now until tea-time. The nurse of those peevish little Mortons is worn out, for the mother is ill, and can’t help her at all, so I promised to amuse the children for an hour after lunch while she takes a nap. Then I have to play a game of halma with old Mr Schute, and help Miss Ranger to dress and come on deck. She thinks she can manage it to-day, and it will do her a world of good to get some fresh air.”

“But why need you fag yourself for all these people? Surely there is some one else who can do it. Can you not send your maid to look after the children, at least, and take that hour to yourself?”

Peggy smiled with complacent satisfaction.

“They would scream themselves hoarse. Of all the spoilt, bad-tempered little ruffians you ever encountered, they are the worst, and there is not a soul on board who can manage them except myself. Yesterday they got so cross that I was almost in despair, and it was only by pretending to be a wild buffalo, and letting them chase me and dig pencils into me for spears, that I could keep them in any sort of order. When they grew tired of the buffalo, I changed into a musical-box, and they ground tunes out of me until my throat was as dry as leather. It kept us going for a long time, however, for they all wanted to hear their own favourite tunes, and were so charmed with the variations. I wish you could have heard the variations! I was so proud of them. The scales ran up and down just like a real musical-box, the tremolo and arpeggio chords were fine, and as for the trills, they were simply entr–r–rancing!” Peggy rolled the ‘r’ with a self-satisfied enjoyment which made Hector laugh in spite of his displeasure, and finished up with an explanatory, “I could never expect Parker to pose as a wild buffalo. She has far too much sense of dignity!”

“Oh, of course, I acknowledge that you have a wonderful knack with children! Every one sees that,” allowed Hector unwillingly. “It is very kind and delightful of you to bother about other people as you do; but what I complain of is the extent of your services, and—aw—the nature of the recipients! Miss Ranger, for instance, is an impossible person. What she calls herself I don’t know, but she doesn’t even begin to be a lady. I heard her talking the other day, and she has a vile accent, and not an ‘h’ in her composition.”

“She has enough responsibilities without them at present, poor soul, so perhaps it’s just as well. She has been ill ever since we started, and has no friend nor servant to look after her. She fell on the floor in a faint one day while she was trying to dress, and lay there helpless until the stewardess happened to go in and find her. That sort of thing sha’n’t happen twice on board this ship, if *I* can help it!” cried Peggy with a straightening of the slim little back which seemed to add a couple of inches to her height, and a toss of the head which convinced Major Darcy that it was no use arguing further on this point. It was astonishing how often he was forced to retire from post to post in arguments with Miss Saville, and the consciousness that this was the case gave him courage to enter yet a third protest.

“Well, at least, old Schute is hearty enough! There is no necessity to pity him; and, really, don’t you know, he is hardly the right sort of friend for you. Do you know who he is? The proprietor of one of the big drapers’ shops in Calcutta.”

“It was a very good shop,” said Peggy reflectively. “They were most obliging in sending patterns. Two of the assistants were in a class mother held for English girls, and they said he was so kind and considerate, and had even paid to send some of them to the hill, after they had been ill. I’ve a great respect for Mr Schute.”

“Quite so; but that’s not exactly a reason why you should play halma with him. I’ve a respect for him also, if what you say is true, but he is not in our class, as he himself would acknowledge, and it’s not the thing for you to be seen talking to him. There are certain restrictions which we must all observe.”

“Excuse me—I don’t observe them. I am Mariquita Saville. Nothing that I can do can alter that fact, or take from me the position to which I was born,” replied Peggy, with that air of overweening pride in her belongings which had a distinctly humorous aspect in the eyes of her companion, for though a county name and some well-won decorations are, no doubt, things to be valued, nothing short of a pedigree traced direct from the Flood itself would have justified the ineffable assurance of her manner.

He was not rash enough, however, to put such a reflection into words, so he stood in silence until once again the girl turned to leave him, when he found his tongue quickly enough.

“You are really going then?”

“Certainly I’m going!”

“You’ll tire yourself out with those children, and get a headache into the bargain in the stuffy cabins.”

“I think it’s extremely probable.”

“Then why will you be obstinate, and go in spite of all I can, say?”

“Shall I tell you why?” Peggy raised her head and stared at him with brilliant eyes. “I must go and help these poor people because *you*—and others like you—refuse to do it! I can’t bear to see them neglected, but I should be delighted to share the work with some one else. Major Darcy, will you do me a favour? Mr Schute is very lonely; no one speaks to him, and his eyes are so weak that he can’t amuse himself by reading. He is a very interesting old man, and I assure you his ‘h’s’ are above reproach. Will you have a game of halma with him this afternoon instead of me, and so set me free from my promise?”

Haughty Hector’s stare of amazement was a sight to behold. He, Hector Darcy, play a game with a tradesman in the saloon of a steamship? Associate on terms of intimacy with a member of a class who, according to his ideas, existed for no other reason than to minister to his needs and requirements? He was breathless with astonishment that such a request should have been made, and made no concealment of his annoyance.

“Really,” he said loftily, “anything in reason that I could do to assist you would be too great a pleasure, but what you ask is impossible. You must see for yourself—”

“You will not do it, then?”

“If you will think for one moment, you will realise that you could not expect—”

Peggy threw back her head and surveyed him deliberately from the crown of his head to the tip of his shoes, from his shoes up again until the hazel eyes met his with a mocking light.

“I did not expect—I *hoped*; but I see that even that was a mistake! Good afternoon, Major Darcy, and many thanks for your polite assurances! It is gratifying to discover exactly how much they are worth.”

She sailed away with her head in the air, leaving Hector to pace the deck with a frown of thunderous ill-temper disfiguring his handsome countenance. It was annoying to be worsted by an antagonist of such small dimensions, but, astonishing as it appeared, he invariably got the worst of it in a conflict with Peggy Saville!

Chapter Four.

The next two weeks passed away all too quickly. The latter part of the voyage had been chill and stormy, so that when Marseilles was reached, Hector Darcy was seized with a conviction that it would be injudicious for him to risk the dangers of an English spring, and that wisdom pointed out a preliminary sojourn in the sunny South. This being the case, it was only natural that he should betake himself to the hotel where his friends the Savilles were located, and so make a convenient fourth in their excursions. It would have been difficult to find a pleasanter party with whom to travel, for father, mother, and daughter were all in holiday mood, rejoicing in the prospect of home, and a reunion with that redoubtable Arthur, whose exploits and excellences were detailed a dozen times a day. They were so happy together, moreover, and there was so friendly an understanding between them, that they made an agreeable contrast to those numerous family parties who reduce a stranger to a condition of misery by their mutual bickerings. So far from labouring under the impression that any manners were good enough for the members of their own family, the Saville trio were even more punctiliously courteous to each other than to strangers, and that despite the fact that parents and child were on terms of much greater intimacy than is usual in such relationships.

Peggy's pride in her father was beautiful to behold, and in the presence of strangers she paid him a respect so profound that those same strangers would have been vastly surprised if they could have seen her rumpling his hair in private, and tying his moustache in a neat little festoon round his nose, while mother and daughter never seemed to outgrow the joy of being together again after the years of separation.

"Oh, my Peg, what should I do without you?" Mrs Saville would cry on those too frequent occasions when a recurrence of the weary Indian fever came upon her, and Peggy nursed and comforted her as no hired attendant could ever do. "Oh, my Peg, what should I do without you? What *shall* I do, when you leave me to fly away to a home of your own? You have spoiled me so much during these last years that I don't know what will become of me without you, darling."

“I shall never marry, dear,” returned Peggy comfortably. “I’ll stay at home like a good little girl, and wheel my mammie in a Bath chair. Marriage is a luxury which is forbidden to an only daughter. Her place is to stay at home and look after her parents!” But at this Mrs Saville looked alarmed, and shook her head in emphatic protest.

“No, no—that’s a wrong idea! I want you to marry, dear, when the right time comes. I have been too happy myself to wish to keep you single. Marriage is the best thing that can happen to a woman, if her husband is as good and kind and noble as your father. I’m not selfish enough to spoil your life for my own benefit, Peggy; but when the times comes, remember I shall be very, very particular about the man you choose.”

“Where, and how, shall I earliest meet him?
What are the words that he first will say?”

chanted Peggy, with so disastrous an attempt at the correct tune that Mrs Saville shook with laughter, despite the pain in her head, and Hector Darcy, entering the room, demanded to know the nature of the joke.

“I was singing a little ditty, and mother derided me, as usual. People always laugh when I sing, and declare that the tune is wrong. They don’t seem to understand that I’m improving on the original. We were discussing my future husband, and the serenade was in his honour,” explained Peggy with an unconscious serenity, at which her two companions exchanged glances of astonishment.

“He is quite an imaginary hero as yet,” Mrs Saville explained hastily, “but the subject having been introduced, I was explaining to Peggy that I should be extremely difficult to satisfy, and could not consent to spare her to a man who did not come up to my ideal in every respect.”

“And Peggy herself—what does she say? Has she an ideal, too, and what shape does it take, if one may ask?” queried Hector, with an embarrassment of manner which the mother noticed, if the daughter did not.

Mrs Saville shaded her eyes with her hands and gazed keenly across the room to where the two figures stood in the window, the man so tall and imposing, the girl so small and dainty in her pretty white dress.

“Oh, I’m not exacting,” said Peggy coolly. “I’m going to marry a man with ‘heaps of money and a moustache, and a fireplace in the hall,’ as Mellicent used to say when we planned out our future in the old school-days. Dear old Mill! I wonder if she is as funny as ever, and if she still mixes up her sentences in the same comical way. I shall be terribly disappointed if she doesn’t. Five, six more weeks before I see her and all the other vicarage people, and already I’m in a ferment of impatience. Every mile we travel nearer home, the more I long for the time to come; and when we get to London I really don’t know how I shall last out the fortnight before I go down to the country.”

“Would it help matters if we invited Mellicent to come and join us in London? She would enjoy the experience of living in an hotel and house-hunting with us. You can write and ask her, dear, if you like,” said Mrs Saville fondly; and Peggy clasped her hands together in one of the old ecstatic gestures.

“How s–imply lovely! Mother dear, you are an admirable person. There is nothing in the world I should like so much, and it would be so wise, too, for Mellicent and I would have time to get through our first floodgates of talk before I met the others, so that I should not be torn asunder by wanting to speak to every one at the same time. It will be a wild dissipation for the dear old girl to stay in an hotel, and she does enjoy herself so beamingly when she is out for a holiday that it’s a pleasure to behold her. I’ll write this very minute!”

The invitation was despatched forthwith, and such a rhapsodical acceptance received by return of post as effectually dispelled Peggy’s fears lest her friend might have outgrown her old peculiarities. Mellicent at twenty-one was apparently as gushingly outspoken, as amazingly irrelevant, as in the days of short frocks and frizzled locks, and the expectation of meeting her in four short weeks lent added zest to Peggy’s enjoyment of her new surroundings.

The headquarters of this happy party was at an hotel situated on the hill behind Cannes, and every morning a carriage waited at the door, to drive them to the different places of interest in the neighbourhood. They bought curious plaques and vases at the Vallauris pottery, went over the scent manufactory at Grasse, where mountains of rose leaves and violets are

converted into fragrant perfumes, and drove along the exquisite Cornichi road, which winds round the hillside, and affords a view of the Mediterranean lying below, blue as a sapphire in the summer sunshine. In the afternoons Mrs Saville would retire to rest, tired out by the morning's exertions, and Peggy would say plaintively:

"Father dear, could you bear the reflections that your only daughter was pining for an ice and a box of chocolates, and that you had refused to indulge her for the sake of a few miserable rupees!" and the colonel invariably replying in the negative, she would array herself in her smartest frock, and repair with him to Rumpelmeyer's, who, as every one who has stayed in the Riviera knows full well, is at once the most wonderful and the most extortionate confectioner who ever tempted the appetites of men.

At every visit Peggy and her father groaned afresh at the price of the bonbons displayed so daintily in their satin boxes; but though they agreed that it was impossible to indulge any more in such extravagance, they invariably succumbed to temptation, the colonel ejaculating, "It's a poor heart that never rejoices. We shall be young only once in our lives, Peg, so we might as well enjoy ourselves while we can," and Peggy explaining to her scandalised mother that the expenditure was really an economy in the end, since she would keep all the pretty cases, fill them with jujubes, and present them as Christmas presents to deserving friends!

At Paris Hector Darcy bade his friends farewell, and Peggy bore his departure in philosophical fashion. It had been delightful having his company, for it had seemed like a "bit of home," but he would have been dreadfully in the way in Paris, where the avowed business of the day was the purchase of clothes and fripperies. Mrs Saville and her daughter prepared for the fray with every appearance of enjoyment, and though the colonel professed a horror of shopping, he yet manifested an agreeable interest in their purchases.

"I can't afford to give you *carte blanche*, with all the expenses of the new house before us," he explained, "but one or two pretty frocks apiece you must and shall have, while we are on the spot; so go ahead and make yourself smart, and I'll brace my nerves to face the bill."

There was no fear that Miss Peggy would not go ahead in such an occupation. The only difficulty was that she went ahead too fast; but by dint of forbearance, mingled with judicious firmness, the choice was made at last, and in due time the dresses came home, the bills were paid, and Colonel Saville, blessing Providence that he had not six women to dress instead of two, hurried on the day of departure from a city of such ruinous fascinations.

On one happy spring morning, then, behold the Saville trio once more nearing the white cliffs of Old England—blessed travellers, whose exile was over, and who could look forward to spending the rest of their lives in that dear old country which, despite its rain and fog, must ever be the dearest in the world to true-born Britons.

They stood together, amidst the bustle of arrival, looking with sparkling eyes at the well-remembered scene, for there was no necessity to hurry for the train, and Colonel Saville, with all a soldier's intolerance of a scramble, decided to wait on board until the general exodus was over. "Then we will get a porter to take our boxes quietly ashore," he explained to his companions; and, as if his words had been overheard, at that very moment a candidate for that post came up from behind.

"Carry your boxes, sir? Can I carry your boxes?" cried a breezy voice, at the sound of which Peggy gasped, Mrs Saville laid her hand over her heart, and the colonel wheeled round to confront Arthur himself, taller, broader, handsomer than ever.

"My boy!" he cried brokenly.

"Arthur!" gasped his mother, and lay sobbing on the dear, strong shoulder, while Peggy stroked the tails of his coat, and assiduously licked away the tears which would insist upon flowing down her cheeks. Why cry, when she was so happy? The thing was absurd! Why do anything but laugh, and dance, and sing with mirth, when at long, long last they were all four together, and Arthur stood before her in solid flesh and blood?

"How tall you are! Taller than your father, my dear big son!"

"How good it is to see you again, my boy! We have wearied for this day."

“Oh, Arthur, what a big moustache! What a dear you look! We never, never expected to see you before we got to London.”

“I was not sure of coming, but I worked it somehow, for I could not wait an hour longer than was necessary. Peg, you’re a lady growed! I looks towards you! Oh, let us be joyful! This is grand to be together again, with no more miserable partings ahead. Welcome to England, mother! First step on the old land—eh? Feels nice and sound beneath your feet, doesn’t it? Just the sort of solid, durable old place to take root in after a roaming life!” And Arthur led his mother on shore, rattling away in his old merry style, though the tears shone in his eyes also, and his voice was not so clear as it might have been.

The years that had passed since he had seen his parents last had not been altogether easy ones for him. He had had to face the bitterest disappointment of his life, to adapt himself to a new and uncongenial sphere, and, in spite of all his courage, there had been moments when the task had seemed too heavy to bear. It had been an effort to write cheerfully, and to refrain from repinings over his lost hopes, but he had made the effort, and he was rewarded for his forbearance a hundred times over in this moment of meeting, as he noticed the hollows in his mother’s cheeks, and the grey locks on his father’s brow. It had been hard enough for them as it was. He was thankful he had not laid on them the additional burden of his own sufferings.

The reunited family travelled up to town together, and dined in a private room in the hotel, so that they might be able to talk without interruption. Arthur was, of course, the hero of the occasion, and was handed about from one to another of his adoring relatives in a manner which would have been amusing to an onlooker. First of all Mrs Saville claimed him, and they sat on the sofa together, stroking each other’s hands like a charming pair of lovers, as a mother and grown-up son should always be. Then she cast an apologetic glance at her husband, and made an excuse to move her position, when Colonel Saville took possession of his “boy,” and the two tall figures leant against the mantelpiece talking “manny talk,” as Peggy expressed it, and smoking their cigarettes. Finally it was Peggy’s own turn, and she sat perched on Arthur’s knee, gazing into the dear, handsome face which had always been her ideal of manly beauty.

“Fancy, Arthur, just fancy, we are grown-up ladies and gentlemen! I am twenty-one, and you are twenty-six! Doesn’t it seem wonderful? You look so handsome, dear, so big and important! I suppose you are important, aren’t you? What is your chief like? Does he appreciate you? Does he defer sufficiently to your advice? Between ourselves, the English Government isn’t so well managed as I could wish. There is a want of firmness in dealing with Foreign Powers which annoys me greatly. Next time you get into a muddle at the War Office, just tell them to apply to me, and I’ll set them straight! If I could get the chance of being Minister of War for a couple of days, I’d settle them! No shilly-shally for me I I’d show them how the thing ought to be done!”—and Peggy wagged her head in a fierce and defiant manner, which sent Arthur into a peal of laughter.

“Not any more burdened by modesty than you used to be, I perceive, young lady. I’ll be pleased to pass on your message. The chief is a conscientious fellow, and feels his responsibility so much that it will doubtless be a relief to him to know that Peggy Saville is to the rescue. I’ll introduce you to him some time soon, when you can have an opportunity of airing your views.”

“I should like that. I suppose we shall have any amount of invitations when we are really settled, but just at first we want to devote all our energies to house-hunting. We are going to drive to the agent’s first thing to-morrow morning, to see what he has to offer us, and then Mellicent arrives in the afternoon. You knew she was coming, didn’t you, and that I am going home with her at the end of a fortnight?”

Arthur chuckled softly to himself.

“Chubby in London! What delirious excitement! I must try to go about with you sometimes, for it will be great to hear her remarks. She has never been in town for more than a few hours at a time on a shopping expedition, and has everything to see. Chubby has developed into a very creditable specimen, I’d have you know, and she don’t appreciate being called Chubby no more. Consequently, I make a point of addressing her by no other name! When she gets into a rage she looks surprisingly like the fat little girl of a dozen years back.”

“Too bad!” cried Peggy, laughing. “None of that sort of thing while she is

here, remember! No one shall tease my visitors but myself. I'm simply longing to see the dear old girl, and hear all the news about everybody. Rob is at The Cedars, they say, so I must wait to see him there, but Rosalind is in town. Oh, Arthur, do you see much of her? Do you meet her often? Is she a great beauty, and does every one talk about her and make a fuss of her wherever she goes, as we used to imagine they would do when she grew up? Do tell me all about Rosalind!"

Arthur's face stiffened in a curious, unnatural fashion, and his lips lost their laughing curve, and grew straight and hard. The sparkle died out of his face, and he looked a boy no longer, but a man, and a man who had not found his life too easy. He was astonishingly like his father at that moment, and both mother and sister noted the fact.

"Oh, that would be a long story, and would take up too much time. For Rosalind's doings, see the society papers," he cried, with an indifference too elaborate to be genuine. "To-morrow's issue will no doubt inform you that she is at some big function to-night, wearing a robe of sky-blue silk, festooned with diamonds and bordered with rubies. That's the proper style of thing, isn't it, for a society belle? I see her occasionally. Lord Darcy is the kindest of friends, and I have always a welcome at his house. I don't go very often, but I meet them out, and am vouchsafed a dance, or ten minutes' conversation, if nobody more important is on the scene. Rosalind is an important personage nowadays, and can't waste her time on the likes of me; but she is devoted to you, Peg, and will rush round to see you the moment you let her know that you are at home."

But Peggy set her lips, and privately resolved to be in no hurry to apprise Rosalind Darcy of her return. No one who considered herself too grand for Arthur should have the chance of associating with his sister. Dear, darling Arthur! Did he still care, then? Was Rosalind's beautiful face still a Will-o'-the-wisp to dazzle and ensnare his heart, and was it possible that she, or any mortal woman, could have the hardihood to resist Arthur Saville when he came to woo? Peggy sat silent, but her heart formed a voiceless prayer—a prayer that if in the future trouble must come, she might be the one to bear it, and that Arthur might be shielded from a second crushing disappointment.

Chapter Five.

The next day the Savilles lost no time in consulting the agent who had been commissioned to advertise for houses on their behalf, and he in his turn presented them with a list of a dozen places which were for sale, eight of which were obviously unsuitable, and none in the very least like Peggy's ideal abode. This was a bitter disappointment to the expectant trio, and the disappointment was not softened by the offhand and independent manner in which they were treated, for the agent hinted at inordinate expectations, smiled openly at Peggy's inquiry about a moat, and floated off to attend to another inquirer, as if any other subject were worth considering when the question of Colonel Saville's future home was on the *tapis*!

Mrs Saville left the office with a crestfallen air, but her husband and daughter stalked forth with their most military stride, and exchanged glances of kindling irritation on the doorstep.

"Insubordinate wretch!" cried the colonel, the ends of his moustache looking fiercer than ever, and his eyes gleaming with anger, for after ruling as despot over his regiment for so many years, the lack of deference shown by a mere civilian was a distinct trial to the flesh. "There's a good deal to be said for our friends the natives after all, Peg! If one of them had dared to treat me like that—"

"Just so!" assented Peggy. "I'm with you, father. I *do* like people to tremble at my nod, and in this land of freedom no one seems in the least afraid of us. It's disgraceful. We had better take the train, and look at this Uplands place. It seems the most likely of any on the list, so I suppose we ought to see it."

To the Uplands, then, the trio betook themselves, to find disappointment number two, for the name had evidently been bestowed in a spirit of satire on a house situated in a valley, and shut in by a network of trees. The rooms smelt like so many vaults, and presented a cheerful pattern of mould upon the walls, while even Peggy's ardour could not face the task of reducing a wilderness into a garden. A drive of three miles brought the explorers to yet another desirable residence of so uncompromisingly

bleak and hideous an aspect that they drove away from the gates without examining the interior, and returned to town fatigued and discouraged.

“But we could not expect to find what we wanted the very first day,” Peggy reminded herself cheerily. “Besides, Mellicent is coming! That is quite enough happiness for one day. In two more hours she will be here. I’ll go downstairs at five o’clock, and wait for her in the hall.”

When five o’clock arrived, however, a brother officer came to call upon Colonel Saville, and Peggy was delayed several minutes longer than she intended, so that when she repaired downstairs it was a little past the hour when Mellicent was due. It was quite likely that the train had been behind time, or that difficulties in getting luggage put on a cab might have delayed her arrival, and Peggy devoutly hoped that this had been the case, so that she might still be in time to give a friendly welcome. The hall was, as usual, crowded with visitors. An American contingent chatted merrily together in one corner; a French marquise stared around through a gold-rimmed lorgnette; and the usual array of family parties lolled on ottomans and sofas, scrutinising the passers-by, and exchanging whispered criticisms, which were neither so complimentary nor so subdued as might have been desired. A stout lady and two slim daughters, looking more like fashion-plates than Peggy could have believed it possible for any human creatures to do, stood discussing a knotty point together in the centre of the floor, their voluminous skirts shutting out the view beyond.

Peggy made a *détour* to the side, caught sight of a broad, blue serge back, looking broader than ever from contrast with sylph-like forms, a coil of yellow hair beneath a sailor hat, and the side of a crimson cheek. Mellicent! Of course it was Mellicent! There she stood, the poor dear thing, a statue of misery in the midst of the fashionable crowd, a roll of shawls clutched in one hand, her dress thick with dust, and her hair blown into disorder. The critics on the benches sniggered and whispered to one another, and the French marquise examined her through the lorgnette with unconcealed amaze; but at the sight of the familiar figure Peggy’s heart leapt within her, for she saw again the ivy-covered vicarage, and the shabby, sunny schoolroom in which she had spent such happy days. A hand clutched Mellicent’s arm in ecstatic grasp, and a tremulous voice spoke in her ear.

“Mellicent, *darling*! Is it really you?”

“Oh, my goodness, Peggy, have you come at last? Nobody knew where you were, and they said they’d send, and it’s simply awful the way these wretches stare!” cried Mellicent in a rush, “They sit round in rows, and glare as if they had nothing in the world to do but quiz the poor new arrivals as they come in at the door.”

“Which, my dear, is precisely the state of the case. It *is* disconcerting, especially when you arrive in the evening, after a tempestuous Channel passage, and step into a hall aglow with diamonds and eye-glasses; but turn about is fair play!” cried Peggy reassuringly. “To-morrow you and I will quiz in our turn, and just think how we shall enjoy it. Father and I have sat together for hours, criticising and inventing histories, and you have no idea how entertaining it is. You’ll simply love it.”

“No, I sha’n’t. It’s unkind and cruel, and must make people simply dread coming in. If I were the manager, I wouldn’t allow it!” declared Mellicent in righteous wrath; then her eyes turned to her companion, and a tardy realisation of the position seemed to dawn upon her. “Oh, Peggy!” she cried, and again, “Oh, Peggy! I’m *so* glad to see you again. It has seemed such a long, long time since you went away, and there was no one like you—no one who could ever take your place.”

Peggy gave an affectionate little grip to the blue serge arm, but made none of the protests which usually follow such an announcement. Modesty not being her strong point, she saw no reason to dispute Mellicent’s assertion, so smiled instead, and cried reassuringly:

“Never mind, I’m back again now, and never going away no more! Dear old Chubs, you look so fresh, and pink-and-white and Englishy, that it does me good to see you. This is our sitting-room, and you must come in and say how do you do to father and mother, and have some tea. Father is going out with a friend presently, and mother will have a rest in her bedroom, so we shall have a cosy little chat by ourselves. Don’t look alarmed! They are not a bit fierce, I assure you, but a most mild and agreeable old couple.”

As she spoke Peggy threw open the door of the sitting-room, and the

mild and agreeable couple bestowed the kindliest of greetings upon their young visitor; but the surroundings were all so strange and formal that country-bred Mellicent was overpowered, and could only blush and stammer in school-girl fashion. Her own perfect consciousness of the fact added fuel to her embarrassment, and a full-length mirror at the opposite side of the room presented such an exasperating contrast of rustic awkwardness and dainty grace, as she and Peggy stood side by side, that her heart died down within her. Poor Mellicent! her new coat and skirt had been made by the very best dressmaker in the village, and had been considered a miracle of elegance by the admiring home circle; so that she had looked forward to making quite a triumphant entrance, and now here she was, looking her very worst, and conscious of a dozen shortcomings as she looked at her friend's graceful figure. Peggy's features still retained their miniature-like faultlessness of outline, her pretty hair was coiled about her head in fantastic fashion, she bore herself with even more than the old assurance, and rustled about the room in a gown of Parisian manufacture. A little chill of strangeness and depression settled down on Mellicent's spirits. For the last month she had lived in constant expectation of this visit, had built a fairy edifice of dreams concerning it, and already the foundations were beginning to totter. The great hotel, with its crowd of critical inmates, was terrifying to the country-bred girl, the graciousness of her host and hostess appeared formal, when compared with the warm-hearted cordiality of her Irish mother, and even Peggy herself seemed transformed into another person. It was no longer Peggy, it was Mariquita, and Mariquita a dozen times more self-possessed and imposing than in the days of old.

When Colonel and Mrs Saville left the room, Mellicent watched with awed eyes an interview which took place between Miss Peggy and a waiter whom she had summoned to bring a supply of fresh tea. There were several other matters to discuss regarding the despatch of letters and parcels, and the severe though courteous manner in which the young lady conducted the conversation, reduced the listener to a condition of speechless amazement. When the door closed behind the man, Peggy met the stare of the horrified blue eyes, and put a laughing inquiry as to the nature of her offence.

"I don't know how you *dare* talk to him like that!" stammered Mellicent in return. "He is ever so much older than you, and looks so—so dignified

and grand, and you order him about, and tell him to be careful, and send him running up and downstairs. I don't know how you can do it. I'm nervous enough about finding fault with the servants at home, but with a stranger! A man! I could never summon up courage to find fault, no matter what mistakes he made. And you are so cool about it!"

"My dear, I'm used to it. Consider the position I have had to fill these last three years in Indiah!" drawled Miss Peggy, and leant her head against the cushions of her chair with an exhausted air, which seemed to imply that she had come straight from the duties of Government House itself. Then suddenly she straightened herself, and attacked the teapot.

"I forget if you take sugar in your tea. So few people do nowadays. And cream? It's rather strong, I'm afraid. Be sure to tell me if it's exactly as you like."

"Thank you!" murmured Mellicent faintly. She put the cup down on a table close at hand, and fumbled nervously with her gloves.

"P–Peggy!"

"Yes, dear."

"Peg-gy!"

"Yes, Mellicent, what is it?"

"Oh, Peggy, I feel—I feel so uncomfortable! It's all so strange and different from what I expected. I thought I should feel at home the moment I saw you—but I don't, not a bit. You look so grown-up and proper, and your dress is so grand, and you have done your hair like the people in the fashion-books, and I never can make out how on earth they twist it in and out... We are the same age, but you seem ever so much older, and I don't feel that it is you at all."

"The inference is, that I never *was* proper, nor tidy, nor well-dressed in the old days! Not very complimentary to me, I must say," began Peggy lightly, and then caught sight of a tear-drop glittering on Mellicent's eyelashes, which sobered her very quickly. Crying? No, surely not; yet tears were there, undeniable tears, filling the blue eyes, and rolling slowly

down over the pink cheeks. Peggy dropped down on her knees, and clasped her hands round the plump blue waist.

“Why, Mill, what is it? What grieves you, dear? What have I done, or said, or looked—horrid thing that I am!—to vex you within ten minutes of your arrival? I never, never meant it!”

“You haven’t done anything! It’s my own fault. I’m sorry to be so silly, Peggy, but all this time I have been longing and longing to see you, and thinking that it would be just the same as in the old days; but, oh, Peggy, we’ve led such different lives, and it’s not the same—oh, it’s not the same at all! I have stood still, but you have moved on, and there’s such a big, big difference. I realised it all of a sudden, and began to cry like a baby, but it’s not your fault. It’s only because I am so fond—so fond of you, Peggy, and so sorry to think—”

“You dear, sweet goose! Stop crying this minute, and listen to me. There is no difference between us, and it’s going to be *exactly* the same. You are Mellicent Asplin, and I’m Peggy Saville, and after my very own people I love the dear old vicaragers more than any one else in the world. I never change in my affections, and in other respects the day may yet dawn, my love, when you may wish that I had altered considerably more than I have. Will it help you to recognise me if I pull your hair, eli?—or tickle you under the chin, eh?—or give a nice little jolt to your elbow just as you lift your cup, eh?” cried Peggy, illustrating each inquiry in practical fashion, while Mellicent giggled in the midst of tears, and dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief.

“D–o–on’t! You’ll spoil my dress. Oh, Peggy, it *is* good of you, and I did so want to come, and will you really promise not to be ashamed of me, if I make stupid mistakes, and look dowdy and horrid when we go out together?”

“I’ll be ashamed of you, and furious into the bargain, if you hint at such a thing again. I’m not a snob, thank goodness! Now sit up, my dear, and drop sentiment, and attend to tea. Take a cress sandwich, and don’t cry over it, I beseech you! If there is one thing more objectionable than another, it is wet salad. Tell me all about home, and every one in it. Are they looking forward to my advent, and is cook remembering my favourite

puddings? I've got a present for every one—such a beautiful white shawl for Mrs Asplin, a tiger skin for your father's study, some old manuscripts for Esther, as I could not think of anything she would like better, and—"

"And what for—How very nice! So kind of you, Peggy, to think of us!" protested Mellicent, drawing herself up with sudden recollection, but palpitating with curiosity to hear what her own share might be. "Esther hopes to get home while you are with us, but she can't tear herself from her precious pupils for more than a week. She has three little boys whom she is training for school, and teaching Latin and Greek and mathematics and all sorts of horrid things. You would hate it, Peggy, and so would I, but Esther loves it, and grudges every moment she is away."

Peggy laughed.

"I can imagine it! The little rascals scrawling substantives on their slates —'O frog—To a frog—By, with, or from a frog!' and Esther's solemn distress over a wrong termination. Isn't it a blessing that we are made differently, and that some people are born with such wonderful patience and forbearance? I pity their poor little knuckles if *I* were in charge. But then I was always hastily inclined. Your father used to say that Esther and Rob had far more of the scholarly spirit than Rex, though he must have worked hard to get through his examinations so well. Dear old Rex, how I should love to see him again! It seems so funny to think of him as a full-fledged doctor, with a practice of his own! How does he like living in the North, and how does he get on?"

Mellicent shrugged her shoulders uncertainly.

"Pretty well, only it's such a disgustingly bracing place that no one is ever ill. Rex says it is most depressing to look out of the windows and see the healthy faces! He gets so tired waiting for patients who never come. I stayed with him for a week in the winter, and whenever the bell rang we used to rush out into the hall, and peer over the banisters to see who was there, and if it was a patient Rex kept him waiting for ten minutes by his watch, to pretend that he was busy, though he was really dying to fly downstairs at once. He makes very little money, and father has to help him a good deal; but last month something happened which he hopes will help him on. The mayor of the town had a carriage accident just opposite

his house, and was nearly killed. Wasn't it luck for Rex? He was so pleased! The mayor was carried into the house, and could not be moved for days, and the papers were full of 'Dr Asplin this, and Dr Asplin that,' as if he was the biggest doctor they had! The mayoress seems to have taken a fancy to him too, for she begs him to go to their house as often as he likes, without waiting to be asked. It will be nice for Rex to have some friends in the town, for he daren't go far from home. Oswald and his wife live within an hour's rail, and often invite him there, but he is afraid to go, in case a patient *should* appear!"

"Oswald's wife! How strange it sounds! I have never heard anything about her, and am so curious to know what she is like! What account did Rex bring when he came home from the wedding?"

"He said he couldn't attempt to describe her, but that you could meet seventy-six girls exactly like her any day of the week. Rather pretty, rather fair, rather nice, rather musical! Everything *rather*, and nothing *very*! and thinks Oswald the most wonderful man in the world. She can't be very clever herself, if she thinks that, can she? Oswald was always a regular dunce!"

"Oh, 'dunce' is too strong a word, Chubby! He was not brilliant, but you must remember that he suffered from contrast with his companions. Rex was very bright, if he was not exactly clever, and it is not often that you come across such a really scholarly boy as Rob Darcy!"

Peggy busied herself with the arrangement of the tea-tray without glancing in her friend's direction, and with an air of studied carelessness. She herself knew that she had dragged Rob's name into the discussion for no other object than to set Mellicent's ready tongue to work on a subject about which she was longing for information, and she was alarmed lest her intention might be suspected. Mellicent, however, had retained her comfortable obtuseness, and rose to the bait with innocent alacrity.

"Well, I don't know if *you* call it scholarly to think of nothing in the world but beetles, and grubby little plants that no one ever heard of before; but *I* call it idiotic. He is worse than Esther, because, after all, schoolboys are human creatures, and sometimes you can't help liking them, though they

are so tiresome, but nobody could love a beetle! I said so once to Rob, and he snubbed me dreadfully, and talked at me for half an hour. I didn't understand half he said—for it was all in technical beetley language, but it was meant to prove that it was wrong to say anything of the sort, or refuse to see the beauty hidden away in the meanest created thing."

"Quite true! I agree with Rob. He was perfectly right."

"But, Peggy, a beetle! And to care for nothing else! You have no idea what a regular old hermit Rob has become. He is perfectly wrapped up in beetles!" cried Mellicent, with a descriptive elegance of diction, at which her hearer shuddered visibly. "He takes no interest in anything else!"

Peggy smiled, and her head took a complacent tilt.

"That's bad! That will have to be altered. He'll take interest in *me*, my dear, or there'll be trouble! I believe in a man devoting himself to his work, but Rob is too nice to be allowed to bury himself completely. I must rouse him up! A fortnight from now we will meet again, and the treatment will begin. Meanest creatures are all very well in their way, but superior ones demand their own share of attention. Rob always did as I told him, and he will not disappoint me now."

Mellicent gazed at her friend in reflective fashion. She called up before her a picture of Rob's great stooping form, his shaggy head, and overhanging brows, and contrasted it mentally with that of the slim little, neat little, prettiest of elf-like figures before her. No, it was not in the least likely that Rob would disappoint Peggy Saville. "Those dreadful Savilles" had now, as ever, the power of enforcing obedience from their vassals.

"But all the same," she repeated obstinately, "but all the same he would have liked you better if you had been a beetle!"

Chapter Six.

The next morning was devoted to another house-hunting expedition, unsuccessful as its predecessor, while in the afternoon came a fresh excitement, in the shape of a call from Arthur's "chief," accompanied by

his wife and daughter. Mr Rob had had a slight acquaintance with Colonel Saville years before, so that the interview lost some of the stiffness incidental to such occasions; and while the two men talked together in one corner of the room, their wives exchanged condolences on the ever-fruitful subject of domestic arrangements, and the three girls cast curious glances at one another in the intervals of conversation.

“I am afraid you must find the weather chilly. Our English springs are very treacherous!” remarked Miss Rollo properly, turning her card-case round and round in her hands, and blinking rapidly with a pair of shy grey eyes, veiled by eyelashes of extraordinary length and silkiness. As the only child of distinguished parents, Miss Eunice Rollo was a personage of some importance in society; but she appeared much more afraid of the two girls than they were of her, and kept her eyes fixed so persistently on the carpet that Mellicent enjoyed an unusual opportunity of indulging a favourite pastime, and sat braced against the back of her chair, staring stolidly up and down, down and up, until she could have passed an examination on the minutest detail of the stranger’s appearance and clothing. As for Peggy, she prattled away on the engrossing subjects of sun and rain, while her thoughts went off on an excursion of their own, and busied themselves with criticisms on the new visitor.

“Eunice by name, and Eunice by nature! A more Eunicey creature I never beheld. Grey eyes like Mrs Asplin... I could love her for those alone, but *so* solemn! I’d like to wake you up, my dear, and make you look more like a real live girl, and less like a marionette. The way that Mellicent stares is disgraceful. She must be made to stop.”

Peggy cleared her throat in meaning fashion, met the wide blue eyes and frowned a warning. Any other girl in the world would have understood and obeyed; but Mellicent only gaped the more, raised questioning eyebrows, and even mouthed a dumb inquiry. Peggy screwed up her face into a vicious glare of anger, at which moment, it is needless to say, Eunice seized the opportunity to lift her eyes from the carpet. For one second amazement held her motionless, then she fell to work on the card-case with redoubled zeal, and tilted her hat over her face. Her eyes could not be seen, but her lips were twisted on one side, and her cheeks grew suddenly, mysteriously pink. Was she laughing? Was she angry? Peggy could not tell, but she felt an intense curiosity to discover, and a

dawning suspicion that Eunice was perhaps not quite so “Eunicey” after all.

“It is very nice to come home to the old country again, and to see all our friends. Miss Asplin and I had lessons together for four years, so that, as you may imagine, we have a great deal to talk over now that we have met again,” she explained; and Miss Rollo replied with elaborate politeness:

“I can indeed. It must be delightful I hope you will bring Miss Asplin with you, if you come to us on Wednesday. We are having a reception in the evening, with music and tableaux. It will be a crush, I’m afraid, but you may find it amusing. Rosalind Darcy is coming. She has been staying in the country for a week, but she will be back by then, and would like to see you, I’m sure. I hope you will be able to come.”

“Oh, I hope so!” The answer came simultaneously from two pairs of lips, and Mellicent drew in her breath with a gasp of pleasure. It was beginning already. What excitement—what joy—what delight! Only the first day of her visit, and behold! an invitation to one of the best-known houses in London, where with her own eyes she should behold those great people of the world whom she had read about, but never, never expected to see. At this rate, Mellicent reflected, she would find herself on intimate terms at Court before the fortnight was concluded; and oh! the joy of returning home and speaking in casual tones about Princes of the Blood, Dukes and Marquises, and Cabinet Ministers, for, the edification of village hearers! Her complacency vented itself in a long postscript to the letter already written to her mother, a postscript of such characteristic nature as delighted that appreciative lady, and which was read aloud with much unction to her husband, and a friend of the family who happened to be paying a call at the time, whereby, as will be seen, certain things came to pass which would not otherwise have happened.

The prospect of Mrs Rollo’s reception was so dazzling as to throw all other experiences into the shade; but the two intervening days were full of excitement, for Peggy was delighted to play “country cousin” for her friend’s benefit, and the two girls drove about from one place of interest to another, from early morning until late at night. Westminster Abbey had, of course, special claims on the affections, and evoked that thrill of

mingled awe and patriotism which all true-born Britons must feel on entering that glorious edifice. When the voices of the choristers rang out in the psalms for the morning, Mellicent shed tears on her Prayer-book, and felt icy-cold all the way down her spine, and Peggy's eyes flashed fire, and the rare colour burned in her cheeks.

When the service was over the two girls wandered about together gazing at the monuments, reading the inscriptions which recalled noble deeds, and exchanging ardent confidences the while.

"I should like to come here every day," said Mellicent softly, "every single day. I should like to be a verger, and spend my life in an abbey. I think I could be awfully good if I lived here always. It makes one feel so small and insignificant, that one wouldn't dare to be selfish, and think one's own happiness so important. I can't believe that it was ever built by men —ordinary common working men. It seems like a mountain—a great, wonderful thing that God must have made Himself, and given to His people."

Peggy looked at her with bright, astonished eyes.

"You dear thing, what a sweet idea! I feel the same about it; but perhaps, after all, it was better that men *should* have made it. It must have done *them* good. One cannot imagine that a workman in such a task could remain 'common.' I have read charming stories about men who have devoted their whole lives to little pieces of carving or ironwork, to be placed in insignificant corners of old Continental cathedrals. It did not trouble them that their work would not be seen; they were so impressed with the spirit of the place that they simply could not endure to do less than their very, very best, and were willing to remain poor all their lives in order to be able to do it. That's fine! That's grand! None of your miserable scamping spirit there. The place made the men, as well as the men the place."

"Yes, yes, that's just what I feel. I'd like to do something for it too, if it were only the dusting," sighed Mellicent, passing her finger along a ledge of wood, and pensively regarding the ridge of dust on her light kid gloves. "I assure you, Peggy, the shivers were running down my back the whole time of that service like a cold-water tap. I was freezing!"

“And I was tingling. Oh, to do something big enough—great enough—to be brought here when I die, and be laid among these fine old heroes! Isn’t it maddening sometimes to be a woman, and feel penned in, in a wretched little body?” Peggy stood still and faced her companion with kindling eyes. “At this moment, my dear, the spirit of Hercules is within me—I feel as if I could lift mountains, and look at *that*.” She held out her hand, staring with intense disfavour at the fragile little wrist. “That’s my weapon! If I tried to lift that *bench*, I should sprain my wrist. If I work my brain for several hours on end, I have a sick headache I’m a lion in a cage, dear; a little, miserable, five-foot cage, and it’s no use beating at the bars, for I’ll never get out;” and Peggy stared miserably at the statue of the “third great Canning” which stood opposite, and sighed her heart out, to think how impossible it seemed that the name of Mariquita Saville would ever be emblazoned by his side.

From the Abbey the sightseers drove to the Academy, where they spent a couple of hours in making their way through the crowded rooms. Mrs Saville and her daughter were unaffectedly interested in the pictures, but Mellicent declared the study of them such a “neck-achey” process that she soon abandoned the effort, and contented herself with criticising the people instead. After living all one’s life in provincial parishes where every inhabitant recognised and saluted the vicar’s daughter, it was a little bewildering to find oneself surrounded by hundreds of absolutely strange faces; a trifle depressing too, to one-and-twenty, to realise afresh her own countrified appearance, as slim-waisted *élégantes* floated past in a succession of spring toilettes, each one more fascinating than the last. Mellicent sat down on one of the centre couches and gave herself up to despair.

“My sleeves aren’t right, and my neck isn’t right, and my back isn’t right! My skirt sticks out where it should be flat, and is flat where it ought to stick out. My hat looks like the ark, and my gloves are too big. I ought to be superior like Esther, and not care a bit, but I *do*. I care frightfully. I feel a worm, and as it I’d like to crawl away and hide myself out of sight,”—and Mellicent’s fair face clouded over with an expression of such hopeless melancholy, that Peggy, catching sight of it, came forward instantly to discover the reason.

“Tired?” she cried cheerily. “Never mind, we won’t be long now, and then

we'll drive home, and you shall be tucked up in bed, and have a comfy rest. Sight-seeing *is* tiring... Which do you like best?"

"The blue, I think, with the lace edgings. The body is so sweet, with all the tiny, lovely little tucks, and the colour would suit my hair," said Mellicent plaintively, all unconscious of the open-eyed wonder with which she was regarded.

"What has your hair to do with it, and how *could* a body be covered with tucks? You are sleepy, dear, and didn't hear what I said. I asked what picture you liked best."

"Oh–h, picture! I thought you meant dresses. I was thinking about the dresses—"

"Mellicent Asplin, I'm shocked at you! You remind me of the visitor to Paris who was asked how she liked the Louvre, and replied that the Bon Marché was cheaper for ribbons. To think that you could sit opposite some of the finest pictures of the year, and find more enjoyment in looking at frocks."

"I haven't enjoyed it at all. I've disenjoyed it horribly. You wouldn't like it yourself, if you saw seven hundred and fifty girls, and each one looked seven hundred times nicer than you did yourself. I detest them all, but I hate the blue one worst! Didn't you see her, Peggy—pale, *pale* blue, with white lace and—"

"Poor old Mill. Come along, dear, we'll go back to the hotel, and not worry about them any more. You shall come straight to my room, and I'll give you a tonic that will do you good."

"I hate tonics. They taste like rusty spoons. I'm quite well, and don't want it."

"We'll see about that. It's a new brand, warranted to be especially efficacious in the case of young females. It isn't in the least like a rusty spoon, and exercises an exhilarating effect on the spirits. You wait and see."

Peggy looked at her friend, and her eyes twinkled. It was evident that

some mystery was in the air, and that the word ‘tonic’ was used in a figurative rather than a literal sense. Mellicent pondered, hit on the solution of chocolates, and being an inveterate sweet-tooth, found consolation in the prospect. Perhaps Peggy was going to present her with some of the treasures she had brought home from Cannes, in which case there would not only be the enjoyment of the bonbons themselves, but the case would remain as a permanent joy and pride. So fascinating did the idea appear that it was quite a shook to see a long narrow roll emerge from the wardrobe when the crucial hour arrived.

“Here is your tonic,” said Peggy. “It has come all the way from India, and was ordered for you a whole year back. I didn’t tell you what your present was the other night, for I wanted you to have the fun of opening it yourself. I do like opening my own parcels, don’t you, and not knowing what I’m going to see!”

“Oh, I do! I love it!” agreed Mellicent rapturously, taking the roll in her arms, and prodding at it with the end of her fingers. “Peggy, how sweet of you! I know I shall like it... It’s very hard, and so narrow... I can’t imagine what it can be. Ordered a year ago—that sounds as if it had to be made. Is it—er—ornamental or useful?”

“Oh, useful! very, very useful!” cried Peggy, and chuckled with enjoyment at Mellicent’s gallant attempt to hide disappointment beneath a pretence of satisfaction.

“Oh yes, how nice! Useful things are much more—*useful*, aren’t they? I believe it’s an umbrella, and yet it’s rather thick for that. I can’t imagine what it can be.”

“Cut the string and look! That’s the best way out of the difficulty,” suggested Peggy; and Mellicent followed her advice, and slowly unrolled the parcel on the bed. Silver paper came first, rolls of silver paper, and a breath of that delicious aromatic perfume which seems an integral part of all Eastern produce, last of all a cardboard cylinder, with something soft and white and gauzy wrapped around it. Mellicent screamed aloud, and jumped about in the middle of the floor.

“It is! It is!” she cried rhapsodically. “It’s a dress like yours—like the one

that was burned in the fire, and that I loved so much. But prettier. Oh, Peggy, it's prettier! There are more of the lovely white silk flowers, and the muslin is softer and finer. You wicked, wicked girl, how dare you say it was useful!"

"Because it was true. You can let Carter make it up, and wear it over your white silk at the Rollos' on Thursday, and if *that* isn't useful, what is, I should like to know? I wish you could have seen your face when I said it was useful. It grew about a yard long."

"I knew it did, though I tried so hard to smile and look pleased. You see, Peg, I have nothing but useful things at home, for we can't afford anything else, and I do so dearly love a taste of luxury now and then. I simply hate useful presents, and when we get any sent to us they invariably are of that order, for people say to themselves, 'Poor things, they are not at all well off, better send them something that will be *of use*.' And I do assure you, my dear girl, that the Christmas before last I got four dozen handkerchiefs, and five separate pairs of gloves. Gloves I don't mind, for they are *nicely* useful; but I nearly spread out all the forty-eight handkerchiefs on the bed, and wept over them with sheer rage that they weren't something else... Oh, you ducky, darling dress! Sha'n't I look nice! Peggy Peggy, I do love you for thinking of it, and giving me such a pleasure. You can't think how I shall enjoy being really well-dressed for once in my life."

"I'm so pleased you are pleased. It's ever so much nicer to give than to receive. When my three French dresses came home, I was in a bad temper for the rest of the day, because the collars were too high and stuck into my chin, and the dressmaker had not carried out all my instructions; but I'm enjoying this as much as you are, and shall feel a reflected glory in your appearance on Thursday. I'm so glad Arthur will be there, for it will be a comfort to see one familiar face among the throng. I wish—"

"What?"

"Nothing. It's lovely to be back again; but sometimes one feels a little lonely when people are all talking together, and going off into little groups. In Calcutta it was different, for we knew every one, and every one knew

us. Is one *always* disappointed, I wonder, when a thing happens which one had longed for, for years and years? I don't know what I want, but I want *something*!" cried Peggy drearily, and pressed her hands to her brow, while her friend looked on with sympathetic gaze.

"It's tea!" she declared oracularly. "It is five o'clock, and you know, Peggy, you always did get melancholy if tea was later than usual. Let us go downstairs and order it at once."

Peggy slid her hand in her friend's arm with a soft explosion of laughter.

"So we will," she said cheerily. "It's a capital explanation. Tea! Oh, you sensible old Chubby!"

Chapter Seven.

Two evenings later Peggy edged her way out of the crowd at Mrs Rollo's reception, and sat down in a corner with a gasp of relief. Eunice had been correct in prophesying a crush, for the suite of entertaining-rooms seemed a solid block of people, and the babel of voices almost drowned the music, which was being discoursed at intervals by a violinist with a shock head, a Signor with an Italian name and an English face, and a lady with an elaborate coiffure, who, in turn, warbled by herself, and joined in the rendering of impassioned Italian duets. The accompanist flourished up and down the piano, and the singers held their music at arm's length, half-acting the words as they alternately frowned and smiled, and having gone their separate ways throughout three whole pages, joined together in a conclusive burst of triumph. The babel of talk went on with even greater energy when the last note had died away, and Peggy pursed up her lips in doubtful compliment.

"*That's* over, thank goodness! I don't know what it was all about, but she said, 'Si,' 'Si,' a great many times over, and they seemed happy at the end, so that's satisfactory. It must be very exhausting to smile so hard, and sing so loudly at the same time, so I hope other people appreciated their efforts more than I did." Peggy sighed, and stifled a yawn. She was feeling just a trifle tired and depressed in spirits, for the day had been a busy one, and the process of dressing for the evening had been delayed

by one of those careless tricks for which she was famous. Some trifling alteration having to be made to the belt of her sash, she had taken it in hand herself, and put it—where? That was the question. Nowhere in any of the three bedrooms could that belt be found, and while the brougham waited at the door, and an impatient male tramped up and down, four distracted females rushed to and fro, opening drawers, ransacking wardrobes, and burrowing beneath beds. Mrs Saville grew nervous and hysterical; her husband tugged at his moustache, and vowed his intention of sending away the brougham and spending the evening at home if this sort of “foolishness” went on much longer; and Mellicent was on the point of tears, when at last the missing treasure was discovered, squashed flat beneath a cushion, in company with a magazine, a handkerchief, an odd glove, and several stray needles.

Colonel Saville looked very fierce during the drive which followed. His light eyes sent out little sparks of fire, and the waxed ends of his moustache bristled with anger, while Peggy sat opposite him in a little heap in the corner of the carriage, with her eyebrows peaked into the old eave-like shape, and the corners of her lips drooping pensively downward. The meek little, “Yes, father!” “No, father!” which replied to his strictures, would have melted a heart of stone, and Mellicent was relieved to see the colonel’s frown gradually giving place to the usual good-natured twinkle.

“But you must be more careful, child,” he said, “or you and I will quarrel I can’t stand disorderly ways. You ought to have a place for everything.”

“I have, father, but it’s generally in the *other* place!” sighed Peggy plaintively, whereat her father laughed, despite himself, and peace was restored. He was very tender to his little daughter during the hour which followed, as he invariably was after anything had occurred to cause a cloud between them; but though Peggy found no familiar faces in the throng, her parents were fortunate enough to discover several old-time friends, so it came to pass that she now found herself alone for the moment, and thankfully seized the opportunity of a rest.

Ten minutes earlier one of the younger men to whom she had been introduced had asked to be allowed to pilot her to the refreshment-room, but she had insisted on sending Mellicent in her stead, and now had the

pleasure of beholding that young lady standing in a distant corner, enjoying an animated conversation, and looking so fresh and bonnie among the anaemic town-bred girls, that more than one admiring glance was cast in her direction. Peggy's little face softened into a very sweet expression of tenderness as she watched her friend, and hugged the thought that she had had some part in giving her the pleasure which she was now enjoying. In the pretty white dress, with her hair arranged by Carter's skilful hands, Mellicent had no cause to be dissatisfied, even in the midst of this fashionable throng, and the natural girlish pleasure in looking her best added zest to the evening's enjoyment. Peggy reflected once more that it was more blessed to give than to receive, and sitting perched on the ottoman with her little satin shoes braced against the floor which they barely touched, enjoyed a reflected pleasure in Mellicent's conversation, blissfully unconscious of the fact that every expression which flittered over her friend's face was faithfully reflected on her own. The worst of being born a mimic is that on occasions one acts a part without being in the least conscious of so doing, and so while Miss Peggy fondly imagined herself to be wearing an expression of dignified repose, in reality her features were never still for the fraction of a second. Mellicent smiled—she smiled also; Mellicent shook her head—she did the same, until all the little sprays of the white aigrette shook and quivered again; Mellicent appeared to question her companion—Peggy's eyebrows peaked themselves in an inquiring arch; Mellicent cast down her eyes and modestly studied the carpet—prunes and prisms were reflected on Peggy's face in an attack of the most virulent description. So it went on for five minutes on end, the little play being hidden from the surrounding gaze by a bank of palms, through the boughs of which the unconscious actress studied her part; but at the end of five minutes something happened which completely altered the current of Peggy's thoughts. Mellicent's partner called attention to something at the opposite end of the room, and the girl turning to look at it, her understudy naturally followed her example, and straight-way forgot Mellicent and her doings for the rest of the evening.

Some one was leaning up against the doorway, studying her in his turn, and at sight of him Peggy's heart gave a wild dance of agitation. The crowds of gaily dressed visitors whizzed round and round like pieces of glass in the old-fashioned kaleidoscope through which she used to gaze in the vicarage drawing-room; the branches of the palms swayed about in

extraordinary fashion, and the face staring into her own grew dim and indistinct. But it *was* the same face. Oh yes! No one else could possibly possess those deep-set eyes, those rugged features, that heavy lock of hair across the brow. In spite of all reasons to the contrary, it was Rob himself, and the next moment his well-known voice sounded in her ear.

“Mariquita! Little Peggy! Is this really you?”

“Oh, Rob!” cried Peggy faintly, and could find no other word. He had taken the seat beside her, and each gazed into the other’s face with eager eyes, noting the changes which the years had brought to the familiar features. Rob’s skin was burnt brown by the burning sun of the lands through which he had travelled, his forehead showed deeply graven lines, and his cheeks had lost their boyish curve, but the atmosphere of strength and health and honest manliness remained, and exercised the old magnetic influence over his companion. It was like a breath of mountain air coming into the heated room, to see Rob’s face, and hear his hearty voice. Peggy drew a deep sigh of contentment, and smiled a happy greeting.

“It is just as you said it would be, Rob, our meeting like this! How long had you been standing there? Did you recognise me at once? Why are you here at all? I thought you were in the country, and that you hated going out, and would never accept an invitation if you could help it!”

“Circumstances alter cases! I was at the vicarage the other day when Mellicent’s letter arrived, saying you were to be here to-night, and a sudden temptation seized me to have a look at you, and see what manner of young lady the years had made of Peggy-Pickle. I came up this afternoon, astonished Rosalind by offering to accompany her, and wandered about the room staring curiously at every girl I met. I saw several in pink dresses that might possibly have been you, but if they had, I should have marched straight home without troubling for an introduction. Then I skirmished round to this door, and saw a little head bobbing about in a way that seemed familiar, and—”

“And please,” inquired Peggy meekly, “how do you like me, now you have found me? Am I at all what you expected?”

She lifted her face to his in the old mischievous fashion, and Rob studied it with a thoughtful gaze. If she hoped to receive a compliment in reply to her question, she was disappointed. It was not Rob's way to pay compliments, and there was, if anything, a tinge of sadness in the tone in which he said:

"You have changed! It's inevitable, I suppose, but I have always thought of you as I saw you last, and don't seem to recognise the new edition. You have grown-up, but you've grown-up very small! There seems less of you than ever. Was the climate too much for you out there? I should have liked to have seen you looking stronger, Peg!"

"Oh, I'm a wiry little person!" said Peggy lightly. "You needn't be anxious about me;" but she coughed as she spoke, and lay back against the cushions, for really it was rather nice to have Rob anxious about her, and to see the troubled tenderness in his eyes! She fluttered her fan to and fro in a feeble, exhausted fashion, while Rob continued to stare and to frown.

"You look too much like the rest of 'em. That's what I complain of!" he said discontentedly, eyeing the details of her dress, and pointing with a long brown finger to the bracelets on her wrist. "All these fixings-up! Have you grown into a fashionable young lady, by any chance, Mariquita? Are you going to join the social treadmill, and spend your time in a rush after gaiety and enjoyment? or are you the same little girl I used to know, who had an ideal of her own, and wanted to do something grand and noble with her life? Which of the two is it? I can't decide!"

"Oh, Rob!" cried Peggy piteously, and clapped her hands together. "Oh, Rob, it's both! I do want to be good more than anything else in the world. That wish is always there, at the very bottom of my heart, and at any moment, if I were called upon to choose, I would give up anything—anything! to do what was right. But I want to enjoy myself too, and to have some fun, and go about to everything that is going on, and wear pretty clothes, and be—be admired, and praised, and flattered! There! I couldn't say so to any one else, but I always did confide in you, Rob; and you won't be shocked. I seem to have two separate sides, and the worst side is often the strongest. Do you think it is very wrong of me, Rob? I'm so young, you see, so young, and so fond of amusement!"

“Poor little Peg!” said Rob tenderly. “Poor little Peg! You were always an honest little soul, and owned up about your failings. Well, there it is, and you must fight it out for yourself. No one can help you in a case like this, and you’ll come out all right in the end, so long as you keep a true heart. I suppose it’s only natural that you should want your fling. Most girls do, and find a mysterious pleasure in gadding about, and dressing themselves up like dolls.” He scanned her once again with amused, half-angry admiration. “You are mighty smart, Miss Mariquita—a very fine bird! It must have taken a long time to put on all those feathers. Are those what you call your feet? Have you been going in for the binding system in India, may I ask?”

“What is the matter with my feet?” queried Peggy, in a tone of injury, as she stretched out two satin slippers, which seemed suddenly to become of Liliputian dimensions when contrasted with Rob’s huge square-toed shoes. “They are very useful little feet, and can carry me about just as well as your great ironclads can carry you. You used to say yourself that I walked uncommonly well for a girl.”

“I did, and I’m glad to find you have not outgrown the accomplishment. Do you remember the red Tam o’ Shanter, Peggy? I found it on its peg when I went to the vicarage after you had left, and walked off with it in my pocket. There was a hue and cry when its loss was discovered, for it had been kept as a sort of fetish, but I refused to restore it. I’ll give it back to you, though, if you will promise to wear it in the country when I can see you!”

“I will, with pleasure, every single day when it’s not too hot. Dear old Tam! It will remind me of our old times together, when we were so happy, and thought ourselves so miserable, because lessons were hard, or our plans went wrong, or we couldn’t agree. But you and I never quarrelled, Rob, we were always friends, and—”

“Partners!” said Rob softly; and Peggy stared fixedly across the room, and once again the floor described that curious upward tilt, and a kaleidoscope whirl of colour flew past.

Chapter Eight.

Ten minutes later Peggy emerged from behind the cluster of palm-trees, and laid her hand on Rob's arm to accompany him to the refreshment-room below.

"You still retain your old weakness for ices, then?" he had asked her, and the "I—do—so!" which came in reply was so emphatic that it evoked a hearty laugh of approval. A group of people standing near at hand turned round to stare with amused curiosity at the tall man and his little partner who were on such good terms with each other, and one or two of the men, recognising Rob, bowed to him with an air of surprise. Then they passed into a second room, and Peggy was instantly aware that something unusual was in the air, for every one seemed flocking together in one corner and listening in charmed silence to the sound of one flute-like voice. Peggy had hardly time to catch the sound of a familiar lisp before there came a quick exclamation of surprise, and a radiant vision, all pink and white and glitter of diamonds, glided forward to meet her.

"It's Mawiquita! It is! Her own little self! A hundwed welcomes, Peggy! I've just returned to town, and was coming to see you to-morrow, the vewy first thing. Lady Norton—evewybody—please excuse me for running away, but Miss Saville is my vewy deawest fwiend, and I have not seen her for four whole years, so I really must take possession of her at once." Rosalind flashed a glance round the group of deserted admirers, and swept along by Peggy's side, smiling down from her superior altitude, and indulging in a string of demonstrative welcomes, at which Rob scowled with heavy eyebrows. As for Peggy, she could only stare, and gasp, and stare again, and blink her eyes, to discover if this vision were a veritable piece of flesh and blood, or some beautiful princess out of a fairy-tale, who would suddenly vanish from her sight. It was one thing to be told that Rosalind was a celebrated beauty, and to summon up her features in cold mental survey; it was another and more impressive experience to see the exquisite colouring of the lovely face, and meet the beguiling glance of the deep blue eyes. Peggy's heart went out towards the beautiful creature, and she felt a thrill of complacent pride in the knowledge that Rosalind had left her other friends on purpose to enjoy her own society. They sat down in a corner of the refreshment-room and

smiled at one another shyly, while Rob went in search of ices, for though there was much to say, it was not easy to know where to begin, and after four years' separation there is a certain constraint between even the oldest of friends.

"So this is why Rob turned up to-night. I might have guessed as much!" cried Rosalind, laughing. "But really, Peggy, I have been so accustomed to thinking of you in India that I never gwasped the idea that you might be here, till I looked up and saw you walking acwoss the woom with your head in the air, and the old Mawiquita stwide. I can't tell you how glad I am to see you. You must come and stay with me, dear, and I'll tell you all my news, and we can go about together. When can you come? We shall be in town for some weeks yet, so any time that suits you will do for me."

"I'm afraid I can't make any promises at present, Rosalind, for we are house-hunting, and when we find what we want we shall be busy getting all in order. The only visit I mean to pay this summer is to Mrs Asplin at the vicarage, and I am going there with Mellicent in ten days' time. Mellicent is here to-night; she is staying with us at the hotel."

"You don't mean it! Mellicent Asplin here! How extwaordinary it seems!" Rosalind gave a chilly little laugh, and tilted her chin in the air. "You are vewy couwageous, Mawiquita. I should never have dared such an experiment. The Asplins are charming in the country, but they seem out of place in town. And your first season too! What possessed you to saddle yourself with such a hopeless burden as poor fat Mellicent?"

"Poor fat Mellicent is not hopeless at all; she is so much appreciated to-night that I've not had a chance of a word with her for the last hour. She is not fat, and looks far too bonnie to deserve any pity; besides, I wanted to see her badly, and didn't care a bit about her appearance. I love the Asplins, and would do anything I could to give them pleasure. They were unspeakably good to Arthur and to me. I don't know what we should have done without them all the time we were alone."

Rosalind's face sobered suddenly, and she gave a struggling sigh.

"You are just the same as ever, I can see, Mawiquita," she said slowly, "not changed a bit. I'm so glad you have come home, for I want to speak

to you about—oh, lots of things! You don't know how often I have thought of you, and said to myself, 'I'll ask Peggy! I'll see what Peggy says!' I've never had a girl fwiend that I cared for so much as you, and I knew you would say just what you thought, however disagweeable it might be. I think it's vewy bwave to say disagweeable things, because even if people take your advice, they are always cwoss with you for giving it. I like people to like me, so I find out what they want to do, and tell them it is the vewy wisest plan, and they go away more pleased with me than ever; but I knew you wouldn't do that, unless you were vewy much changed. I wanted you to be the same, Peggy, and I heard some things about you lately which set my mind at rest on that point. You still use big words, I hear, and are vewy, vewy dignified when any one ventures to contwadict you, but not too dignified to pass your neighbour salt instead of sugar, or to pretend to arrange a fwiend's sash, and then tie it in such a way that the poor thing dwagged her chair with her when she twied to rise. Not too dignified to play your old twicks still, Peggy Saville."

"Who has been telling tales about me?" cried Peggy wrathfully. "A little bird, indeed! A great big bird, you mean. A big enough bird to have kept his own counsel. It's a poor thing, if one can't have a little innocent fun in mid-ocean without having it brought up in judgment against one in a London drawing-room. I'm disgusted with Hector! He might have kept silence out of gratitude, at least. I never took any liberties with him."

"Perhaps he would have liked it better if you had," said Rosalind slyly, and her eyes looked into Peggy's with a meaning glance. "It's a good thing I am so fond of you, my dear, or I should have gwown pwetty tired of your name during the last few weeks. It was extraordinary how every conversation with Hector worked wound to Peggy Saville. We could not even ask him to take a second cup of tea without being told how many cups Peggy Saville drank, and what were her views about cweam and sugar. I used to time him by my watch, and see how long it would be before he managed to intwoduce the subject, and seven and a half minutes was the wecord. The average was five."

"Very gratifying, I'm sure! Pleased to hear he has such good taste," laughed Peggy, trying to carry off her embarrassment by carelessness of manner. She was by no means deaf to Rosalind's insinuation, and the knowledge that haughty Hector had been so favourably impressed by her

fascinations could not fail to be agreeable to a girlish heart. Hector prided himself on being the most supercilious of men, and it was a triumph to have roused him out of his usual indifference. The love of power was as strong as ever within Peggy's heart, and, it pleased her to feel that she could influence this experienced man of the world. There are many ways in which temptation comes to a young girl, and perhaps none more subtle than this, for in the beginning it seems so innocent, yet it leads so often to disastrous results. Peggy would have been horrified if she had been accused of an intention to flirt with Hector Darcy, and, to do her justice, she was entirely innocent of such a wish, but she did distinctly hug the thought that it was "fun" to manage him, and determined in her heart not to throw away the power which she had gained.

At that moment Rob came back with the ices which he had managed to steer safely across the room, and Peggy casting about in her mind for a change of subject, was not at all grateful to Rosalind for repeating her last remarks for her brother's benefit.

"I am just telling Mawiquita how incessantly Hector has talked about her since his weturn. It seems strange that they should know each other so well. Nearly two months you were together, weren't you, Peggy? Two months is a long time, especially when you are travelling. It is as good as two years at home. I dare say you feel as if you knew Hector much better than you do Rob, for it is really six years now since you two saw much of each other."

Rosalind spoke with a guileless sweetness of manner, and nothing could have been more innocent than the expression of her eyes; nevertheless Peggy suspected that a deliberate intention to annoy lurked behind the amicable manner, for it was evident that there was no more sympathy than of old between the brother and sister. She flushed indignantly, and was about to make a heated reply, when two tall figures appeared in the doorway, and waved an eager greeting. The older of the two was none other than Hector Darcy himself—(Tiresome creature! to put in an appearance at such an inopportune moment!)—and Arthur was his companion, looking well, what Arthur always *did* look in his sister's eyes—the handsomest and most distinguished man in the room. Peggy had seen him earlier in the evening, but through all the embarrassment of meeting Hector with his sister's words still ringing in her ears, she was

acutely conscious of every detail of his meeting with Rosalind; her little rustling movement of agitation, the flash in his eyes, above all, the eloquent silence with which hand met hand. Alas, poor Arthur! no need to wonder any longer if he cared, with that look on his face, that tell-tale light in his eye! After the first quick glance his sister averted her eyes, as from something sacred, and poured out a flood of rapid, inconsequent talk to the new-comer. Hector was unaffectedly delighted at the meeting, and became unusually lively, as he retailed items of information about different passengers on board the steamer, whom he had met since his return to England, while Peggy in her turn had her own little histories to add to the store.

“You remember the old lady in the alpaca dress who called me a ‘restful influence’? It appears she is the head of the millinery department in one of the Calcutta shops, and was on her way to Paris to study fashions. We ran across her in a restaurant there, and she told us all about it, and offered to get my hats at wholesale prices. I thanked her kindly, but taking note of the fact that she was wearing a purple toque with trimmings of crimson and green, politely but firmly refused.”

“I should think so, indeed! Terrible old person! How you ever endured her as you did, I cannot understand. Remember young Chamberlain? Handsome fellow with big nose and square shoulders. I met him the other day in Piccadilly with a brand-new wife. Married the week he came back, after seven years’ engagement. Introduced me to his wife with as much side as if no one had ever been married before!”

“How sweet of him! He was a really nice man. He always went into the services on Sunday, and joined ira the hymns, instead of lolling about at the other end of the deck, like many of the men. He had some friends travelling second-class, too, and wasn’t a bit ashamed of it, but used to go and see them regularly. I hope he will be very, very happy. Was she pretty?”

“Not an atom! Might have been once on a time, perhaps, in the prehistoric ages, but she is too pale and faded nowadays. By no means in her first bloom, I assure you.”

“Well, she has lost it in waiting for him, so he would be a mean wretch if

he liked her any the worse. *Such* a joke! You remember that fat old man with the crimson face who was so furious with little Miss Muir when she spoke against Gladstone? He jumped up and down like a Jack in the Box, and said he was ‘surprised, madam, that any one of your intelligence, madam, should be so blinded by prejudice, madam—’ You remember how we looked on from afar, and christened him ‘A Study in Scarlet’? Well, two days ago, mother had a letter from Miss Muir herself, and they are going to be married in August! It seems he never rested until he converted her to his own views, and then he was so pleased with her for agreeing with him that this is the result. She seems so happy, poor old dear, and says that though hot-tempered he has a warm and loving heart. I notice that people with especially violent tempers always take refuge behind the plea of loving hearts! Whom else have you seen?”

“I had an invitation to call upon the Shores, and went on Sunday week. Miss Eveline was in greater form than ever. I am sure you would have liked to see her.”

Peggy shrugged her shoulders viciously.

“K–r–r–eature! Don’t allude to her in my presence, please. No one shall hear me breathe a word about a member of my own sex, but of all the miserable, contemptible, mean little wretches that ever breathed, she was the worst! I’ll *never* have anything to say to a girl who snubs her own mother before strangers, and makes fun of her poor old father, because he has given her a better education than he had himself. One day he was talking to me about the view, and enjoying himself so much—he really was a most affable old man—when she happened to come up and overhear him say something about the ‘Hopen haspect!’ She shrugged her shoulders and smiled at me, and I turned a basilisk countenance upon her and glared, lit-er-ally gl–ared with anger.” Peggy turned her head with a delighted remembrance of her own severity, then once more softened into smiles.

“Any news of my *dear* friend, General Andrews? You have seen him, of course? Did he ask for my address?”

“I am afraid not. I really can’t remember that he did.”

Peggy sighed.

“He promised me a tiger skin,” she said sorrowfully, “and a brass tray, and some carved ivories, and a dressing-gown, and an elephant’s foot! The elephant’s foot was to be mounted for me, and he gave me the choice of how it was to be done, and said he would take it to a skilful man. I think he must have killed a whole herd of elephants, for he promised a foot to every girl on board. He was a most promising creature, and his intentions were admirable. I am sure that at the time he meant all he said, and I can’t blame him for his forgetfulness, for my own memory is at times sadly defective.”

She glanced roguishly in Rob’s face as she concluded, as if recalling past mishaps, and he smiled in return, but in a strained, unnatural fashion which she was quick to notice. Rob knew none of the people of whom she had been talking with his brother, and could enter into none of the jokes which were associated with their names. It was only natural, therefore, that he should feel debarred from the conversation.

Peggy drew a long breath of dismay. What a strange world it was, and how differently things turned out from what one expected! To think that at this first meeting it should be *Rob* who was left out in the cold, and not Hector; Rob who stood aside and was silent, Hector who laughed and talked with the ease of intimate friendship! It gave her a miserable feeling of self-reproach that it should be so; and yet how was she to blame? The situation had arisen naturally enough.

She gave a little movement of impatience, and her thoughts went off at a tangent, while in appearance she was still listening attentively to Hector’s reminiscences.

Rosalind and Arthur were whispering together with longer pauses between the sentences than is usual in the converse of friends. She was smiling into his face in her sweetest, most winsome manner, but he did not look happy. His face wore the same troubled, fighting expression which his sister had noticed on the evening of her arrival in London.

Hector’s complacent serenity stood out in soothing relief at once from Arthur’s strain and Rob’s moody silence, for moody Rob looked indeed,

with his closed lips and heavy brows. A vivid remembrance flashed into Peggy's mind of a schoolboy, raising his head from a microscope and scowling darkly at some unhappy wight who had incurred his displeasure, and with the remembrance a wild longing to be a school-girl again, in short frocks and pigtail, a scrap of a school-girl who could swing herself on to the table to pinch his arm, or mimic each gesture as it came, pulling her own sleek locks into an imitation of his shaggy crop, and scowling so darkly that, against his will, he was forced into laughter. Many a time in the days gone by had she smoothed the "black dog" off Rob's back in some such fashion; but now the age of propriety had dawned, and it was not permitted to take such liberties.

"I'm a lady growed, and I'll act according," said Peggy to herself; "but dear, dear me, what a handicap it is! He would enjoy it so much, and so should I. Well, at least I can say I want to go upstairs, and then we can have another nice talk. I haven't said half or a quarter of what is in my mind."

She rose from her seat, turning towards Rob to claim his escort; but before she had time to speak, Hector's arm was thrust forward, and Hector's voice protested eagerly:

"Let me take you. I have so much to tell you yet. Take my arm, and let me pilot you through the crowd."

Peggy stood hesitating and uncertain between the two tall brothers.

"But—" she began feebly, and then looked at Rob, waiting for him to finish the sentence.

So far Rob had made no protest, but the moment he met that glance, there came a sudden flash to the eye, a straightening to the back, which made a startling transformation in the aspect of the dreamy student.

As he stood thus, he was as tall as Hector himself; the rugged strength of his face made him an even more imposing figure.

"But Peggy came down with me," he said firmly, "and it is my place to take her back."

“Nonsense, my dear boy. You have had your talk. It’s my turn now. Peggy and I have a great many things to say to each other, and—”

“Plenty of opportunities ahead in which to say them. To-night will not be your only meeting. Take my arm, Peggy,” said Rob sternly; and Peggy gasped and took it, and marched away meek and blushing, conscious to the very curls on her neck of the amazed disgust with which Hector watched her retreat.

Outside, in the corridor, her eyes met Rob’s, and she made a little grimace of alarm.

“*Now* you have done it! How furious he looked!”

“Serve him right,” said Rob lightly. “And I’ll do it again the very next time he comes interfering between you and me! There are some things, Mariquita, that a fellow can *not* be expected to stand!”

Peggy gave a happy little trill of laughter. After all, there were some good points about being grown-up. At that moment she had no hankering whatever for the days of pigtails and pinafores!

Chapter Nine.

Rob went back to The Larches next day, faithful to a decision expressed to Peggy at the reception.

“I have seen you now, Peg,” he said, “and have gratified my curiosity, so I shall go back to my work and the country, until such time as you deign to shed the light of your presence upon us. It’s no use staying here, for you will be up to your ears in engagements all day long, and I’m never fit to speak to in London, in any case. I hate and detest the place, and feel in an abominable rage the whole time I am here.”

“How strange—and I love it! I made father take me for a drive on the top of a City omnibus the other day, and it was just thrilling. I love the roar and rush and bustle, and the feeling that one is in the very centre of the world, and that inside those big bare buildings, and among those jostling

crowds, the greatest men in the world are at work, making literature—making kingdoms—making history! I look at the different people as they pass, and wonder who they are, and what they are doing and feeling and thinking. It's like a big, wonderful puzzle, which one will never, never be able to solve, but which keeps one enthralled and wondering all the same."

Rob's dark face softened tenderly as he looked at the little figure sitting so erect by his side, with the flush of excitement on her cheeks, and her young eyes aglow with enthusiasm.

"Or a story-book?" he said gently. "You used always to compare life to a story-book, Peggy, and comfort yourself in tribulation by the reflection that it would all work out right in the third volume. Well, *you* find your most interesting chapters in the City, and I find mine under the hedges in a country lane. It's all a matter of taste, but you have as much right to your opinion as any one else."

"Oh, but I love the country, too," cried Peggy quickly. "You know I do! We want to have our home in the country, and I intend to have the most beautiful garden in the county. I have never yet seen a garden which came up to my ideal, and I mean to show how things should be managed, and to enjoy myself ever so much in planning it out. All the same, it must be near town, so that we can run up when we feel inclined. People first, and Nature second—them's my sentiments! I could not be happy separated from my fellow-creatures."

Rob smiled in a patient, forbearing manner.

"Women are by nature gregarious. They can't help themselves, poor things! Whatever they do, they need an audience. It's no satisfaction to them to possess anything, unless they can show it off to a so-called friend and make her green with envy. 'What is the good of a nice house? No one sees it!' That is Rosalind's cry, when by any chance we are without visitors for a week at a time. 'What is the use of wearing pretty clothes? Nobody sees them!' The idea of enjoying a thing for itself alone is unattainable to the feminine mind."

"Don't be superior, please! It's so easy to sneer and be sarcastic at other

people's expense. I could scorch you up at this moment if I chose, but I refrain. Snubbing is a form of wit which has never made any appeal to my imagination," cried Peggy grandiloquently, and Rob chuckled to himself with delighted appreciation.

"Bravo, Mariquita! Score for you! I hide my diminished head. Look here, though, I've got an idea which I present as a peace-offering. If you don't succeed in getting a house near town, what do you say to Yew Hedge, in our neighbourhood? It's to be sold, and you used to admire it in the old days, I remember. It's a quaint, old-fashioned place, with a drawing-room out of which you could make great things; six acres of land, and some fine trees. Altogether you might do worse, and although it is further in the country than you wish, there are several human creatures in the neighbourhood who would be delighted to welcome you!"

"Rob, you admirable person! You have the most delightful ideas! Yew Hedge! I have never been inside the house itself, but I remember peeping over the hedge and admiring the grounds, and it would be just scrumptious to be near you all. I'll speak to father about it at once, and it will be a comfort to have something in the background, to keep up our spirits if our search continues to be as unsuccessful as it is at present."

Another week's house-hunting proved the truth of Peggy's words, for if it had not been for the thought of Yew Hedge, the wanderers would have begun to think that there was no resting-place for them within their native land. House after house was visited, and house after house proved unsuitable or, in those rare instances when all requirements were fulfilled, so far beyond Colonel Saville's purse as to transform perfection into aggravation, pure and simple. It seemed as though Fate were shutting every avenue in order to advocate the claim of Yew Hedge; but, though Peggy secretly rejoiced over the fact, she could not induce Arthur to share her feelings.

"It's a charming old place, I grant you," he said, on one of the precious, too rare occasions when brother and sister found an opportunity for a confidential chat, "and, personally, I think nothing of the distance. When you are once settled in the train, you might as well have an hour and a half's journey as forty or fifty minutes', but there are other considerations. For my own sake I wish the house had been situated anywhere in the

kingdom but just where it is—within half a mile's distance of the Darcys'."

Peggy looked up quickly, for this was the nearest approach to a confidence which Arthur had made, and though she did not wish to force him into speech, she was equally anxious not to miss an opportunity.

"You mean, Arthur, you mean because of—"

Arthur rose from his seat, and paced restlessly up and down the room.

"I mean, Peg, that I want to be with you dear people as much as possible, and at the same time to see as little as possible of—other people! When one is perfectly conscious of a temptation, the wisest plan is to keep out of its way. It is no use deliberately playing with fire, and then praying to be 'delivered.' I've thought out that subject for myself through some pretty hard times these last few years, and have come to a final conclusion. We must do our own share in keeping away from the danger, and not trifle away the strength we ask for. This is a little confidence for yourself alone, dear. I don't care to worry the parents with my affairs, or to influence their choice, but I want you to know the reason if I don't enter into your plans so heartily as you expect."

"But, Arthur dear, it seemed—it struck me that 'other people' seemed to find it a temptation too! Surely if you both—"

"Then I must think for both, and be the more careful. The hardest temptation of all, Peg, is one that seems just within grasp, but of which conscience says one should not take advantage. Think what this means! I have a hundred or two a year from the dear old godfather, and a few more for my salary—in all about as much as a fashionable lady would spend on clothes and jewellery. Even with what my father and—hers might be willing to add, it would mean comparative poverty for years to come, and some people are not made for poverty, and could not be happy under such conditions."

"There are things which are worth more than money!"

"To you and me, yes, Peg, a thousand times, but not to every one! The bent of a lifetime does not easily alter. One may think it does under the stress of strong feeling, but it is a very difficult matter when it comes to

living a restricted life day after day, month after month, and to giving up the luxuries and pleasures to which one has been accustomed. It is better to face a definite sorrow, than life-long regret and repining." Arthur's face hardened into a determination which had in it a sadness which Peggy was quick to understand. The bitterest drop in the poor fellow's cup was the consciousness that the girl whom he loved was neither strong nor unselfish enough to value happiness before worldly prosperity, and his sister's heart grew hot with indignation at the thought that any one dared to think herself too good for Arthur Saville!

"I hope and pray, Arthur, that when the time comes for you to marry, your wife will realise that she is a most blessedly fortunate woman, and not harbour any delusions about making a martyr of herself! You are perfectly right in wishing to keep out of the way under the circumstances, and I will do the same. I never wish to see 'other people' again, or to speak to her, or to have anything whatever to do with her."

"If you want to please me, you will see as much of her as you can, for you can help the poor girl more than any one else. She is fond of you, and knows that you return her affection."

"I don't! I won't! How can I be fond of her when she makes you unhappy? If you are not grand enough for her, then neither am I; but I have yet to learn that the Savilles are unworthy of any alliance which they may choose to make. I can't be a hypocrite even to please you, Arthur, and I'll have nothing more to say to Rosalind Darcy from this hour!" protested Peggy violently, then suddenly melted into tears, and laying her head on Arthur's shoulder, proceeded to contradict every word she had spoken. "Yes, I will! I'll do anything you want, but, oh, why did you do it? Why did you fall in love at all? Why couldn't you go on loving me best, and being happy and comfortable?"

Peggy wept and moaned, and Arthur shook her by the shoulder with all a man's horror at the sight of tears.

"Hold hard, Peg! Hold hard! For pity's sake don't cry! Your eyes will be crimson in another moment, and the Rollos will be coming in to tea, and wondering what on earth is the matter. So unbecoming, too! What a funny little fright you do look, to be sure!" said Arthur shrewdly, and

chuckled in triumph as Peggy stopped short in the middle of a sob, and, with two tears in the very act of rolling down her nose, rushed to the nearest mirror and began dabbing at her face with a minute pocket-handkerchief.

“Horrors! They do look red. I’ll go up to my room and stand in a draught, and you must keep the visitors occupied till I come down. Don’t let father get impatient. I’ll come back the moment I am respectable,” she cried, and flew breathlessly from the room, just in time to avoid Mrs and Miss Rollo, who entered by another door.

The “country cousin” sight-seeing had been carried on with much gusto in the intervals of house-hunting, and more than once Eunice Rollo had been included in the party, for, like many Londoners born and bred, she had neglected to visit places close at hand, and was delighted to have so pleasant an opportunity of making their acquaintance.

The three girls spent an afternoon in the British Museum, and discussed Mollusks and Lepidoptera with surreptitious pauses to yawn behind the glass cases, until the first barriers of formality were broken down by the fascination of Egyptian mummies, and the thrilling, imaginary histories which Peggy wove concerning their life on earth. They went over the Tower, and enlivened the tedium of a Beefeater’s life by discussing in his presence how best to steal the treasured Koh-i-nor; and finally, they visited the National Gallery, and on their return Mellicent and Eunice sat on Peggy’s bed, while that young person represented some of the celebrated portraits for their benefit, with the aid of such properties as the room afforded.

“Portrait of a young girl, by Sir Peter Lely,” announced the clear voice; and the audience turned their heads, to behold a demure visage framed by braided hairy a white towel pinned severely across the shoulders, and a milk-white blossom held in a mittened hand. The chintz curtain with its bouquets of flowers made an admirable background for the youthful figure, and the lamb-like innocence of expression was touching to behold. Eunice gripped her companion’s arm and pointed breathlessly to the feet peeping out beneath the short white skirt. The flat black shoes with the sandal-like crossings were the exact counterpart of those in the picture; but how in the name of mystery had Peggy managed to produce them?

Eunice discussed the question with Mellicent in the pause during which they were requested to “look the other way,” and had reached the solution of goloshes and ribbon, when “Gloriana, by Rubens!” was introduced to their notice.

Miss Peggy reclined against a background of cushions, beamingly conscious of a transformation so complete as to be positively startling to behold. A trio of sponges pinned round the head gave the effect of an elaborate coiffure, above which was perched a scarlet turban decorated by half-a-dozen brooches, holding in position as many feathers; a blue dressing-gown opened over an underskirt composed of an eiderdown quilt, which gave an appropriately portly air to the figure, and by some mysterious process a double chin had been produced for the occasion! Gasps of delight from the bed greeted this masterpiece; but the third impersonation was most successful of all, when the audience shrieked aloud to behold Lady Macbeth glaring upon them from a yard’s distance, enveloped in bath sheets, and wearing such an expression of horror on her face as chilled the blood to behold!

“Not all the spices of Arabia can sweeten this little hand!” hissed Peggy, shaking her little paw in the air, while Mellicent screamed with delight and pounded the ground with her heels, and Eunice lay prone against the bedpost in a silent paroxysm of laughter. To see Eunice Rollo laugh was a delightful experience, and one which was worth some trouble to enjoy. Not a sound issued from her lips, not an exclamation marked her enjoyment; like a helpless image she sat, and shook, and trembled, and quivered from head to foot, while her face grew pink, and the tears rose in her eyes, and streamed unheeded down her cheeks. The sight of her, dumb, shaking, weeping—roused the other girls to uncontrollable mirth, and the louder they laughed, the more did Eunice weep; the more violently did they gesticulate and prance about the room, the closer did she hug her bedpost, the more motionless she appeared.

To be forced into laughter, real, honest, uncontrollable laughter, as opposed to the forced guffaw of society, seemed a new experience to this only child of busy and pre-occupied parents; and it needed only Arthur’s assurance that he had never seen the girl so bright and animated to put the final touch to Peggy’s growing liking.

On the present occasion Eunice and her mother had come to tea at the hotel, and as Rosalind and Hector were also expected within the next half-hour, it was quite necessary that Peggy should get her eyes in order without delay. She was not in a mood to give a cordial welcome to the destroyer of her brother's happiness, and, despite her efforts to the contrary, there was a chill in her manner which Rosalind was quick to note. It worried her, as it had worried her in the old girlish days when Peggy Saville had refused to pay the homage which she expected from her companions, and now, as then, she put forth all her fascinations in order to subdue the unruly spirit. The princess in the fairy-tale seemed again the only creature to whom to compare her as she sat enthroned on the sofa, her lovely face alight with smiles and dimples. Eunice Rollo looked like a little grey mouse beside her, the very colour seeming to be absorbed from her face by the brilliancy of the contrast, while bonnie Mellicent appeared of a sudden awkward and blousy.

"Rosalind makes every one else look a fright, the moment she comes into a room. I shudder to think of the guy I must appear. Poor dear Arthur! I don't wonder at his devotion. She is so lovely that she fascinates one in spite of oneself!" sighed Peggy, trying to harden herself against the glances of the sweet caressing eyes, and feeling her heart softening with every moment that passed.

All her thoughts were centred on Rosalind and Arthur, and she presided over the tea-tray with a sublime absence of mind which afforded Hector Darcy much amusement. His own cup was filled last of all, and seating himself beside her he gravely extracted from it six separate lumps of sugar, which he ranged in a neat little row on a plate.

"Seeing that you asked me twice over if I took sugar, and on hearing that I did not, immediately ladled in the largest pieces you could find, I conclude that there is something weighing on your mind," he said markedly. "What is it? Nothing unpleasant, I hope—nothing serious?"

"A bad habit of thinking of several things at the same time, coupled with the fatigues of a London season. That is the explanation!" sighed Peggy, patting the discarded lumps into a pulp with her spoon, and moulding them into pyramid shape with as earnest an air as if her life depended on the operation. "We have been terribly energetic—flying about all day long

and living in a perfect whirl of excitement."

"And yet I never meet you. I look out for you every day, but in vain. We never seem to go to the same places."

"Ah, you are among the rank and fashion, you see, and we are country cousins doing the sights. You visit the real people, and we stare at the images at Madame Tussaud's. You attend private views, and we go in with the rabble. You go to luncheon parties at The Star and Garter, and we have buns and tea in an ABC shop, and pay an extra penny for cream. We move in different circles, Major Darcy," cried Peggy, with a toss of the head which contradicted the humility of her words. "It is not to be expected that we should meet. To-morrow morning we are going to the Zoo."

The big officer looked down at her with admiring eyes, paused just long enough to give added effect to his words, and then said deliberately:

"May I go with you?"

"Certainly not!" replied Peggy promptly; and when Hector demanded her reason, "You would be too great a strain upon us," she explained. "We should have to behave properly if you were there, and that would spoil the fun. You would be shocked at our behaviour, or if you were not shocked, you would be bored, and that would be even more disastrous."

"Try me and see. There is no fear of my being bored, and I promise faithfully to be so far from shocked that I will do every single thing that you do yourself."

"Go round with the crowd and see the animals feed?"

"Certainly, if you wish it."

"Give biscuits to the elephants?"

"With pleasure! I'd do anything for an elephant. Finest beast you can find."

"And nuts to the monkeys?"

“Er—is that a necessary condition? I really cannot face the monkey-house in this weather.”

“Walk round the parrot-house and examine every cage, and offer your finger to be bitten?”

“I would wait outside until you came back.”

“That’s shirking. If I let you off the monkeys, I should insist upon the parrots; but the most important of all is the dromedary. Will you have a penny ride with us round the grounds on the back of a dromedary?”

“My dear Peggy! Anything in reason to enjoy the pleasure of your society, but really—”

“Nobody shall come with us to the Zoo who is too proud to ride on the dromedary,” said Peggy firmly. “I told you you would be shocked, and you see I was right; but Mellicent and I have no pride at all where animals are concerned, and we intend to do every possible thing that can be done. We will have to defer our next meeting for another occasion, Major Darcy.”

“Not longer than Fwiday, I hope, Peggy,” interrupted Rosalind sweetly. “I want you to keep Fwiday afternoon disengaged, and come with us to Lady B’s garden-party, which will be one of the things of the season. The Pwince and Pwincess will be there, and everybody who is in town, and there is to be a pastowal play beneath the trees, so that altogether it will be worth seeing. You will come, won’t you, Peggy? You really must pwomise to come.”

“The Prince and Princess! Oh, how lovely! I’m simply dying to see the Princess! Only yesterday I said that I could not bear to go away without seeing her. If she were at a garden-party, we could get quite near, and see her face, and her clothes, and hear her speak. How *simply* lovely!” ejaculated Mellicent rapturously. “Oh, we must go, we must manage it! We have no engagement for Friday, Peggy, have we? Nothing that could not be put off?”

The idea that she herself might not have been included in Rosalind’s invitation had never occurred to Mellicent’s innocent mind. Since her

arrival in town she had been treated as an honoured guest, and if on any occasion it had been impossible for both girls to enjoy a pleasure, it had been Peggy who stayed at home and gave place to her friend. Mellicent had wondered more than once when Rosalind Darcy intended to do her share towards the entertainment of her vicar's daughter, and now was aglow with delight on receiving the invitation which of all others she had most desired. She was too much excited to notice Rosalind's discomfited surprise, but awakening came all too soon.

"Dear Mellicent, I am sowwy, but I cannot take more than one fwiend," she murmured caressingly. "Evewybody is asking for invitations, and it would not do to encroach too far on Lady B's hospitality. Another time, when Peggy is not going, I should be delighted to take you with me—"

"But, Rosalind, I can't go on Friday. I am dreadfully disappointed, for it is just the sort of thing I should love, and if I had only an ordinary engagement I would put it off, but it is not. An old school-friend of mother's is coming up from the country especially to see us, and we could not possibly put her off, as we have already had no end of difficulty to fix a day. Letters and telegrams have been flying to and fro, and if we altered the date there is no saying when we should meet. I am very, very sorry, but it is impossible to go with you."

"But surely you could be spared for the afternoon! You would see your fwiend in the morning, and at dinner—"

"She won't arrive until lunch-time, and must leave again at six o'clock. She will travel four hours in the train just to spend the afternoon with us, so I could not possibly go out; but there is no reason why Mellicent should stay in too. She could go instead of me."

Peggy would not have ventured to make such a suggestion had not Rosalind's own protestations opened the way, but as it was she felt no diffidence in making it, and the change from despair to rapture on her friend's expressive face went far to console her for her own disappointment. But if Mellicent's expression was significant, Rosalind's was even more so. Her lips tightened, the colour deepened in her cheeks, and her eyes sent forth an unmistakable gleam of vexation. She hated being forced into an unpleasant position, but there was one thing

which she would hate even more—to be obliged to take a dowdily dressed, countrified-looking visitor to one of the social events of the season, and at all risks this must be avoided. Mellicent would probably be offended, Peggy furious, Arthur pained and disappointed—she knew it beforehand, and lamented the knowledge; but, as Arthur had said, the bent of a lifetime is too strong to be overcome in a moment. Rosalind would have been ready to protest that she cared a hundred times more for her friends' feelings than for her own dignity, but when it came to the test she sacrificed them without hesitation in the interest of selfish pride.

"I am sowwy, but if you cannot go, Peggy, I think we had better leave it alone for the pwesent. Some day we may all be able to arrange to go together, but Lady B's will be a gweat cwush, and I shall meet many fwiends, and be so much engrossed. Mellicent would not enjoy herself without you. She would know nobody."

There was a dead silence. Hector stared at his shoes; Peggy gave a short, *staccato* cough; and Arthur looked swiftly across the room, to see how Mellicent bore herself beneath this unmerited snub. She was seated on the sofa beside Eunice Rollo, slightly in advance of himself, so that only a crimson cheek *was* visible, and a neck reddened to the roots of the hair, but Arthur saw something else, which touched him even more than his old friend's distress—a little grey-gloved hand which shot out from its owner's side and gripped the broad waist; a little hand that stroked, and patted, and pressed close in sympathetic embrace. Arthur's lips twitched beneath his moustache, but he said no word; and presently Rosalind rose and took her departure, feeling the atmosphere too charged with electricity to be agreeable.

Contrary to his usual custom, Arthur did not accompany her downstairs, so that he returned from the door in time to hear the explosion of indignation which followed her departure. Mellicent stamped up and down the floor, breathless and tearful; Eunice stared at the floor; and Peggy sat erect as a poker, with a bright spots of colour on either cheek, and lips screwed into a tight little button of scorn.

"Don't speak to me!" she was saying. "Don't ask my opinion. I am bereft of speech. Never, in all my existence, have I ever beheld such an exhibition of snobbish disloyalty—"

“Mellicent, my mother has a ticket,” put in Eunice. “You can go with her and take my place. I have seen the Princess scores of times. Oh, please don’t cry, it isn’t worth it, indeed it isn’t!”

“I’d scorn to cry. I wouldn’t condescend to shed a tear for the nasty horrid thing!” cried Mellicent, mopping with her handkerchief at the continuous stream which rolled down her cheeks. “It is she who should cry, not I. If I *am* poor and shabby, I know how to behave. I’m a lady, and Rosalind Darcy is a c–cad. She *is*, and I don’t care who hears me say it! I’ve known her all my life, and she’s ashamed to be seen with me. I’ll go home to-morrow, I will! I’ll stay at home where people love me, and don’t choose their friends for the cl–clothes they wear!”

Mellicent burst into fresh tears, and Peggy looked anxiously into Arthur’s face. It was drawn and fixed, and his lips were set, as if in endurance of actual physical pain.

Chapter Ten.

Four days before Peggy left town she had an amusing encounter with one of her old friends. The little party had divided, and while Mrs Saville and Mellicent shopped in the West End, the colonel and his daughter drove into the City to visit a collection of the pictures of one of the old masters. They were sauntering through the second room when Peggy’s attention was attracted by a group standing at a few yards’ distance—a lady, a gentleman, and two little boys with Eton collars and round-about jackets—a family group for a ducat, yet surely, surely there was something familiar in the figure and bearing of the supposed mother! She was tall and dignified, her clothes were quite miraculously tidy, and the smooth, fair hair was plaited in Puritan fashion round the head.

“Can it—can it be?” queried Peggy to herself; then, catching sight of a long grave face, “It *is*!” she cried with a flash of joy, and walking forward, planted herself deliberately in the stranger’s path. What she anticipated came precisely to pass, for the lady stepped back from her position, collided violently with herself, and began hurriedly to apologise.

“I beg your pardon! I did not see—I hope I have not hurt you.” So far in

fluent unconsciousness; then suddenly she stopped short, gasped, hesitated, stared hard at the face before her, and ejaculated a breathless, "*Peggy—Saville*!"

"Esther Asplin! I knew it was you! I knew no one else in the world could possess that back hair! How extraordinary to come across you here! It's a marvel that Mellicent was not with me, but we were both looking forward to seeing you at the vicarage at the end of the week!"

"I am on my way home now. I go down by the six o'clock train, and took the opportunity of bringing the boys into town to see some of the sights. They are such dears, Peggy. The one with the red hair is a genius. You should see his Latin prose! The fat one is a lovable little soul, but terribly stupid and lazy; a great trial to my patience. I suppose Mellicent has told you all about my work, and how happy I am? The parents are such charming, cultivated people. The mother is a sister of Professor Reid, the gentleman who is with us now." She rolled her eyes meaningly towards the cadaverous-looking man who had fled to the end of the room at Peggy's approach. "He was one of our lecturers at Girton, and recommended me to his sister when I left. Such an honour for me, for he is one of the finest men in the 'Varsity'—So wonderfully learned and clever!"

"He *looks* it," remarked Miss Peggy, regarding the lanky, stooping figure with a crinkle of disdain in her saucy little nose. "Just exactly my idea of a learned professor. Does he ever brush his coat?"

Esther flushed, and bridled with displeasure.

"I never inquired," she returned coldly. "In conversation with Professor Reid one has something better to do than discuss coats. He was kind enough to offer to meet us in town, and to take the boys home after I leave to-night, and it is a privilege to go about with him. I'll introduce you to him if you like, and—"

"You'd better not. I am sure he wouldn't like it. Let me introduce you to father instead. He is wondering what new friend I have discovered, and will be so much interested when he knows who it is."

Colonel Saville came forward in response to his daughter's summons,

and greeted her friend with much cordiality, while Peggy was agreeably surprised to note the easy self-possession with which Esther sustained her part in the conversation. Contact with the world had rubbed away the rusticity of manner which still characterised Mellicent, and though by no possibility could Esther be called pretty, there was an undeniable attractiveness about the tall, neat figure and intellectual face. Peggy knew that her father was agreeably impressed, for the colonel had a tell-tale expression, and could by no possibility manage to hide his feelings. If he were bored, dreariness feebly described his appearance; if he were annoyed, his eyes sent out little sparks of fire, and every hair in his moustache bristled on its own account; if he were sad, he lost in five minutes the last remnant of youth, and appeared a wan old man; while if he were pleased, he might have passed as Arthur's brother, so alert and beaming was his demeanour. On the present occasion he was all smiles and bows, and joked elaborately with the little pupils, who were brought up and introduced, when, to Peggy's amusement, the genius preserved a stolid demeanour, while the fat, little dunce displayed an agreeable animation.

"An exceedingly sensible, pleasant young woman," was the colonel's verdict as he left the room; and Peggy peered round over her shoulder, and beheld the sensible young woman rearranging the fat boy's tie while the professor cautiously retraced his steps towards her.

A few days later Peggy scrambled her possessions together to prepare for her visit to the vicarage. Carter, Mrs Saville's maid, had departed to pay a visit to her relatives in the country, and in her absence her young mistress complacently folded her dressing-gown on top of muslin dresses, pressed a jewel-box over a chiffon bodice, and remarked, with a sigh of satisfaction, that it was a blessing to be able to wait on oneself, and to be beholden to no outsider; after which she straight-way left her keys on the dressing-table, and drove off to the station in blissful unconsciousness. Mellicent was divided between grief at leaving dear, beautiful, exciting London and anticipation of the reflected glory with which she would shine at home as the restorer of Peggy to the household; and in the vicarage itself all was excitement and expectation, the old cook concocting every dainty she could think of in a kitchen heated up to furnace-heat; Mr Asplin mowing the lawn in hot haste, because the daisies *would* spring up in impertinent fashion in the hot dry

weather; Mrs Asplin flying from one room to another, patting cushions into shape, and artfully placing little tables over worn spots on the carpet; and Miss Esther laying out clean towels, and flicking infinitesimal grains of dust from the chairs and tables. The sight of disorder was a positive pain to Esther's orderly eyes. It was reported of her that in the midst of a Latin examination she had begged to have a blind put straight, since its crooked condition distracted her mind; and therefore it may be surmised that on the present occasion Robert Darcy met with no very cordial reception, when he was discovered stamping about the newly swept rooms in a pair of dusty shoes, scattering fragments of leaves and stubble behind him.

"Bless the child, it will seem all the more home-like to her if it's not all spick and span! Don't pick them up, Esther. I like to see them. It was good of you to come over, Rob, for I'm not myself at all without a boy in the house, and it does me good to see your dear dirty boots," cried Mrs Asplin, and blinked her eyes, trying hard to keep down the tears which *would* rise at the thought of Max in his far-off home, and all the train of mischievous, happy-hearted lads who had been under her care, and who were now fighting the world for themselves. Every morning as she woke, and felt the tired pressure at her head, she felt a pang of relief at the remembrance that there was no longer the old necessity to be up and doing. Every evening as she rested on the old sofa she remarked afresh to her husband how sweet it was to be alone, and to have the rest and peace of a quiet house; but between the two ends of the day there came a dozen other moments, when she longed for the cheery bustle, the clamour of youthful voices, the presence of the merry young band. Such a moment came to her now, and the tears were already glistening in the sweet grey eyes when the sound of wheels crunched up the drive, the vicar dashed into the house to shed his alpaca coat, and his wife and daughter flew excitedly into the garden. The carriage stopped, a blue-robed damsel leapt out of either door, and for the next two minutes four female figures were so inextricably mixed together that it would have been difficult to an onlooker to say which was which, or to apportion the waving arms and bobbing heads to their proper owners. The vicar stood in the background, looking on with a comical gleam of amusement on his long face, while Rob shrugged his shoulders and looked bored and superior, as men are fond of doing when women enjoy themselves in a way which they themselves cannot understand. Presently, however, the

kaleidoscope-like mass dissolved into its component parts, and a young lady advanced towards the vicar with a pretty flushed face beneath a French hat, and two little hands stretched out in greeting. Mr Asplin looked at her critically. *Was* it Peggy? For a moment memory was baffled by the sight of the elegant young lady, but a second glance revealed the well-known features—the arched brows and kitten-like chin. For the rest, the hazel eyes were as clear and loving as ever, and the old mischievous gleam shone through the tears.

“Is it Mariquita?” he cried, and Peggy stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek, and hung on to the lapels of his coat, saying tremulously:

“No, it’s Peggy! I never was Mariquita, you know, unless I was going to be scolded in the study; and you couldn’t possibly scold me the first day. Are you half as pleased to see me as I am to be back again?”

“God bless you, child!” he said softly, and laid a tender hand on her cheek. The bud had blossomed into a flower; the little school-girl whom he had loved so well had grown into a woman, and her early grace and charm were sweet in the old man’s sight. He thanked God for them, as he thanked Him for all beautiful things—the sunshine which gave colour to the flowers, the green restfulness of the land, the song of the birds in the trees. “You are very welcome, dear. It does me good to see you among us once again.”

“And looking so well. You are quite blooming, Peggy; and so smart as she is too! Deary, deary me, is that what they call the fashion?” cried Mrs Asplin, holding the girl in outstretched arms, and turning her slowly round and round, to take in the details of her attire. “You look so spruce, child, that I hardly knew you; but there, it won’t be long, I expect, before the true Peggy peeps out. Come in, darling. There’s a new rug in the hail; don’t trip over it! We have been saying we needed it for five years back, but it was bought only last week, to smarten the house for your coming. Those are Esther’s certificates in the corner, and you must see the new cretonne in the drawing-room. All the chairs are recovered. We finished them only last week.”

“Tut, tut!” cried Peggy, and shook her head in dismay at such reckless extravagance. She had not had a chance of exchanging any further

greeting with Rob than a smiling nod, while she and Esther cast curious glances at one another across the room, renewing the impressions of their first meeting. Peggy thought it one of the prettiest sights in the world to see Mrs Asplin hang on to the vicar's arm and drag him with her about the house, forgetful of everything but her instinctive desire to be near him in her rejoicing; the prettiest thing in the world to see the tenderness in his eyes. She looked at them mischievously, and then of a sudden her own eyes began to blink, for all those four years of absence had left their mark on the dear faces; they had changed as well as herself; but with them it was not the blossoming of the bud into the flower, it was rather the losing of those last leaves which had lingered from life's summer. The vicar's shoulders were more bowed; the lines on his face more deeply graven; his wife's hair had grown silvery about the temples, and the pathetic, tired look in the grey eyes must surely be permanent nowadays, since not even the excitement of meeting could chase it away. She was even sweeter-looking than of old, but had she always been so thin, so transparently delicate in colour? Do what she would, Peggy could not keep back her tears, and Mrs Asplin caught sight of them, and produced her own handkerchief in instant response.

"Ah, Peg, I know what you are thinking. The old home is not like itself without the boys. I feel it too, dear, I feel it too. Not a single boy would we have had in the place, if Rob had not taken pity on us, bless him! It seems so strange after having had so many of them all these years."

"It seems very quiet and peaceful, if you ask me! and if I'm *not* a boy, I've been away, and I do think I deserve a little attention!" cried Mellicent, aggrieved. "If it had been Max who had come home, you wouldn't all be crying and moaning for the girls. You would forget there were such things in the world. It's not our fault that we happen to be girls, and we have our feelings all the same. No one speaks to me! No one says they are pleased to see me! No one makes the slightest fuss because I am home!"

"Darling!" cried her mother, and rushed to take her in her arms. "My precious baby, I'm just delighted to have you back; but you know how it is —the thought of old times made me sad for the moment. We seemed such a small party without the boys."

Mellicent grimaced and hitched her shoulders in petulant fashion. Then she looked at Peggy, and a flash of amusement passed from eye to eye.

“Let’s have tea!” she said shortly. “It’s good for the spirits, and we are both hungry. It’s to be in the schoolroom, I suppose, mother, as we asked. Peggy died to have tea there again, and was so afraid that it would be laid out in style in the drawing-room that she made me ask you to have it exactly the same as in the old times. I told her it was no use, that you would have out all the best things, whatever we said.”

“But you didn’t, Mrs Asplin, did you? There are halfpenny buns, aren’t there, and scones, and damson jam, and the old thick cups and saucers?”

“Bless me, no, child! The very best china; cakes from Buzzard’s, with icing on the top, strawberries and cream, and every luxury you can imagine. The schoolroom, yes; but you don’t suppose I’d feed my prodigal on halfpenny buns! Come and see all the good things that are waiting;” and Mrs Asplin led the way towards the schoolroom, with the complacent air of a housekeeper who has reason to be satisfied with her preparations, while the two girls followed with elbows in suspiciously close proximity. Another moment and the door was thrown open, when Mrs Asplin immediately gave a shriek of surprise, and fell prone against the wall. There stood the long table, set out with flowers and silver, and, in the centre seat, sat a handsome frock-coated figure, with every dish and plate of edibles massed around him in a solid circle of temptation. The silver cake-basket was in the centre, plates of scones, macaroons, and biscuits bordered each side; while the interstices were filled in with bowls containing jam and fruit. On his own plate there were piled at one and the same moment, a meringue, a slice of plum cake, two biscuits, and a jam tart, and, in default of tea, he had filled his cup from the cream jug, and was even at this moment wiping the tell-tale drops from his moustache.

“That blessed boy!” cried Mrs Asplin, clasping her hands in delight. “There never was any one like him. He guessed how I should feel—he always *did* guess! I might have known that he would come. But how? When? Where? He was not in the carriage with the girls.”

“Got out at the gate, mater, and came in at the window. Wanted to get a start of you all at tea,” said Arthur, coming forward, serviette in hand, to receive the kiss and hug of welcome which he was never too old to enjoy. He had divined that Peggy’s advent would make the gap in the household even more felt than usual, and his kindly instinct had been to fill that gap as much as possible; but no other reason would he acknowledge for his presence than the necessity of escorting two frivolous young women who could not be trusted to take a journey on their own account, and his hosts were too full of delight at his appearance to dispute the point.

“Second fiddle!” sighed Peggy with a shrug. “It’s meself that’s second fiddle this moment, when ’twas the whole orchestra I expected to be. Take me away, somebody, before I break down altogether, and show me some of the old haunts until tea is ready.”

“Peggy, don’t be absurd!” Esther said solemnly; but Peggy marched determinedly out of the room, and, with the exception of Mr and Mrs Asplin and Arthur, every one followed and stood looking on while she pushed open the swing door of the cloak-room, and poked her little head round the corner.

“Where’s my peg?” she cried. “If I find any other wretched creature’s clothes hanging on my peg, I’ll—” then she stopped suddenly, darted forward with a squeal of delight, and closed the door behind her. She was not hidden more than a minute, but in effect it seemed to have been a long, long time, for when the door reopened, the French hat had disappeared, and it was the real old Peggy-Pickle who smiled and nodded and peaked her brows beneath the scarlet cap.

“The Tam o’ Shanter! Rob has brought it back after all these years. He kept it until you could wear it again. Goodness, how touching! I never thought *you* would turn sentimental, Rob!” cried Mellicent the tactless, and the next moment devoutly wished she had held her peace, as Rob scowled, Esther pinched her arm, and Peggy trod on her toe with automatic promptness. She turned on her heel and strode back to the dining-room, while Peggy flicked the cap off her head, trying hard to look unconscious, and to continue her investigations as if nothing embarrassing had occurred.

“There’s the old stain on the floor where I spilt the ink, and the little marks all the way upstairs where the corners of my box took off the paint. Dear, dear, how home-like they look! I must see cook after tea, and Diddums, my sweet little kitten. How is the darling? As pretty and fluffy and playful as ever?”

“Peggy dear, do *not* be silly!”

“Esther dear, I cannot help it! I’m too happy to be sensible. Let me be silly for just one day. *What*, is that Diddums? That ugly, lanky, old cat? You’ve aged terribly, Diddums, since I saw you last. Ah me, ah me, the years tell on us all! Tell me, dear—be faithful!—are you as much shocked at the change in *me*?”

Peggy looked up archly, and met Rob’s deep, earnest gaze. She put down the cat, rose suddenly, and thrust her hand through Esther’s arm. Her cheeks were very pink, her eyes astonishingly bright. Esther looked at her critically, and pursed up her lips in disapproving fashion.

Certainly Peggy had grown into a very pretty girl, but it was a thousand pities that she had not yet outgrown the eccentricities of her youth.

Chapter Eleven.

When Peggy had been staying a week at the vicarage, her parents came down from town on a two days' visit, especially arranged to give them an opportunity of looking over Yew Hedge. Colonel Saville's scant supply of patience was fast giving out beneath the strain of disappointment, and he declared his intention of buying the first habitable house he saw, while his wife and daughter were reluctantly forced to the conclusion that it was impossible to procure an ancestral estate at the price of a suburban villa. Yew Hedge, therefore, appeared the refuge of the destitute, and a fly being hired from the village inn, and Mrs Asplin invited to take the fourth seat, the little party drove off to inspect the house in mingled hope and fear.

The thick hedge which gave the name to the house skirted the country road for some hundreds of yards, while a carriage drive of commonplace propriety led up to a square stone house, which could by no possibility have been termed either beautiful or picturesque. Mrs Saville's face fell into an expression of martyr-like despair, and the colonel looked fierce and frowning; but, like many good things, and people also, Yew Hedge showed its worst points on the surface, and modestly hid its Virtues out of sight. There was a large flower and vegetable garden behind the house, the entrance hall was roomy with an old-fashioned fireplace in the corner, the drawing-room contained an abundance of those nooks and corners beloved of modern decorators, and Peggy fairly capered about with exultation when she entered the dining-room and beheld panelled oak walls and a frescoed ceiling.

"Father, it's settled! We take this house on the spot. These walls decide it. Think how inspiring it will be to live our lives against a background of carved oak!" she cried in a rapture, and the colonel tugged at his moustache with a smile of complacent satisfaction.

"Looks about right, Peg, doesn't it? That Indian furniture would look well in here, and the old delf. We'll put all the delf here, I fancy, and—"

"And have blue walls in the drawing-room—blue paper and white wood, and a touch of yellow in the draperies. I saw some brocade at Liberty's

which would be the very thing!” chimed in his wife, while Mrs Asplin gasped and looked askance at the extraordinary trio who began to discuss the furnishings of a house before they had even ascended the staircase. She coughed in a deprecatory manner, and said:

“The reception rooms are certainly fine—they have always been considered the strong point of the house, but the bedroom accommodation is not nearly so good. There are fewer rooms than you would expect, and they are mostly small. I’m afraid you will be disappointed when you see them.”

“If there are three or four decent rooms, that is all we need. I want my home for myself, and not for a crowd of visitors. One spare room, or two at most, is all I would have furnished if there were a dozen empty. Give me retirement and a quiet home life!” cried the colonel, whereat his wife and daughter exchanged glances of amusement, for if ever there lived a man who adored his fellow-creatures, and delighted in crowding his house from floor to ceiling with unexpected guests, that man was Colonel Saville, and would be until his death.

Mrs Asplin understood the meaning of that glance, and giving up the colonel as a hopeless case, addressed herself instead to his wife.

“And I am afraid the pantry is poor, and the scullery also. Mrs Selby used to complain of them and of the lack of conveniences. There are no cupboards, and the—”

It was of no use. Mrs Saville was as intractable as her husband, and refused to listen to any warning.

“Dear Mrs Asplin,” she said sweetly, “I don’t know anything about cupboards. We never worried about these things in India; the servants managed somehow, and I presume they can manage here. The entertaining rooms are large enough to take in our furniture, and Peggy likes them. Those are the great points which we have to consider. If there are enough bedrooms to take us in, I think we shall be satisfied.”

This Saville trio was the most impracticable party of house-hunters whom the vicar’s wife had ever known, and she wondered no longer at the difficulty they had experienced in finding a house to their taste, when she

noted the spirit in which they surveyed the present premises. A convenience was not a convenience at all if it interfered with a fad or fancy, and a serious drawback was hailed with delight if it appeared in quaint or unexpected fashion. As a matter of fact, the purchase of the house had been a foregone conclusion, since the moment when Peggy had beheld the oak walls of the dining-room, and within twenty-four hours from that moment it was a concluded fact.

Ah, then and there was hurrying to and fro, and endless journeys up to town, and interviews with obstinate decorators, who would insist on obtruding their own ideas, and battles waged with British workmen, who could not understand why one shade of a colour was not as good as another, or wherein lay the deadly necessity that they should match. Peggy put a penny in the slot and weighed herself on the machine at the station every second or third day, to verify her statement that she was wasting to a shadow beneath the nervous strain. She was left at the vicarage in order to superintend the workmen, while Colonel and Mrs Saville stayed in town to interview furniture dealers and upholsterers; and every morning she walked over to Yew Hedge and made a procession round the rooms, to note what progress had been made since the day before. Half-a-dozen men were at work, or, to be strictly accurate, were *engaged* to work, at the house; but beyond the fact that it grew steadily dirtier and dirtier, and that the splashes of whitewash and shavings of paper stretched further and further down the drive, it was difficult to see what progress was being made.

Then Peggy made a desperate resolve, begged a bundle of sandwiches from the old cook, packed it with sundry other properties in a basket, and announced her intention of spending the day at Yew Hedge, and keeping the men up to their work by the influence of her presence. Mrs Asplin laughed at the idea of their being awed by anything so small and dainty, but small as she was Miss Peggy had contrived to instil a very wholesome awe of herself among the workmen. She never expressed open disapproval, and was invariably courteous in manner, but there was a sting in her stately speeches which made them wince, though they would have found it difficult to explain the reason of their discomfiture. On the present occasion the usual group of idlers was discovered lazing in the hall when the little white figure appeared suddenly among them. They flushed and slouched away, but the young lady was all smiles and

amiability.

“Good-morning!” she cried. “I have brought my tools with me to-day, for I am going to stay and garden. If you can spare the time, I shall be much obliged if you will boil some water for me later on, but it will do when you make your own tea. Don’t let me interrupt your work! I shall be in the garden, if you want to consult me at any time, so we shall all be busy together!”

The abashed faces stared at her in a solid wall of discomfiture, and Peggy retreated hastily, and paused behind a harberry fence to have her laugh out, before repairing to the shed where the gardening tools were stored. Then she unrolled an apron, tied it over her skirt, rolled up her sleeves to protect the starched little cuffs, took a rake in one hand and a hoe in the other, and surveyed the prospect. With ambition untempered by ignorance, she had openly avowed her intention of possessing the finest flowers in the county, and giving an object-lesson in gardening to ignorant professors of the art, so that it was more than time to begin preparation.

“The finest garden in the county!” Even allowing for the prejudices of possession, it was impossible to bestow such a title upon Yew Hedge in its present unkempt condition. The house had been unlet for two years, during which time the grass had grown coarse and rank, wallflowers and forget-me-nots were dying a lingering death in the borders, and nothing was coming on to take their place. It was not the first time that Peggy had given her mind to this subject, but so far she had not succeeded in finding a solution of the difficulty, nor had the suggestion of the village gardener met with her approval.

“It’s bedding-out as you want,” he had explained. “You must bed out. That’s the tastiest thing for those ’ere round beds, and the tidiest too. They last well on into the autumn, if it comes in no sharp frosts. There’s nothing like them for lasting!”

“Like *what*? Do you mean geraniums?”

“Ay, geraniums for sure, and calcies, and lobelias, and a nice little hedge of pyrethrum. Can’t do better than that, can yer? Geraniums in the

centre,”—he drew a circle on the ground with the end of his stick, and prodded little holes here and there to illustrate his plan. “A nice patch of red, then comes yellar, then the blue, then the green. In circles or in rows, according as you please.”

“I seem to have seen it somewhere! I have certainly seen it,” mused Peggy solemnly, so solemnly, that the poor man took her words in good faith, and looked at her with wondering pity.

“I should say you ’ad! You couldn’t travel far without seein’ of ’em in the summer time. There’s nuthin’ else to see in a manner of speaking, for they all ’as ’em. ’Igh and low, gentle and simple.”

“Then I won’t!” quoth Peggy unexpectedly. “Henceforth, Bevan, when sightseers come to the neighbourhood, send them up to Yew Hedge to inspect the one garden in England which does not go in for bedding-out! If I want fireworks, I’ll have them in gunpowder on the fifth of November, but not in flowers if I know it! It’s an insult to Nature to rule a garden in lines and transform a bed into a mathematical figure!”

The old gardener looked at her more in sorrow than in anger, and shook his head dejectedly as he went back to his work. He had the gravest doubts about the sanity of a young lady who objected to “bedding-out;” but if Peggy gained no approval from him for her new-fangled notions, she reaped her reward in Rob’s unaffected delight, when the conversation was detailed for his benefit.

“Bravo, Mariquita!” he cried. “I recognise in you the instinct of the true gardener—a rare thing, let me tell you, to find in a woman. Women like show and colour, a big effect, rather than interesting detail, but I’m thankful to find you are an exception. Come over to-morrow and see *my* garden! I keep a corner for myself at the end of the shrubbery, and forbid any of the men to touch it, and I flatter myself I have some treasures you won’t find in any other garden in England. I brought them home from my travels, and have coaxed them to grow by looking after them myself and studying their little ways. They need a lot of care, and get sulky if they are not humoured, but it’s the whole interest of gardening to master these little eccentricities.”

“Just my sentiments!” cried Peggy; but when in due time Rob escorted her to see his precious garden, her face was blank with disappointment. Two straggling beds with a rockery filling up the corner, and scarcely a gleam of colour from one end to another! That at least was the effect from a distance, but as the proprietor pointed out his treasures, insignificant little blossoms were distinguishable among the greenery, and flowers the size of a threepenny piece were produced proudly from lurking-places and exhibited for admiration. They all came from some unheard-of spots at the other side of nowhere, had been reared with prodigious difficulty, and were of such rarity and value that the heads of public gardens had paid special pilgrimage to The Larches in order to behold them. Peggy’s eyebrows went up in a peak, and her face lengthened, but it was no use, she could not be enthusiastic, could not even affect an interest in the struggling little lives.

After exclaiming: “How strange!” “How odd!” and “Fancy that!” a dozen times in succession, her very powers of exclamation seemed to depart, and she was reduced to sighs and grunts of response. In the middle of the history of a jungle plant which was the glory of the collection, Rob suddenly lifted his head and put a startling question:

“Are you interested? Do you care to hear about it?”

Peggy looked at him and made a little sign of apology.

“Not—*much*, Rob! It’s curious, of course, but very ‘niggly,’ don’t you think? It makes no effect at all in the bed.”

Rob rose from his knees, flicked the dust off his trousers, and cleared his throat in that dry sepulchral manner which people adopt when they long to say something sharp and cutting, but are too high-minded to allow themselves to do so. Then he pushed his cap back from his head, whistled three bars of a popular tune, and said politely:

“There are some pink peonies coming out in the drive. Better come along and see them.”

“Robert Darcy, I will—not—be—patronised!” cried Peggy, flashing indignant eyes upon him from the altitude of his highest waistcoat button. “Don’t pink peony me, if you please! If it comes to a matter of taste, I

prefer my own to yours. You have an interesting museum, sir, but, allow me to tell you, a most inadequate garden!”

Then Rob was obliged to laugh, and in that laugh lost the last trace of vexation.

“Sorry, Peg! I’m a crusty beggar, but it’s your own fault if I expected too much. You were always so patient with my hobbies that I thought you would be interested in this too. I’ll do penance for baring you by helping to arrange your garden in the way you *do* like. We’ll draw out our plans together, or rather you shall give the orders, and I’ll do the work. Any leading ideas to offer?”

“Harmony of colour, and sequence of effect. A constant succession of flowers, assorted as to size, and forming agreeable contrasts to their neighbours. No red and magentas next door to each other in *my* garden, thank you! Order in disorder, and every season well represented!”

“I see,” said Rob gravely. “It’s an admirable idea, Mariquita, admirable! We’ll set to work at once. By means of digging up everything that is in the beds at present, working diligently, and waiting until you are old and grey-headed, there is no reason why you should not attain your ambition in the course of the next twenty years!”

But Peggy had no intention of waiting twenty years, or twenty months either. Immediate effect was what she demanded, and she said as much to Rob, and repeated the words with much emphasis, backing into a bed as she spoke, and trampling some cherished seedlings to pieces with her sharp little heels, whereupon Rob hastily called her attention in an opposite direction, and promised meekly to further her desire.

Not for worlds would she have acknowledged the fact to another, but as Peggy stood this afternoon surveying the empty beds before her, sundry prickings of conscience began to rise, lest perchance she had been too hasty in her decision to have naught to say to bedding-out plants. Something must be done, and that quickly, or she trembled to think what her friends and relatives would have to say upon the subject of the “finest garden in the county.” With a vision of a prophetess she saw before her paths of green sward arched with roses, a lily garden, sweet and cool,

and fragrant harmonies of colour massed against the trees; but these were in the future, and in the present there were only empty beds, with little sprigs of green peering up here and there through the dry caked soil.

“At least I can dig up the beds and get rid of the weeds, and then perhaps for this summer only we might take refuge in geraniums and begonias. Just for one summer, till something else will grow.” She sighed, and set to work with her spade, giving it a push into the ground with her foot in professional style, and pausing to gasp and straighten her back between every second or third attempt. Astonishing what hard work it was, and how hot one got all of a sudden! Peggy gathered the weeds together, moralised darkly on their number, and set to work on the surrounding beds, digging so vigorously that in an hour’s time she felt as if a week in bed would be barely sufficient to recoup her exhausted energies. Too weary to cross to a seat, she was holding on to her spade, and slowly straightening her back, when she became conscious that the foreman had approached from the house, and was regarding her with curious eyes.

“There’s two pieces short of that there paper for the drawing-room,” he announced. “I thought fourteen pieces would ha’ done it; but it’s been a mistake, it seems. ’Ave to get it made, I suppose, to finish the corner.”

“Oh, how dreadfully, dreadfully tiresome! We will have to wait weeks and weeks before we can get it, and it will keep everything back.”

Peggy wrung her tired hands and looked the image of despair.

“You said that you were sure fourteen pieces would be enough; and we told you at the time to be careful, as it had to be made!”

“Ay, it do seem a pity, don’t it? They rarely ever gets it the same shade a second time,” the man replied blandly. Then he jerked his thumb towards the flower-beds, and put a deprecatory question: “Didn’t you like them, then? Wasn’t they your fancy?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about. Was what my fancy?”

“Those ’ere things as they put in yesterday. I thought, maybe, they was something special, from the care they took about ’em.” He gave an

explanatory kick with his foot to the weeds piled up on the gravel path, and there was a pause of two whole minutes before a weak little voice inquired faintly:

“Who took such care? Who put them in? I don’t understand.”

“The young master up at The Larches and one of his gardeners. They was here for a good two hours. We wondered to see you scratching them up. Joe says to me, he says, ‘Go down and tell her,’ he says. ‘Oh,’ I says, ‘she knows what she’s about!’ I says. ‘She’s not the sort to do a trick like that,’ I says.”

Peggy’s lips positively ached with the effort of twisting them into a smile.

“That was very kind of you,” she said. “It would be a silly trick, would it not? Do you think you could boil the kettle for me now? I feel badly in need of some tea.”

Chapter Twelve.

Rob received Peggy’s confession of her latest gardening exploit with a roar of good-natured laughter. She had been afraid lest he might be angry, or—what would have been even worse—superior and forbearing; but he was neither the one nor the other. Such a genuine, Peggy-Pickle trick, he declared, was worth taking some trouble to enjoy, and went far towards consoling him for the advent of a fashionable young lady in the place of his mischievous little friend. His generosity was not sufficient, however, to prevent him from enlarging on the exceeding beauty of the seedlings which had been so ruthlessly disturbed, and Peggy listened in an agony to a string of names wherein syllables ran riot. *Salpiglossis*! Alas, alas! she had not the faintest idea what the flower was like, but the name was exquisite, all-satisfying. It rolled off her tongue with sonorous effect. To speak of it alone would have been joy. She looked so meek and wretched that Rob nerved himself to fresh efforts, and wrought miracles on her behalf, so that if by any chance she admired a plant in The Larches’ garden, that plant was transplanted bodily to Yew Hedge, and smiled a welcome to her on her next approach.

The gardener pointed out the folly of moving plants in bloom, and prophesied failure; but no failure came, for plants have their likes and dislikes, like other living creatures, and there is no doubt that they are more amiably disposed to some people than to others. If another man had been rash enough to disturb their flowering, they would have sulked for the rest of the season, and made him suffer for his boldness; but no plant ever sulked at Robert Darcy. He had simply to lay it down in any spot he liked, and, behold, it grew and flourished! His fingers seemed to possess the power to impart health and strength, and, thanks to his care, Peggy soon felt safe from ridicule, at least on the score of her garden, and could devote herself with an easy mind to the work indoors. She experienced the usual string of aggravations which are known to every one moving into a new house; tradesmen took twice the allotted time to fulfil an order, and eventually sent home the wrong article; patterns selected were invariably “out of stock”; escapes of gas made it necessary to deface newly decorated walls; and effects which were intended to be triumphs of artistic beauty, turned out snares and disappointments. From the lofty frame of mind which aims at nothing short of perfection, Peggy subsided by degrees into that resigned melancholy in which the exhausted strugglers feel that “anything will do,” if only, by chance, a house may be made fit to live in.

It was on the occasion of a final visit to town, two days before the removal, that Mrs Asplin surprised Peggy by expressing a desire to bear her company.

“I have several things to do, and I should like to go when I can have your help,” she said; and the vicar’s face instantly assumed an expression of the profoundest dejection. He knew that his wife’s expeditions into town invariably demanded toll in the shape of a nervous headache the next day, and hastened to raise his usual note of protest. Why need she go? Could she not send her order by post, or could not Peggy buy what was wanted? Why tire herself needlessly, when she had no strength to spare? She knew very well—“How unwell I shall be!” concluded his wife for him with a laugh. “Really and truly, Austin dear, I want to do something this time that no one else can do for me. I’ll promise to be careful, and drive about all the time, and get a good lunch.”

“Penny omnibuses, and tea and scones! I know your days in town. Ah,

well, a wilful woman must have her way! If you have made up your mind to go, it's no use arguing; but I don't know what it can be you need so badly. We seem to have everything we need."

"Blessed, blessed, ignorance of man!" cried Peggy, rolling her eyes to the ceiling. "It's all very well for you, sir, who can never wear anything but a black coat and hat, but consider the fascinations of summer fashions to poor defenceless women! Mrs Asplin and I want to look at the shops, and groan in chorus over all the distracting fripperies which we want so badly, and can't afford. We pretend we have weighty business; but that is the true explanation, isn't it, dear?"

"Oh yes—I love shop windows!" replied Mrs Asplin vaguely. She had wandered to the window, and stood looking out on to the garden, with her back turned to her companions. Peggy would have followed, but, on her approach, the other walked quickly forward and began stooping over the flower-beds, and snipping off the withered blossoms. For some reason it was evident that she did not wish to be followed, and Peggy felt an uneasy pang at the sight of her flushed, exhausted face. During her lengthened visit to the vicarage she had become more and more conscious of the lack of strength shown by the dear mistress of the house. Her spirit was as cheery as ever, but she no longer raced up and down in her old impetuous manner, but rather spent half her time resting on the sofa, with the busy hands lying idly on her lap.

She did not like to make any protest, since Mrs Asplin's mind was evidently set on going to town, but she privately registered a determination to charter a hansom by the hour, and see that the shopping expedition was conducted in the most luxurious manner possible.

It did not seem as if there was much to be done after all, for Peggy's business being concluded, her companion invested in a yard of ribbon, and some Berlin wool, and then pronounced her shopping finished.

"But there is something else I have to do, dear," she explained, catching the girl's glance of amazement. "The real reason why I came up to-day was to see a doctor. I did not wish to distress them at home, but I've not been feeling well, Peg; I have not been well for a long time. I have made an appointment with a doctor in Harley Street, and if you will go with me

I'll be very grateful. I am not nervous, but—but it feels a little bit lonesome to go alone!"

She turned her face towards the girl and smiled at her, with sweet, tired eyes, and Peggy's heart gave a sickening throb of apprehension. She put out her hand and slid it lovingly through the other's arm.

"Of course I'll go, and proud that you ask me! Poor darling! so that is the way you do your shop-staring! It is just like you to allow yourself to be blamed, rather than give pain or anxiety. I thought you were looking ill, and am so glad you have made up your mind to consult a first-rate man. He will find out what is the matter, and put you right again in no time."

"He can't put new works into an old machine. Not even the cleverest doctor can do that. The springs are giving out, Peg, and I can only be repaired, not cured. I don't expect to be made well, but I want to keep going if possible, for the sake of Austin and the children. I have been intending to pay this visit for a year back, but I kept putting it off and off. I was afraid of what he might say."

"Nonsense! Afraid, indeed! He'll laugh at your fears, and give you a tonic which will make you perfectly well again."

Mrs Asplin smiled, and was silent. Twenty-one could not be expected to realise the weakness and pain which come as companions, and not as guests; the weakness which must grow greater instead of less; the pain which cannot be charmed away. It is not to be wished that it should, for youthful optimism has its own work to accomplish in the world; but it would tend to a better understanding between old and young, if the latter would remember that it is the lack of hope which makes the bitterest drop in the cup of age! To bear the weary ache, and know that it will grow worse; to feel one power after another slipping away, and to realise that it is for ever; to be lonely, and to see the loneliness closing in ever deeper and deeper. Ah, think of it, young impatient soul! Think of it and be tender, be loving! Spare not the sweet gift of sympathy. The time will come when you will long to have done still more.

Peggy held Mrs Asplin's hand in her own as they sat waiting together in the doctor's study, and kept her seat sturdily through the interview which

followed. She felt instinctively that her presence was a support to her friend, and that the consciousness of her sympathy was a support during the trying ordeal. The doctor questioned, and the patient replied. He scanned her face with his practised eyes, felt her pulse, and produced a stethoscope from the table. Then for a time there was silence, while he knelt and listened, and listened again, and Peggy heard her own heart throb through the silence. He was an old man, with an expression full of that large tenderness which seems the birthmark of the true physician, and he lingered over his task, as if unwilling to face what lay beyond. At last he rose and laid the stethoscope carefully on the table, letting his fingers linger over the task. Peggy heard him catch his breath in a struggling sigh, and for a moment his eyes met her own, anxious and troubled.

“Well?” queried Mrs Asplin gently. “Well, tell me the verdict!”—and the doctor crossed the room again and seated himself by her side.

“My dear lady, you ask a hard question. It is difficult to say in a few words all that one thinks of a case. You are not strong; you need rest. I will prescribe for you, and see you again later on, and meanwhile I should like to see your husband, if he could have a talk with me here. There are certain rules which I should like you to observe, but we don’t care to trouble patients with these matters. It is simpler and better to instruct their friends.”

Mrs Asplin looked at him steadily, a smile lighting up her face.

“Ah, doctor, it won’t do. You can’t take me in at all!” she cried in her winsome Irish voice. “It’s the truth I want, and no pretence. My husband believes that I am shop-gazing in Regent Street, and that’s all he is going to hear about this visit. He is delicate himself, and puts an altogether exaggerated value on his old wife. Indeed, he’d worry us both to death if he knew I were ill. Don’t be frightened to speak plainly. I am not a coward! I can bear the truth, whatever it may be. It is the heart that is wrong?”

“Yes,” he said, and looked at her with kindly eyes. There was an invincible fascination about Mrs Asplin which strangers were quick to acknowledge, and it was easy to see that admiration and respect

combined to make his task exceptionally trying. “Yes, the heart is very weak. It can never have been strong, I think, and you have not spared yourself. You are the kind of woman who has lived, in the fullest sense of the word; lived in every faculty—”

“Every single one, and I’m thankful for it! I’ve been so happy, so rich, so sheltered! Whatever happens now, I have been one of the most fortunate of women, and dare not complain. So tell me, please, what does it mean? To what must I look forward?”

“You must face the fact that you can no longer afford to live at full pressure. You must be content to let others work, and to look on quietly. I fear you must face increasing weakness and languor.”

“And for—how long? My children are still young. I should like to see them settled. I should like to feel my husband had other homes open to him when he was left alone. If I am *very* careful—for how long?”

Peggy closed her eyes with a feeling of suffocation. The pulses in her ears were beating like hammers, the floor seemed to rock to and fro beneath her feet, and the doctor’s voice sounded from an immense distance.

“Perhaps three years. I don’t think more. If you ask me for an honest opinion, I should say probably three years—”

Three years to live, and then—*death*. Three years longer in that happy home, and then good-bye to all who loved her. Three years! Three years! The words repeated themselves over and over in Peggy’s brain as she sat motionless in her chair, staring at the opposite wall. Outside in the street an organ was grinding out a popular air, the front door opened and shut, and footsteps passed along the hall, a little heathen idol upon the mantelpiece nodded his head at her in mocking fashion. Some one was talking at the other end of the room in a quiet, level tone, as if nothing extraordinary had happened. It was surely—surely not Mrs Asplin herself?

“Thank you! It is kinder to tell me the truth; but the time is shorter than I expected. I should like to ask one more question. Shall I be doing my husband a wrong in keeping this from him? Could he do anything to

prolong my life? I am most anxious not to throw this shadow over our home; but if he could help in any way, it would, of course, be my duty to spare him the pain of knowing afterwards that more might have been done."

"He could do nothing except shield you from exertion, and that you can do for yourself. I should say, on the whole, that it would be better for you, even physically speaking, to secure the cheerfulness of surrounding that would come from ignorance, than to be continually reminded of yourself by the anxiety of your family. Remember always that you are your own best doctor! I have told you the worst, and now I may add that I have known people in as precarious a condition as yourself live twice, and even three times the time specified by their doctors. You know what is needful—a peaceful life without excitement; fresh air, rest, and, above all things, the specific which our Quaker friends have named for us, '*The quiet mind*.'"

His voice dropped to a softened cadence as he spoke those last words, and the tears started in the listener's eyes.

"Yes—yes! I know. I'll remember that. Thank you, thank you for all your kindness!"

The eyes of doctor and patient met in a long, steady glance, which had in it a light, as of recognition. They were friends indeed, though they met for the first time to-day; for they were bound together by the closest of ties, in that they both served and trusted a common Master! In that moment, when as it seemed she stood upon the brink of death, Mrs Asplin's mind travelled with lightning speed over the years which had passed since she first gave herself and her concerns into the hands of her Saviour, and trusted Him to care for her in this world and the next. Had He ever failed her? A thousand times, no! Sickness, anxiety, even death itself, had visited her home, but the peace which was Christ's parting gift to His disciples had dwelt in her heart, and He Himself had never seemed so near as when trouble fell, and for a time hid the sun in the skies. If she had known beforehand that she was to lose her first-born darling, to spend long years in painful anxiety about her husband's health, and to see her children's future crippled for lack of means to give them the best opportunities, her heart would have sunk with fear, and she would have

declared the trial too great for her strength; yet He had enabled her to bear them all, and with each fresh trial had given a fresh revelation of His mercy. She had submitted to His will, weeping, it may be, but without bitterness or rebellion, and the reward had come in the serene peacefulness which possessed her soul. Christ had done all this for her, and now in this latest trial she looked to Him to support and comfort to the end.

“Thank you, doctor,” she murmured once more; and a moment later Peggy and Mrs Asplin were in the passage, following the old butler towards the door. It seemed years and years since they had paced it last, but nothing had changed. The man let them pass out without a glance in their direction, as though it were the most commonplace thing in the world for people to receive a death-warrant in the course of half an hour’s visit. The pavement outside was flooded with sunshine, carriages were driving to and fro; two men walking along together broke into a peal of laughter as they passed; a newsboy shouted out some item of popular interest. Nobody knew, nobody cared! The great, noisy, cruel world jostled on its way as if such things as death and parting had no meaning in its ears. Peggy’s young heart swelled with bitterness. She dared not speak to Mrs Asplin, dared not trust her own voice, but she drew the thin hand through her arm, and gripped it with passionate fervour. They walked on in silence the length of the block, then stopped instinctively, and exchanged a long, earnest look. Mrs Asplin’s eyes were shining with a deep inward glow, the colour had come back to her cheeks, her expression was calm and peaceful.

“Peggy, child!” she exclaimed softly; “you are so white! This has been a strain for you, dearie. You must have lunch at once.”

Even at this supreme moment of her life her first thought was for others, not herself!

Chapter Thirteen.

The pre-occupation of Peggy’s manner during the next week was easily attributed to the responsibility of superintending the settling down in the new house. From morning until night she was rushing about from one

worker to another, planning, instructing, superintending, and when night came she crawled into bed, a weary, sore-footed little mortal, to fall asleep before her head well touched the pillow. The revelation of Mrs Asplin's danger lay like a shadow across her path, but beyond a few brief words in the train, the subject had never been mentioned between them after leaving the doctor's study.

"I hope I have not been selfish, Peggy, in taking you with me to-day," Mrs Asplin had then said anxiously. "I can only tell you that you have helped me greatly, and thank you with all my heart for your sympathy. Later on, dearie, we will have a talk together, and I will tell you what is in my mind; but first of all I must fight my own battles, and gain the prize of which the doctor spoke. '*The quiet mind*,' Peg! When that comes, it will take away the sting!"

That was all, nor through the weeks that followed did ever a word or a look in the presence of her family betray the dread that lay at Mrs Asplin's heart. Peggy, running in and out of the vicarage, would always find a smile awaiting, and a cheery word of greeting. At first she felt awkward and constrained, but by degrees the first painfulness of the impression wore away, and with the natural hopefulness of youth it seemed that the doctor must have taken an unnecessarily gloomy view of the case, since a patient in so precarious a condition could surely not be so bright, so cheery, so interested in the affairs of others! On her first few visits to the vicarage, the girl had felt that it would be sacrilege to smile or jest as of yore, but it was impossible to keep up this attitude when Mrs Asplin herself sparkled into mischief and led the bursts of laughter. That dreadful half-hour grew more and more unreal, until at times it seemed a veritable dream.

A fortnight after the removal into Yew Hedge, a letter arrived from Mrs Rollo, inviting Peggy to come up to town on a two or three days' visit, to attend some festivities, and enjoy her brother's society. Arthur had not been able to leave town during the last few weeks, and the desire to see more of him, and to be able to help him if possible, were powerful inducements in his sister's mind. She anxiously considered if by any possibility the household could exist deprived of her important services, and slowly accepted the assurance that it could! The furniture had been arranged, pictures hung and re-hung, and what remained to be done in

the way of blind-fitting, curtain-hanging, and the like, could surely be managed without the assistance of a master mind. She was sorry to leave the dear, new home, but three days would quickly pass, while, apart from the joy of seeing Arthur, it would be delightful to get to know something more about that baffling personage, Miss Eunice Rollo.

Eunice was at the station to meet her visitor, all propriety and polite condolence on the fatigue of the journey; and Peggy, never to be outdone in grandeur of diction, replied in Mariquita fashion, so that an elaborate conversation all about nothing was carried on throughout the drive home. Mrs Rollo was out, Arthur busy in the study, and three long hours loomed ahead before it would be time to prepare for dinner.

“This is dreadful! We seem to be beginning all over again, from the very first moment we met!” sighed Peggy to herself. “What on earth can I talk about next? If I could only make her laugh, we should get on better, but I can’t be funny to order. At the present moment I have not a joke in my composition, and it’s getting serious, for we have exhausted the weather and the miseries of removing into a new house, and the health of every single person we know. There’s nothing for it but books! I’ll turn her on to books, and dispute everything she says, and that ought to keep us going for an hour at least.” She cleared her throat, and was just beginning an insinuating, “Have you read—” when she met an earnest look from the grey eyes, and Eunice said miserably:

“I know what you are thinking! I saw you looking at the clock. You don’t know how to pass the time, or what to say next. I’m dreadfully sorry to be so stupid, but the more I want to talk, the more dumb I become. I can’t describe the sensation, but perhaps you have felt it for yourself. Do tell me! Do you know what it is like to be shy? Did you ever feel it?”

Peggy cudgelled her brains, unwilling to admit that any human experience was beyond her ken, but no! not one single instance of the kind could she remember. She had felt lonely at times, silent and unsociable, but never shy! She shook her head.

“No—never! I love meeting strangers. It is like opening a new book. You can never tell what good friends you may become. When I meet some one for the first time, I look into her eyes, and say to myself—‘What is

she? Why is she? What does she think? Right away down at the bottom of her heart, what is she like? Do we belong to each other at all, or is there no single point where we can meet?' It is so interesting! I assure you I drove through the City the other day in an omnibus, and discovered an affinity on the opposite seat! We just looked at each other, and a sort of flash passed from her eyes to mine, and I said to myself, 'Oh, I *do* like you!' and I knew as well as possible that she was thinking the same of me. We never spoke, and may never meet again, but we *were* friends all the same, and when I went away I said in my heart, 'Good-bye, dear, good luck! So pleased to have met you!' At other times I've seen people —Gr–r–r!" she hitched her shoulders to her ears and spread out her hands in disgust, "quite respectable and ordinary-looking creatures, but there! I wouldn't touch them with the end of my umbrella!"

Eunice regarded her with pensive envy.

"Oh dear, I wish I felt like that! It would be like a book, as you say. I love reading, but I always think real life is so different."

"And so much better! It's *true*," cried Peggy ardently, "and the other is pretence. I think it's a glorious thing to live, and just most marvellously and wonderfully interesting. Why, think of it—every day is a mystery. You make your plans in the morning, but you know nothing of what may happen before night! People sigh and moan over the uncertainty of life, but that is ungrateful, for there are happy surprises as well as sad, and all sorts of pleasant things cropping up which one never expects. And it ought to go on growing more and more beautiful as we grow older, and can appreciate and understand."

"Yes," sighed Eunice softly. "Oh yes, and so it will—for you, Peggy, at least, for you have the gift of happiness. I feel things too, but I can't express my feelings. I want to act, and I hang back trembling until some one else steps forward. I try to speak, and my lips won't move. You don't know how dreadful it is to feel as if two iron bands were placed round your mouth and would not *let* you speak!"

Peggy laughed in conscience-stricken fashion.

"I—don't!" she cried comically, and her eyebrows went up in a peak. "I

have a pretty considerable fluency of language, as an American cousin would say, and the worst of it is, I speak first and think afterwards! Your iron bands remind me of the man in the dear old fairy-tale who was under the spell of a wicked magician, and had iron straps bound round his heart. There was only one way in which they could be broken, and no one knew what it was, but one day a peasant woman took pity on his sufferings and tried to nurse him, and snap! one of the bands broke off and fell to the ground. Another time a little child brought him some food, and snap again! another disappeared. Last of all the beautiful princess chose him for her husband before all her rich suitors, and dropped two things upon his cheek—a kiss and a tear, and at that all the other bands broke at once, and he was free. Perhaps that story really meant that the man was shy and reserved, as you are, Eunice, and could never show his real self until he found friends to love and understand. I am not going to shed tears over you, my dear, but may I kiss you, please? You only shook hands when we met at the station."

Eunice rose up swiftly and knelt down at Peggy's feet. Her face was lifted to receive the offered kiss, and the flush upon her cheeks, the smile on her lips revealed such unexpected possibilities of beauty as filled the other with admiration. The features, were daintily irregular, the skin fine and delicate as a child's, the hair rolled back in a soft, smoke-like ripple. The two girls looked at one another long and steadily, until at last Eunice said falteringly:

"What do you see in *my* eyes, Peggy?" and Peggy answered promptly:

"I see a friend! Please let me go on seeing her. While I'm here, Eunice, give the carpet a rest and look at me instead. You can't deny that I'm better worth seeing."

"Oh, you are, especially when you pull faces!" responded Eunice unexpectedly. "Peggy, some day, when there is nothing else to do and you are not tired, will you imitate people for me again? Will you? Will you do Hector Darcy and Miss Asplin and your father when he is angry? I have never laughed as much in my life as when you imitated the National Gallery pictures, and Mr Saville says that these are even funnier. It must be delightful to be able to mimic people, if you are sure they won't think it unkind."

“Oh, but I invariably do it before them, and they don’t mind a bit. It amuses them intensely, and it’s such a joke to see their faces. They wear such a funny, sheepish, found-out sort of expression. Certainly, I’ll give you a *séance* whenever you like. How would it be if I began by imitating Miss Rollo and the iron bands, welcoming a young friend from the country?”

Eunice gasped and fell back in her chair; whereupon, taking silence for consent, Peggy placed her cup on the table, and crossed to the end of the room, where she went through a life-like pantomime of the scene which had happened on the station platform an hour before. The bows, the hand-shakes, the strained smiles of greeting were all repeated, and two chairs being drawn together to represent a carriage, Miss Peggy seated herself on the nearer of the two, and went through so word-perfect a repetition of the real dialogue as left her hearer speechless with consternation. Eunice heard her own voice bleat forth feeble inanities, saw her lips twist in the characteristic manner which she *felt* to be so true, listened to Mariquita’s gracious responses, and saw, (what she had not seen before), the wide yawns of weariness which Peggy averted her head to enjoy. The tremulous movement of her body grew more and more pronounced, until presently the tears were rolling down her cheeks, and she was swaying in her chair in silent convulsions of laughter. To see her laugh sent Peggy into responsive peals of merriment; to hear Peggy laugh heightened Eunice’s amusement; so there they sat, gasping, shaking, no sooner recovering some degree of composure than a recurring chuckle would send them off into a condition more helpless than the last.

In the midst of one of these paroxysms the door opened, and Arthur stood upon the threshold transfixed with surprise. To see Peggy laughing was no uncommon circumstance, but it was a different matter where Miss Rollo was concerned. During the months which he had spent beneath her father’s roof, Arthur had been sorry for the girl who was left to her own devices by her pre-occupied parents, and had thought how few pleasures she enjoyed, but had consoled himself by the reflection that she had little taste for the ordinary amusements of youth. Like a quiet little mouse she slipped in and out, never voluntarily opening a conversation, nor prolonging it a moment longer than was necessary. A struggling smile had seemed the height of merriment to which she could attain, so that to

see the quivering shoulders and streaming eyes was indeed a revelation of the unexpected. Arthur's feelings were curiously contradictory at that moment. He was gratified at the tribute to his sister's fascination, and yet in some inexplicable manner conscious of a jarring note in his satisfaction. He himself had always been regarded as a sufficiently witty and interesting personage. How had it happened that he had failed where Peggy had succeeded?

When Eunice left the room to allow brother and sister to enjoy a confidential chat, the conversation soon drifted to the subject of her own personality.

"Why did you never tell me what a darling she was?" Peggy demanded. "I love her already, and I am going to love her a great deal more. She is just as sweet as can be, and here have you been living in this house for months, and never a word have you told me about her, except that there *was* a daughter, and that she was twenty-two. It's not like you to be so unappreciative, my dear! Don't you think she deserves more attention than that?"

"I don't think I thought much about her in anyway," replied Arthur, with that air of masculine superiority which never failed to rouse his sister's ire. "She seems a nice quiet sort of girl."

Peggy sniffed contemptuously, and tossed her head in the air.

"Nice quiet girl indeed! Is that your verdict? She is ch–arming, my dear, that's what she is, and as for looks—Well, she may not be striking to the casual observer, but if you take the trouble to look at her face, it's like a beautiful old miniature. Did you *ever* see anything like her eyelashes? They come half-way down her cheeks, and her eyes are the sweetest I have ever seen, except Mrs Asplin's."

"Eyes!" echoed Arthur vaguely. "Eyelashes! Really!—I'm afraid I have never noticed."

"Then please notice at once. It's time you did. Don't let me have a bat for a brother, if you please. Some people look so much at other people that they can't see the people who are staring them in the face!" cried Miss Peggy elegantly, whereupon Arthur suddenly discovered that it was time

to dress for dinner, and hurried her upstairs to her own room.

Chapter Fourteen.

On the night of Peggy's arrival in London, Eunice voluntarily made several remarks at the dinner-table; at breakfast next morning she took a distinct part in the conversation, and at lunch, meeting the roll of Peggy's eyes, she laughed aloud, nor seemed the least alarmed at the unexpected sound. Some one else was startled, however, and that was no less a person than her father himself, who stared over his spectacles with an expression which Peggy found it difficult to understand, for it was both grave and glad, troubled and gratified. She wondered if he approved of this unusual liveliness on the part of his quiet daughter, but her doubts were put to rest before many hours were over. She had dressed early for the garden-party to which she was invited in the afternoon, and was wandering up and down the drawing-room, coaxing on her gloves, and examining the different pictures and photographs on the walls, when Mr Rollo entered the room, and stood regarding her earnestly.

"I want to thank you, Miss Saville," he began at once, "for the good you have done my daughter. You have been with us only a few hours, but already I can trace a most happy effect. I have not seen her so bright and happy for many a long day. It has often pressed on my mind that the child suffered for the want of a companion of her own age, but it was difficult to find a remedy. Now, if by chance you were one of half-a-dozen daughters, we might have borrowed you from your parents, and kept you with us most of the year, but as it is, you are a ewe lamb, and I suppose no possible bribe—"

"Oh no! my price is above rubies!" cried Peggy, laughing; "but, Mr Rollo, I shall be delighted to visit Eunice from time to time, and I want her to come to me in return. I think we are going to be friends; I hope so, at least, for I have taken a desperate fancy to her, and I am rarely attracted by strangers!"

"She is a dear child, a good, unselfish child; but, alas, she has never been young! She needs rousing, and I think," said Mr Rollo, smiling, "I think you are the person to rouse her! I hope that you will see a great deal of each other in the future, in which case I shall owe a still larger debt of gratitude to your family than I do at present. I realise my good

fortune every day in having your brother's services at my command, for he is worth all the secretaries I have had before rolled into one."

"Ah–h!" cried Peggy, glowing with delight. "Of course! I knew he would be. Whatever Arthur does, he does better than anybody else. He will be a great man yet, won't he? Oh, do say he will! It was such a terrible disappointment for me when he had to give up the Army, and my only consolation has been the belief that he would distinguish himself in some other sphere. You do really believe that Arthur will be great before he dies, don't you, Mr Rollo?"

The grave man smiled down very kindly into the eager, young face.

"It is not always the best men who make the greatest mark in the world, and 'greatest,' as you mean it, has many drawbacks, my dear. I should like to advise you not to set your heart on worldly distinctions, but I suppose if I did, you would put me down as a prosy old fellow, who did not practise what he preached, so I'll make you happy instead, by telling you that I also expect great things of your brother. He is one of the most brilliant young men of his day, and some time soon we will send him into the House, and give him a chance there. I don't wonder you are proud of him. I should have been proud indeed, if Providence had seen fit to grant me such a son!"

The sigh with which the sentence ended gave a clue to the bitterest disappointment of this man's life. It was an abiding regret that he had no son to follow in his footsteps, and to carry on the good old name; but he never suspected that his quiet little daughter had divined his disappointment at her sex, and that the consciousness thereof had been one powerful factor in damping her spirits. To know that we are a disappointment to our friends has a paralysing effect on our energies, and there are many people in the world who have failed simply from want of encouragement and appreciation. A word of honest praise is as good as a tonic, and it is too rarely spoken. We feel it our duty to find fault where blame is merited, but are not nearly so careful to acknowledge work well done, or to show our gratitude for services willingly performed.

Mr and Mrs Rollo loved their daughter dearly, but were too much engrossed in their different pursuits to pay her much attention, and

believed that, being of a naturally reserved disposition, she would not value outward demonstrations; wherein they erred, for it is the dumb, silent folk who most appreciate warm-hearted words and actions. What a much brighter world it would be if we were more generous in this respect; how happy we might make our friends, if we gave them the benefit of our loving thoughts, instead of locking them tightly in our own breasts!

Eunice opened like a flower beneath the sunny influence of Peggy's presence, and drove off to the garden-party with an animation most unusual under the circumstances. Garden-parties were, as a rule, unmitigated bores, but this one would be an exception! Peggy would be there, and where Peggy moved fun and brightness followed in her footsteps; and Arthur had been despatched by Mr Rollo to take his place in escorting the ladies. Eunice was persuaded that no man in the world was nobler than her father, but, socially speaking, he had his defects! It was a little trying to go about with a man who spent his time discussing politics with other old gentlemen, forgetting all about the poor, shy little daughter, who languished in a corner, shivering with cold, or grilling with heat, as the case might be, and striving, oh, so vainly I to look as if she were enjoying herself. Nor was Mrs Rollo a great improvement on her husband, for she also was weighed down with the responsibilities of Guilds, Causes, and Charities, and invariably found a fellow-member of committee with whom to discuss knotty problems. This afternoon, as Eunice sat facing her mother in the carriage, she could see the nervous fingers pull at the ends of the gloves, and the lips move in mechanical rehearsal of her next address, but the sight gave her none of the usual forebodings, for this afternoon, at least, she need not dread desertion. Arthur and Peggy would be her companions, and never a word of politics or guilds need they speak, from the time they arrived until the time they came away! Eunice rambled about the beautiful grounds with the glee of a child escaped from school, and played the part of appreciative audience with an enthusiasm which could not fail to be inspiring to her companions.

Arthur looked into the smiling face, and listened to the low sweet laughter with the incredulous amazement of one who has suddenly received his sight after a spell of blindness. "Bat," indeed, Peggy had rightly named him, since he had lived for months in the same house as this delightful creature, and never realised her charm. When they were resting together

on a garden bench under the shade of a tree, Arthur cast surreptitious glances at Eunice, and formed a new estimate of her attractions to take the place of the old. He understood little about dress, but he instinctively felt that the white frock was remarkably simple for the only child of such distinguished parents, and the simplicity was in accord with the pale, well-cut face whose chief characteristics were modesty and sweetness. A little white-gloved hand lay on her lap, and, as Arthur looked at it, a swift remembrance arose of the afternoon a few weeks back when he had seen that hand stretched out to comfort a companion in distress. His lip twitched beneath his moustache and his smile faded.

“Ah, well,” he said to himself sadly, “we cannot all be alike; but it does one good to see her—dear, little, gentle thing! She’ll make some one very happy some day, and he will think her beautiful, for he will see his home in her eyes.”

He went off into a day-dream of his own, a troubled day-dream, poor fellow, as his day-dreams were apt to be at this time of his life; but his companions did not notice his adsorption, for one was listening rapturously, while the other entertained her with imaginary conversations supposed to take place between different members of the crowd by which they were surrounded. That she could hear no word of what was being said, was but an added stimulus to Miss Peggy’s inventive genius, and so aptly did her dialogues follow the expressions and gestures of the strangers that Eunice shook from head to foot in irrepressible enjoyment.

“Goodness, Clementina, here’s that impossible Mrs Jones! I thought we had avoided her so successfully. *Must* speak now, I suppose. There’s no way of dodging her. ‘*Dear* Mrs Jones, how *do* you do? Such *ages* since we met. Is this your daughter? Grown out of knowledge! It seems but the othah day she was a little girl in short frocks. Quite impossible, don’t you know, to associate *you* with a grown-up daughter! Sorry to hurry on, but really—so *many* friends!’ Oh, there’s Lord Algernon Fitznobody coming down that path! Don’t let him pass! Waggle your parasol, Clementina! Cough! Sneeze! Do something to make him see us! ‘Don’t you remember me, Lord Algernon? How quite too naughty of you! Mrs Ponsonby de Tomkins, whose purse you picked up in the railway station in Lausanne. I have heard so much of you since then, for my sister’s aunt’s cousin’s husband is quite an intimate friend of dear Lady Fitzroy—’ Well, really,

Clementina, he need not have rushed away in such a hurry! He seemed very distrait. He was looking round for somebody else all the time. Now, see, he is hurrying off to meet her. *Ah–h*!"

The deep exclamation of understanding was uttered in the speaker's natural voice, as, following the direction of the good lady's glance, Peggy suddenly divined the reason of "Lord Algernon's" pre-occupation. Rosalind Darcy was approaching, surrounded by the usual bevy of admirers, her parasol tilted over her shoulder, and her lips curved into a smile of artificial sweetness. It was easy to see that her affectation of interest in what was being said was of the thinnest possible description and Peggy wondered what could be the reason of her ill-humour, but only for a moment, for presently Rosalind's eyes wandered to the bench under the trees, and in a flash the sunshine came back into her face.

"She was looking for Arthur! She thought he was not here!" Arthur's sister said jealously to herself; and the next moment Rosalind was hurrying towards them, leaving the discarded admirers to digest their rebuff as best they might. Nothing could have been sweeter or more winsome than her greeting of her friends, but Arthur responded to her advances with a coldness which astonished his companions. They had not been present the night before, when Miss Darcy had found it convenient to ignore his presence, and to forget a promise given to him because a more distinguished partner had appeared on the scene. Arthur's pride in himself was by no means of the overweening description affected by his small sister, but he had too much self-respect to accept a smile one day at the expense of a snub the next, and Rosalind was given to playing fast and loose with her friends. It was true, she invariably repented herself of her rudeness, and endeavoured to make a gracious atonement, but it was becoming more and more difficult to appease Arthur's wounded dignity, and to-day she felt an unaccustomed thrill of nervousness at the sight of his grave, stern face.

"Arthur, come and walk wound with me!" she commanded with an unaccustomed note of timidity mingling with the imperious young voice. "I want to talk to you. Those widiculous men have been boring me to distwaction, and I want to hear about Yew Hedge. Take me into the wose garden, and tell me all about Yew Hedge."

“Peggy can do that better than I, Rosalind. I have been down only for a few hours. We will all walk round together, and Peggy can give you the interesting details.”

He stepped to Eunice Rollo’s side as he spoke, and, addressing a remark so pointedly to her that it could not be answered by another, led the way forward in the direction indicated. Rosalind could have borne the rebuff more complacently if he had followed in the rear, when she could have played off her little airs and graces for his benefit, but to choose another girl before herself, and then to walk on ahead, without even troubling himself to see if she followed—this was too much for her composure. Her face clouded over, and though she made a valiant effort to preserve her composure, it was in vain, and she was glad to find an outlet for her irritation in pettish complainings.

“How I do detest garden-parties! Of all the senseless, dead-alive entertainments they are the worst. Evewy fwesh one is worse than the last.”

“Why don’t you stay away, then? The remedy is in your own hands,” retorted Peggy coolly; but at this Rosalind’s ill-humour broke out in another direction.

“Peggy Saville, I think it is vewy mean and unkind of you to wefuse to visit me when I asked you, and then to wush up from the countwee to stay with new fwiends who have not half the claim upon you that I have. If you would go to the Wollos’, why not to me?”

“Because you did not ask me at the same time. A month ago it was impossible for me to get away, and even now I am here for three days only. I don’t wish to appear unfriendly, Rosalind, but—”

“But you feel it,” replied Rosalind, her voice changing suddenly into a note of honest pathos. “Oh yes, Mawiquita, you are no better at pwetending than you used to be, and I know quite well that you don’t appwove of me. I hate myself too, and twy to be diffewent, but it is no use, circumstances are too stwong for me. But it’s not the way to make me better, Peggy Saville, to toss your head at me, and tweat me as if I were beyond all hope of reformation.”

“Rosalind—oh!” Peggy was breathless with consternation. It was a horrible accusation, and the worst of it was that conscience told her that it was true. She stared with penitent eyes into the accusing face, nodded her head once or twice, and said with conviction:

“I’m a little wretch! Who am I, I should like to know, to judge another girl? Dear old Rosalind, snub me all you can, and take no notice of my airs. I’m not good enough to help you, I’m afraid, but I can’t help loving you, you dear, beautiful thing, and wishing to make you happy!”

“But, oh, Peggy, I’m misewable! I’m abjectly misewable!” sighed Rosalind in return. She gave a glance around, to make sure no one was within ear-shot, and then continued rapidly, “All my life long I’ve been bwought up to look forward to this time, and to work and plan and pwepare for it. Mother talked as if it would repay me for all my pains, but I’ve been out thwee seasons now, and I’m tired to death of the everlasting wound. I get so cross and irritated and weary of it all. I don’t think I have ever been so misewable in my life as duwing the last year!”

Peggy looked at her thoughtfully. At the moment Rosalind looked dismal enough, but recalling the occasions when she had seen her in society, Peggy could not honestly say that “wretched” was the word which best described her demeanour. On the contrary, a most well-satisfied and complacent young woman had she appeared, and Miss Peggy shrewdly suspected that the present distaste was but a transient emotion.

“If you are so tired of it, why don’t you go down to the country, or join your mother abroad?” she inquired with a stern directness which her companion found somewhat embarrassing.

She shrugged her shoulders and gave a little impatient laugh.

“Because I should like that *worse*! I am bored to distwaction in the countwy, and poor dear mother would worry herself to death if I left town just now. She is as ambitious as ever, and will be tewwibly disappointed if I don’t make a bewilliant match before the end of the season. She is expecting the news of my engagement by evewy letter, and is working herself up to a fever of anxiety as the time goes by—”

“And is there—is there some one in particular whom she expects you to

marry?" queried Peggy calmly. Her heart had given a throb of nervousness at the introduction of the subject, and she had instinctively lifted her eyes to glance at the handsome figure a few yards ahead, but her pride would not allow her to show her discomfiture. No one would have suspected that a personal interest lay behind the nonchalant question.

"Oh, of course there are sevewal!" admitted Rosalind naïvely, "but just now there is a Special Somebody! Title, estate, family, diamonds, all complete, just the vewy *parti* mother had hoped for ever since I was born. He has spoken to father alweady, and is going to pwopose to me the first opportunity he gets. I know it quite well. Don't you always know, Peggy, when they are twying to speak out?"

"Always!" repeated Peggy, with a little gasp of dismay. "That's too wholesale a word for me, Rosalind! The only experience of the kind I have had happened in India, and I was entirely unprepared, for, as a matter of fact, I cherished a profound aversion for the victim! I didn't dislike him afterwards, though! I was so grieved for the poor fellow's distress, so grateful to him for liking me so much, that I felt quite tenderly towards him. It was the most unpleasant experience I have ever had, and I want only one more proposal—one to which I can say, 'Yes, please!' and settle down in peace and comfort. Do you care enough for the *parti* to be able to say, 'Yes, please!' to him, Rosalind?"

"I don't dislike him. He is good-looking, and not nearly so stupid as many of the men one meets. Sometimes I think I could get on with him reasonably well, but at other times I can't—I weally *can't* face it! Then I keep out of his way, and am cold and weserved, and twy to put it off a little longer. But it will come, I know it will! I shall have to face it soon, and I feel as I used to do when I was a child and had a visit to the dentist before me. I twy to forget it, and be happy, but evewy now and then the wemembwance comes back like a sudden pain, and catches my bweath. Oh, Peggy, isn't it difficult—isn't it twying? Aren't you sowwy for me?"

"No!" said Peggy Saville stoutly. "Not a mite!" She lifted her head and looked the other squarely in the face. Her eyes were astonishingly bright, and there was a patch of colour on each cheek. "Pray, why *should* I be sorry? If you look upon the question as a pure matter of business, I

cannot see that you deserve any sympathy. I am sorry for *him*! He seems to be an extremely good bargain, and it is hard on him to be regarded in the light of a disagreeable necessity. I suppose he is devoted to you, and hopes, poor wretch! that you are going to accept him for himself. For you *will* accept him, Rosalind! That's certain. You may imagine that you have not made up your mind, but you have! You could never have the courage to give up all those good things. Why should you, indeed? They mean more to you than anything else. You would never feel any temptation to love a man who was not rich!"

Peggy spoke in crisp, stinging little sentences, her distress on her brother's account goading her into unusual bitterness; but she was entirely unprepared for the result of her words, stricken dumb by the sight of Rosalind's pale glance of reproach, the sudden rush of tears to the eyes. Broken words struggled for utterance, but she could only distinguish, "Unjust! Untwue!" before, as Fate would have it, the couple in front wheeled round, and came back to join them.

"I wanted to know which way you would prefer to take—" began Arthur, and then stopped short, horrified at what he beheld. Something that Peggy had said had touched Rosalind on a tender point, for having once broken down, she found it impossible to control her distress, and though she had lowered her parasol so as to form a shield between herself and the passers-by, she made no attempt to hide from Arthur, but stood gazing at him like a lovely, distressed child, with lips a-quiver, and eyes all drowned in tears. He seized her hand with an impulsive gesture, and questioned her rapidly as to the cause of her distress. His voice vibrated with tenderness, and Rosalind clutched his arm with nervous fingers, and stammered pitiful explanations.

"Peggy—oh, so cruel! So unkind! I asked her advice, and she said—she said—such cruel things!"

Arthur cast one glance at his sister, and then appeared unconscious of her presence. A group of visitors was approaching, and his great desire was to take Rosalind into some quiet corner of the grounds, where she could have an opportunity of recovering her self-possession without being observed by curious eyes.

“Come with me!” he said gently. “Come down this path to the end of the shrubbery. If you are in trouble, can’t I help you, Rosie? Won’t you let me try?”

They disappeared from sight, and Peggy walked on in the opposite direction, her face white and set. The iron had entered into her soul, for oh, that glance—that glance of cold anger and reproach! Could it indeed have come from Arthur—Arthur, who never looked at her in anger before—Arthur, between whom and herself there had never hovered a shadow of a cloud in all their happy, loving lives? A stranger had complained of her, and he had accepted the complaint without giving her an opportunity of justifying herself! Another girl in Peggy’s position might have blamed Arthur in return, and regarded herself as a martyr, but that was not Peggy’s way. Far harder to bear than her own smart would have been the necessity of admitting a flaw in her idol. Her one desire was to justify Arthur, and place him beyond the reach of blame. Before she had taken twenty steps forward, she was saying brokenly to herself:

“Yes, I deserved it! It is easy to be sharp, and say cutting things at another person’s expense. I had the chance of speaking kindly, and of helping her to a better decision, but I let it go, and gave her a sneer instead. I deserved it, Arthur dear! I *did* deserve it, but oh! you must forgive me soon. It’s like red-hot knives sticking into my heart to think that you are angry with me!”

But Arthur was not thinking about Peggy. He was standing beside Rosalind at the end of the shrubbery, his eyes shining, his face beautified by a great tenderness.

“Now, Rosie!” he cried, “now! Tell me all about it!”

Chapter Fifteen.

Rosalind gave a little sob and flicked her handkerchief across her eyes.

“Peggy thinks I am worldly,” she said brokenly, “and when I twy to confide in her, she puts her head in the air and looks as if she had no patience to listen. She says cwuel things!”

“I’m sorry, Rosalind, and so will she be herself, when she has had time to think. Peg is a hasty little mortal, but you know how loving and staunch she is, and I am sure she had not the remotest intention of wounding you. What was it all about? What was the subject under discussion?”

But at this Rosalind blushed and hesitated. A problematical marriage was no easy matter to explain to Arthur Saville, yet mingled with her embarrassment was a strange eagerness to hear what he would have to say on the subject. Never once in all these years had a word of love passed Arthur’s lips, but Rosalind was too experienced a woman of the world to be in any doubt as to his sentiments. She knew that he loved her, and had been grateful to him for the reticence which made it possible to continue on terms of friendship, but at this crisis of her life the old friendship seemed insufficient, and her heart went out to Arthur in a rush of love and longing.

“I asked her advice about—accepting Lord Everscourt!” she said, faltering; and there was a moment’s silence before Arthur replied quietly:

“I see! Just so. And Peggy said?”

“She said she was sowwy for him, not me. She said that I looked upon it as a business arrangement, and seemed to think that I could never really care for any man.”

“And was she misjudging you? *Do* you care for Lord Everscourt, Rosie?”

She shook her head at him with a soundless movement of lips shaped to pronounce a “No.”

“But he is a good fellow, I am told, and devoted to you. I don’t agree with Peggy on this question, Rosalind. You have been brought up to value certain things so highly that you cannot be happy without them, and if you meet an honest English gentleman who can give them to you, and love you sincerely into the bargain, I believe that it would be your best chance of happiness. If you can esteem and respect him, love would probably follow.”

Rosalind dropped her eyes and stood before him drooping and silent. This was not what she had expected to hear. Never in her most

despondent moods had she believed it possible that Arthur Saville would advocate her marriage with another; never had she believed that he could listen unmoved to such a suggestion! The pain at her heart forced her into speech, and the words faltered forth with unconscious self-betrayal.

“No, I could never love him. It’s impossible! I have no love to give.”

“You mean—” began Arthur, and then stopped short, for Rosalind had lifted her eyes to his in a long, eloquent glance, and in that moment there were no secrets between them. Rosalind realised the patient, self-sacrificing love which had kept silence for her sake, and Arthur Saville knew that all that was best in Rosalind Darcy’s nature was given to him, and that he held the key to the poor starved citadel of her heart.

“Oh, Rosie!” he cried brokenly, “is it really so? Am I the happy man, dear? Do you mean that you care for me instead—that that is the reason why you cannot love him?”

“Always, Arthur, oh, always!” whispered Rosalind brokenly. “Ever since I was a child! I have twied to get over it, but it is no use. I think of you all the time; I enjoy nothing if you are not with me. I have behaved badly to you often, but I have suffered for it afterwards. I have lain awake cwying half the night when you have been vexed with me and have gone away without saying good-night.”

“Poor child!” sighed Arthur softly. His face was pale, and wore a troubled expression, very different from that of the ordinary happy lover who has just listened to such a speech from his lady’s lips. “And I have loved you, too, Rosalind; but I never intended to let you know it. Perhaps I was wrong, but I doubted my own powers of making you happy, and thought the best thing I could do for you was to stand out of the way. But the case is altered now. You love me, and that lays a new duty on us both. The question is—how much do you love me, Rosie dear? How much are you prepared to give up for my sake? I am a poor man, and have my way to make. In ten—a dozen years from now, if I am alive and well,”—Arthur squared his shoulders and drew himself up with an air of a man who has a justifiable confidence in his own powers—“I shall have made a position for myself which will be worth your acceptance; but we must realise what

ten years means. In ten years, sweetheart," he looked at her with a smile so tender that her eyes fell before his, "you will be young no longer. You will have passed the best years of your life. Could you bear to pass them as the wife of a poor man, living in a small house, without any of the luxuries and pleasures to which you are accustomed? Do you love me enough to do it *willingly*? I'd work with the strength of ten men, but I have had more experience of the world than you, dear, and I know that success cannot come in a day. With all my love and all my care, I could not shield you from the waiting which must come first."

"But—but—" faltered Rosalind, and was silent. The matter-of-fact manner in which Arthur had followed up the mutual declaration of love by a proposal of marriage had filled her with consternation. She did love him, oh yes! If he had been in Lord Everscourt's position, how gladly she would have been his wife! but his picture of the life which the must share if she joined in her lot with him sent a chill of dismay through her veins. Ten years of poverty and obscurity, ten years' work and waiting, with no possibility of success until youth and beauty had fled, and she was an uninteresting, middle-aged woman! Rosalind shivered at the thought, and summoned up courage to protest once more.

"It is so sudden, Arthur, that I don't know what to say. I was never sure until now that you weally did care for me. And to talk of being mawwied so soon—at once!"

"What else can we do? When you tell me that other men wish to marry you, you cannot wonder that I want to claim you as my own. You are troubled about Lord Everscourt, but if you were engaged to me the matter would settle itself dear, and it would be the best way out of the difficulty. I will speak to your father at once, and—"

"No, no!" she cried quickly, so quickly and with such an emphasis of denial that Arthur looked at her in wonder. "You must not do that. I won't allow it. He is waiting for me to give an answer to Lord Everscourt, and he would be so upset and distwessed. He likes you, and so does mother, but—Oh, you know how it is! You know what they want! You know how disappointed they would be!"

"Yes, I know, and I should be sorry for them, for it would be a reasonable

disappointment. You are their only daughter, and from their point of view Everscourt can do better for you than I; but, my darling, in this matter you must think first of yourself! It is your life that is at stake, and it is for you to choose whether you prefer love or riches. Your parents will bow to your decision, for they love you too much to destroy your happiness. Your mother would feel it most, but I would do my best to reconcile her to the disappointment, and as for your dear, good father, there is one thing which would grieve him infinitely more than the loss of a brilliant marriage. Can you guess what it is, Rosie?"

"No," she said, "no," but her eyes drooped, and she fidgeted uneasily with the handle of her parasol. Arthur laid one hand over hers with a quick pressure, and, despite its firmness, his voice was very gentle as he replied:

"Yes, you do, dear. You guess what I mean. He would rather see you married to me than know that you had deliberately sold yourself for money while your heart was given to another man. In the one case he would admire your sincerity, in the other he could feel neither admiration nor respect, nothing—it seems to me—but shame and humiliation!"

Rosalind drew in her breath with a deep inhalation. It was true, and she knew it was true! Lord Darcy had never failed to hold the highest ideals before his daughter, and it would be a bitter grief to him if she condescended to an unworthy choice. Already, in imagination, she could see the shadow fall across the tired old face, and she shivered as if in pain, for her father's respect and good opinion were very precious in her eyes. Many a time in days gone past had the fear of his disapproval held her back from a foolish action, and, in this crisis of her life, it was more than ever necessary to her peace of mind to retain his approval. She stood hesitating and trembling, and, unseen to mortal eyes, the good angel of Rosalind Darcy's life stood by her side at that moment and whispered counsel in her ear. The worldly motives seemed to disappear, she looked in Arthur's face and saw, waiting for her, love and tenderness, with such joy of congenial companionship as for the moment eclipsed every other consideration. Oh, surely no life was worth having compared with one spent with him! Her mind ran swiftly over a dozen possibilities, and in each found a happy solution. Whatever happened, she could not fail to be content if Arthur were near. He was so good, so strong, so

radiant, that his very presence was a guarantee of happiness, of something more than happiness, for, with all his brightness of manner, there was an underlying nobility in Arthur Saville's character which Rosalind recognised and longed after in the depths of her vacillating heart. She could be a better woman as his wife than in any other sphere in life; if she rejected him, she would reject also her own best chance of becoming a good woman. She knew it, and a little chill, as of fear, ran through her veins as she acknowledged as much to herself, for at the bottom of her heart she knew something else also. She knew that when it came to the point she had no intention of marrying Arthur Saville. It was sweet to look into his face and dream for a moment of what might be, but the chains of the world were too heavy to be broken; the prize for which she had longed was within her grasp, and she could not throw it aside. The good spirit spread her wings and flew sadly away, for when a human being sees with clear eyes the opening of the roads, and deliberately turns in the wrong direction, the angel who must then step forward to bear her company is no longer white-robed, but wears a weary countenance and sombre garment. Sometimes we call her Pain, and sometimes Experience, and there is no welcome waiting for her where she goes, though sometimes, looking back over the years, we bless her in our hearts, and realise that she has taught us lessons which her bright-robed sister was powerless to instil.

The shadow of future suffering seemed already on Rosalind's beautiful face as she raised it to Arthur's, and cried tremblingly:

"Arthur, I cannot! I love you dearly, but I cannot face it! Evewy one would be so surpwised—so astonished! They would laugh at me behind my back, and mother would bweak her heart—and—and—oh, I couldn't bear to give up so much! I could not be happy seeing other people doing things, and not being able to do them myself. I could not endure to be poor. If you were even a little better off, I might wisk it, but it is such a long, long time to wait. Ten years! And, after all, it is not certain. You might not succeed even then!"

"No, nothing is certain, not even the success of a worldly marriage, Rosalind! Health may go, riches may take wings and fly away. Suppose you married Everscourt, and one of these two things came to pass, where would your happiness be then? There is only one thing which can

be trusted to remain unchanged, and that is the right sort of love. I could have given you that love, Rosalind, if you had cared enough in return to trust yourself to me, but I will not persuade you against your will. I have an uphill fight before me, and I want a wife who will help me by her faith, not drag me back by her complaining. I was right in believing that such a poor thing as my love could have no power with you against other attractions."

A note of bitterness rang in Arthur's voice, despite his effort to restrain it, and Rosalind winced, and held out her hands with a gesture of protesting pain.

"You don't understand! You will never understand, and I can't explain. I can't justify myself, Arthur, or expect you to forgive me, but twy at least to think of me as kindly as you can. I may not be able to care for any one in the way you do, but at least I have cared for you most! I could never be happy again if I thought I had bwoken your heart."

"You have not broken it, Rosalind," said Arthur quietly. "If you had loved me truly, and I had lost you, it would have been another matter, but you have never been mine even in imagination. I could not help loving you, but there was no hope in my love, only the shadow of this end hanging over all. Now at last the bolt has fallen, and I have to face the worst. That is all!"

"But you won't—you won't do anything rash?" gasped Rosalind, the sight of the set face sending a dozen wild thoughts of suicide, emigration, and the like through her foolish brain. "Pwomise me, pwomise me, to be careful of yourself! Oh, Arthur, tell me, what do you mean to do?"

Arthur Saville drew himself up with the old soldierly gesture, and the flash came back to his eyes.

"Do!" he cried. "Bury the past and begin afresh, Rosalind! This is my second defeat in life, but I'll go on fighting. I'll win my victories yet!"

Rosalind Darcy looked at him and was silent. He was speaking the truth, and she realised it, as any one must have done who saw the young fellow at that moment, and noted the strength and determination of the handsome face. Arthur Saville was not a man whose life could be

wrecked by a woman's folly; there was a future before him, and the time would come when those who loved him would glory in his achievements.

In one of the bitterest moments of her life Rosalind Darcy realised that when this time arrived, she herself would have neither part nor lot in his successes!

Chapter Sixteen.

When Peggy was dressing for dinner that evening a knock came to her door, and Arthur's voice demanded entrance. She flew to meet him, and felt her spirits go up at a bound at the sight of his smile.

"Have you come to say you have forgiven me?" she asked, linking her arm in his, and shaking back the mane of hair which fell over the white dressing-gown. "I am so thankful to see you, for I am appallingly hungry, and yet to eat a crumb while you were still angry with me, would have been a moral impossibility. I did not know how to get through dinner."

"Angry! When was I angry? I was never angry with you, Peggy kins, that I know of!"

"Oh, Arthur! This very afternoon. A most lacerating glance. It cut into me like knives."

Arthur laughed; a short, half-hearted laugh which ended in a sigh.

"Oh, is that all? I was annoyed for a moment, but it seems a small cause for so much emotion. Can't you bear even a glance of disapproval, young lady?"

"No, I can't! Not from people I love, for I do love them so badly, that there's no peace or comfort for me unless they are pleased with me in return. I am not blaming you, dear, but it was the first time, you see, that you have ever taken part against me."

"Ah, well, it won't happen again; it's the last time as well as the first!" sighed Arthur wearily. "I came to tell you, Peg, that Rosalind and I have come to a definite understanding. You knew so much that it is only fair

that you should know the whole. You will soon be asked to congratulate her on her engagement to Lord Everscourt."

Peggy marched to the other end of the room, aimed a deliberate blow at an unoffending wicker work-table and hurled it to the ground. She glared with an expression of savage satisfaction at the miscellaneous articles scattered broadcast over the floor, curled her lips scornfully at her own reflection in the glass, and finally walked back to Arthur's side, and exclaimed in a tragic voice:

"I knew it! I knew it was coming! She affected to ask my advice, but I told her it was waste of time, as she had really made up her mind what she meant to do. Then she began to cry, and said I was cruel, and went away with you so willingly that I thought perhaps, after all, I had judged too quickly, for she *does* care for you, Arthur, I know she does! She could not deny that, I suppose?"

"No, she did not deny it. She loves me in her own way, but it's not my way, Peg—or yours! She would have been happy with me if I had been rich, but she is not prepared to make any sacrifices on my account, and would rather give me up than live a quiet, restricted life. She does not even understand how much she is losing, poor girl, or how little satisfaction she will get in return!"

Peggy set her lips tightly.

"No, she does not understand, and that makes one sorry for her, for she misses just the best thing in life. I used to think when I was a child that the thing I wanted most was for people to love me—not in an ordinary, calm, matter-of-fact sort of way, you know, but to love me *frightfully*, and care for me more than any one else in the world! I used to put myself to any amount of trouble to be agreeable, for even if I did not care for a person myself, it worried me to death if that person were not devoted to me! There were thirty-six girls at school besides the governesses, so you may imagine how exhausting it was to be nice to them all. Well, I've come to the conclusion that it's a mistake. It's sweet to be loved, but it's ever so much sweeter to love. It is so inspiring to forget all about one's tiresome little self, and care more for somebody else. When I love people, I feel," Peggy threw back her head and expanded her little

shoulders with a terrific breath, “*omnipotent*! There is nothing I could not *be* or *do* or suffer to help them. The more they need from me the happier I am. Don’t you know how you feel after listening to a beautiful sermon—that you really wish something disagreeable would happen, to give you an opportunity of behaving well and being sweet and unselfish? Well, that’s just how one feels in a lesser way to the people one loves on earth. It’s how I feel to you at this moment, Arthur darling, when I know you are suffering. I wish I could take all the misery and bear it for you. Is your heart quite broken, you dear old lad?”

“No, Peg, it is not. I feel miserable enough, but I don’t delude myself that I have received a life-long wound. It has been a dream, you know, a schoolboy’s dream, but I always realised that the princess was not for me. She is so lovely that one’s heart goes out to her instinctively, but it never seemed possible to think of her as a part of my work-a-day life. It’s dreary work walking in the cold grey light and realising that the dream is over, but I shall pull myself together as time goes on, and make the best of what remains.”

“You will be surprised to discover how much that is! There are many people left who love you and long to make you happy, and in time to come you will be thankful that things are arranged as they are. There are dozens of other girls who are far better worth winning—”

“But I don’t happen to want them! That makes all the difference!” sighed Arthur sadly. “Ah, Peg, it is easy to be philosophical for another person. I could offer volumes of common-sense consolations to another fellow in my position, but they fall very flat when it comes to one’s own turn. It is impossible to judge for another person.”

“Yet onlookers see most of the game, and no one could know you and Rosalind, and not feel that you were a thousand times too good for her! Think of mother! Think of Mrs Asplin! Compare her with them, and you will see how different she is. I can quite understand your feelings, for she fascinated me, too, and, however stern I mean to be, I have to give in when she takes the trouble to smile upon me; but one wants something more than pretty ways, and she would have disappointed you, Arthur, I know she would! You would have found her empty-headed and unsympathetic just where you needed sympathy most.”

“Ah, well, well, we won’t discuss her any more. It is not our business. If you want to please me, Peg, you will be as friendly as possible when you meet. She will have her own troubles to bear, poor girl, and it will be all the easier for you, since you believe that I have had a fortunate escape.”

He tried to smile, but it was an unsuccessful attempt, and Peggy realised that the wound was as yet too fresh to bear handling. The time would come when Arthur would be ready to receive consolation, but now it was easy to see that depreciation of Rosalind’s character only added to his distress. He did not attempt to contradict his sister’s statements, but no doubt the fact that he was unable to do so was the bitterest drop in his cup. Peggy clasped her arms round his arm and looked into his face with wistful eyes.

“Oh, Arthur, I wonder why it is that the two things which you have cared for most in your life have both been denied to you? You wanted two things—just two—and they have both ended in disappointment! If you had been wilful and selfish, it would have been different, but you never were that. You worked hard, and thought of other people before yourself, and still nothing has gone right! How is it? Why is it? Why should it be?”

Arthur shook his head sadly.

“I don’t know, Peg. My luck, I suppose,” he replied in a tone so dejected that it brought the tears to his sister’s eyes.

“No, it is not your luck,” she contradicted quickly. “I know what it is—it has just come to me this minute. It is because God has better things waiting for you! It is all rough and miserable just now, but further along the path it will get beautiful again. Oh, I believe it will be very beautiful; and when you get there, Arthur, you will be thankful that you went on, and did not stop half-way.”

“Dear little Peg,” he said fondly, “I hope I shall. It’s a cheery thought, and I’ll adopt it forthwith, and try to look ahead, not backwards, and you must do the same. No more tears, please! You must help me by being bright and talking persistently of some thing else. And now I must go, or you will never be ready for that dinner you want so badly. I’m wery hungry myself, so please don’t keep us waiting.”

He hurried out of the room, leaving Peggy to continue her hairdressing operations with a tear trickling slowly over her cheek, and a speculative expression in her eye.

Hungry? But he had no business to be hungry! Never in the course of her readings had she come across the case of a rejected lover openly avowing an impatience for dinner, and, despite her anxiety for her brother's happiness, Peggy could not subdue a certain regret that he should have showed such a painful inconsistency in the performance of his part!

The next day brought the visit to London to a conclusion, but Peggy said her adieux with the pleasant expectation of meeting her friends again before many weeks were over. When Parliament rose, Arthur would be free, and had agreed all the more willingly to come down to Yew Hedge, as Rosalind and her father would at that time be visiting Lady Darcy in Switzerland. An invitation to Eunice for the same time had also been eagerly accepted, and Peggy was full of rose-coloured schemes for the amusement of her guests.

"Picture to yourself, my dear," she cried tragically, "that never yet have I had the pleasure of entertaining a friend in my own domain! I don't know if you will enjoy yourself, but I am sure that I shall. I have views on the subject of hospitality, and am anxious to test them. So I shall treat you like a puppet, and play all sorts of experiments on you to try the effect. I should wish you to feel tired sometimes in the morning, and stay in bed to breakfast, so that I could wait upon you, and to be too lazy to dress yourself now and again, so that I could arrange your hair in different styles. If you could manage to be a little ill, it would be charming, for then I could nurse you and be severe about your diet, but if you keep wen, we will make the best of it, and entertain the neighbourhood. I'll set to work at once to plan something original and startling."

"Oh, do!" cried Eunice eagerly. "I'd love to be startled. I shall look forward to coming every single day until the time arrives, and be the most obedient of puppets. You are a dear, Peggy—I *do* love you! I'm so grateful to you for being kind to me."

"It's my nature, dear. Go on deserving it. Three remarks at least I insist

upon at every meal, and if you could increase the number to six, I should be correspondingly gratified. Don't stare at the carpet, don't look frightened when there is nothing to be frightened at, and look after my beloved brother for my sake. Those are my last instructions for your guidance. Arthur feels lonely sometimes, just as you do, and it would help you both if you would talk to him sometimes, or, still better, let him talk to you. Men, my dear," sighed Miss Peggy with an air of experience, "men like nothing better than to talk of themselves with a woman as audience. Ask questions about his work, his plans, his thoughts, and he will go on talking happily, so long as you will sit and listen to him. You could do that, at least, if you could not talk yourself."

"Oh yes, easily. I'd like it. I love to hear him talk," assented Eunice naïvely. She fixed her soft shy eyes upon Peggy's face as she spoke, and that young lady felt that she had shown her usual shrewdness in suggesting such an arrangement, for a sweeter *confidante* it would have been difficult to find, or one more ready with sympathetic interest.

With her usual tactfulness Eunice declined to accompany Peggy to the station, so that her presence should put no check upon the last conversation between brother and sister, but no reference was made on either side to the event of two days before. Arthur seemed anxious to talk on impersonal subjects, so they discussed the old friends and their doings—Esther and her theories, Mellicent and her romances, and sent affectionate memories after the two absentees, Rex working his uphill way in the world, and Oswald in his luxurious home. It was always a happy task to recall bygone days, and the "Do you remember?" filled up the conversation until the last moment arrived, and Peggy leant out of the carriage window looking down upon Arthur with an anxious scrutiny. The dear face looked worn and thin, and the forehead showed a couple of lines which she had never seen before.

"Oh, Arthur, I wish I were staying longer, or that you were coming home with me!" she cried impetuously. "I can't bear leaving you alone just now. You need to be petted and coddled and made a fuss of, you dear old boy, and I am desolated that I can't do it! What is the use of having a sister, if she can't do anything for you when you are in trouble?"

"She has done a great deal for me already, and is such a sympathetic

person, Peg, that I am afraid she would spoil me altogether if she had her way! It's just as well that we have to be separated for a time, for the less I think of myself the better. It can do no good, and only unfit me for work. I'm going to set my teeth and begin afresh. Consolation prohibited, my dear, but hints for support and occupation thankfully received!"

And then had Peggy an inspiration! A flash of mischievous enjoyment lit up the hazel eyes, but before Arthur had time to discover it, it had disappeared and been replaced by an innocent little smile.

"You might do a good turn to Eunice by cheering her up after my loss! It would be beneficial for you to make the effort, and the Rollos would be grateful. It is not easy to make her talk, but you would find it worth the effort, for she has sweet thoughts, and—on occasion—a pretty little wit of her own!"

"On somewhat rare occasions, I should say," replied Arthur, smiling; but all the same he looked pleased at the suggestion, and the smile lingered on his lips, as at some pleasant remembrance.

When the whistle sounded and the train began to move onwards, he waved his hand and nodded a cheery assent.

"Right, Peg! For the credit of the family, your pupil shall not be allowed to fall back into her old ways. I'll do my duty towards her."

"Mind you do!" cried Peggy, and flopped down on her seat with a soft explosion of laughter. "Ha! ha!" she cried aloud. "Ha! ha!" and flourished her magazine in triumph.

The next moment she became aware that an old lady seated in the opposite corner was regarding her with glances of apprehension, and stealthily fumbling for her umbrella as a possible means of defence.

"She thinks I am mad!" quoth Miss Peggy to herself, "How truly gratifying! I must foster the delusion." She turned her magazine ostentatiously upside down, smiled vacantly at the pictures, and feigning to fall asleep, watched beneath her eyelashes the compassionate glances with which she was regarded, shaking the while with inward laughter!

Chapter Seventeen.

A week after her return to Yew Hedge, Peggy was on her way to tea at the vicarage, when she was joined by Rob Darcy, who jumped over a wall at her approach, and exhibited an extraordinary amount of surprise at seeing her, considering how long he had been on the outlook for just such an event.

“Where are you going, my pretty maid?” he demanded, “and—”

“I’m going to the vicarage, sir,” she said promptly, with an accompaniment of old-fashioned curtsey which brought the twinkle into Rob’s eyes.

However solemn he might be, he never could resist a smile at Peggy’s saucy ways, and to-day indeed he did not appear solemn at all, but unusually beaming and radiant.

“Then I’ll go with you, my pretty maid, for I’ve been asked too, in a breathless note from Mellicent, with neither beginning nor ending, nor comma nor full stop. If any one else had written in such a state of agitation, I should have thought something thrilling had occurred, but Mellicent is guaranteed to go off her head on the slightest provocation. Probably it is nothing more exciting than a cake or a teacloth which is to be used for the first time. She said that I *must* come, whatever happened, for it was dreadfully important, but I have really not thought much about what it could be, for I am accustomed to receiving violent summonses which mean nothing at all. The first time I ran nearly half the way, and arrived with a purple face and such a stitch in my side as nearly finished my mortal career, and she said: ‘Oh, have you come? I didn’t think you would. I want to show you my new hat!’ Another time she was out, and had forgotten that she had asked me at all; but as she has asked you too, that will hardly be the case to-day.”

Peggy threw back her head and regarded Rob with a curious scrutiny. “Methinks I perceive an air of unusual festivity in my venerable friend. It takes a great deal to rouse him to any sign of feeling, so one must needs conclude that some important event had occurred. May one inquire its nature?”

“Peggy may, if she cares to hear it!” returned Rob briefly. “I have had one or two pieces of good luck lately, Mariquita, which have cheered me up. That’s all. I want to earn some money, you know, and not depend entirely on what the father allows me. My books and papers have done well in one sense, though there’s not much money to be made out of scientific writing, but now I believe I see my way to making a good thing out of my plants. I think I told you before that I have sold some of the specimens which I brought home at a very good price, and I have one shrub in particular which is bringing in quite a little income. It’s a species of broom which I discovered in the most accidental fashion. I was on a hunting expedition one day when I was in Africa, and was hiding behind a clump of broom, when I noticed that one bush was different from the rest. They were plain, but it was mottled in two distinct shades of the same colour. It was evidently a freak, a disease of some sort, as such variations generally are, but it was uncommonly pretty all the same. I had never seen anything of the kind before, and, without conceit, I may say that I know a good deal more about plants than the ordinary professional gardener. Well, I examined it, and it occurred to me, Peg, that it would be a much better day’s work to secure that shrub than to go on with my sport. I unloaded my gun, marked the spot, and had a look round, to see if I could find any further specimens, but no, all the rest were the ordinary type. The first bush was the one exception. Luckily it was not very big, and I managed to dig it up and get it home alive, and after that there was no difficulty, for it is healthy enough, and grows almost as well as the common species. I set to work striking cuttings, and, after waiting until I had a good supply on hand, sent specimens of the bloom to several big nurserymen. They took it up at once with the utmost keenness, and I am now able to sell cuttings as fast as I can strike them, and for a very good price into the bargain. Of course this won’t last for ever, because by degrees other people will get their own stock, but luckily the plant is a slow grower, and meantime they are obliged to come to me, and I have the monopoly of the market. So my travels have turned out more of a success in a monetary sense than I expected, and I am beginning to realise that a man who understands botany, and who has also a love for roaming about forbidden lands, may discover unknown treasures, and do well for himself by bringing them home. It is a happy discovery for me, for I have no chance in the beaten lines, and it will be a solution of many difficulties if I can make a little money in this way.”

“You will go away, you mean? You will leave England and go abroad?” queried Peggy, with a feeling that the foundations of the earth were giving way beneath her, and that life itself was a delusion, since, at a moment’s notice, the pillar of strength on which she had depended above all others could calmly announce its own purpose of withdrawal. “Do you mean that you will settle there altogether, and never come home any more?” She was under the impression that she had put the question in a calm and impersonal manner, but in reality there was a wistful tremor in the voice which Rob was quick to catch.

“I shall be able to answer that question better later on, Mariquita,” he said quietly. “It depends on—circumstances! But, so far as I can see, these journeys must form an important part of my life; I must come and go, and as there will necessarily be a certain amount of danger involved, you needn’t speak of it in public at present. It will be time enough to tell the others, when I am about to start, for they will then have so much less time to worry. I tell you now because—because I always *did* tell you all my plans, I suppose. It’s an old habit.”

“And you know that I am too sensible to worry. I promise to be duly anxious when the time comes, but I really can’t agitate myself about lions’ jaws in an English lane, or feel apprehensive of any more savage assault, than we shall receive at the vicarage if you persist in dawdling along at this rate! It’s very kind of you to make an exception in my favour, but it’s an honour I could have done very well without. It’s a poor thing, I must say, to come home from India, and have old friends begging you to settle down among them, and then immediately turning round and saying, ‘I’m off to Africa!’ as if your presence in the same hemisphere was more than they could bear. You are a champion wet blanket, Rob! Your items of good news are calculated to drive your friend into melancholy madness. I hope Mellicent’s disclosures will be of a more agreeable nature, or I shall be sorry I came out at all.”

“I *do* love to see you in a temper, Mariquita. You are a capital little spitfire. Go on abusing me, do! You can’t think how I enjoy it!” returned Rob promptly; which request, needless to say, was sufficient to seal Miss Peggy’s lips until the vicarage gate was reached.

Two eager faces appeared pressed against a window, and Mrs Asplin

and Mellicent hurried out into the hall to greet their visitors and escort them into the schoolroom with an air of suppressed excitement. Tea was laid on the centre table in the old-time fashion which Peggy approved, and the vicar was standing before the empty grate, trying to look dignified and proper, with the most comical expression of amusement twitching his long lean face and twinkling out of his eyes.

“What do you think?” began Mrs Asplin tragically, seating herself in state in an old armchair and endeavouring to keep up an imposing front, despite the fact that the absence of the fourth castor sent her tilting first to one side and then to the other. “*What* do you think we have got to show you in the drawing-room?”

“What do you think? What do you think?” echoed Mellicent all in one breath; and the two visitors glanced at each other in mischievous amusement. These dear, simple-minded people so intensely enjoyed their little mysteries and excitements that it would be cruel indeed not to indulge them. Rob ruffled his locks and frowned bewilderment, while Peggy rolled her eyes to the ceiling and cried:

“I’ve *no* idea, but don’t tell; let me guess it! Animal or mineral?”

“Animal.”

“Fine or superfine?”

“Not fair! Not fair! You can only put questions that can be answered by ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’”

“How strict you are, to be sure! Well, then, is it mineral? No! Vegetable? No! Animal? Yes! Ornamental? It *must* be ornamental, or you wouldn’t be so proud of it!”

Mellicent and her mother looked at one another and queried with uplifted eyebrows. The girl formed a vigorous “No!” The woman smiled indulgently and said:

“I think it is! I think it is *very* pretty!” and the vicar could throw no further light on the subject than to say that he agreed with both.

“It is useful then?” queried Peggy next; but this question fared no better than the first.

“Not a bit,” cried Mellicent. “It used to be, or, at least, *part* of it did, but now it can do nothing at all but just—”

“Be careful, dear! You will give them a clue. Oh yes, I think we can say it is useful. Its general characteristic is usefulness, and it will soon settle down again into its old ways.”

Peggy turned to Rob with a gesture of despair, and then started afresh on a different tack.

“Is it an article in general use? Do you find one in every house?”

“No, no!”

“In our house?”

Giggles from Mellicent, reproving glances from her father, a decided “No!” from Mrs Asplin.

“In Rob’s house?”

“N–ot at present!”

“Could you have more than one in any house at the same time?”

Flutters of consternation and alarm—mysterious chuckles of laughter.

“You *could*, but one at a time is enough for most people. Two or three would be rather embarrassing!”

“Especially in a small house, because where should we sit in the evening? There would be no room for us!” said Mellicent meaningly, at which mysterious reply the listeners grew more mystified than ever.

“It must be *very* large!” they murmured thoughtfully. “What can it be? We shall never guess, so we might as well give it up at once and let you tell us. What *is* the wretched thing?”

“It’s not wretched at all! It is very, very happy! It is—take hold of your chair, Peg, and hold tight! It is—*An Engaged Couple*!”

“A *wh–wh–what*?” Peggy let her muscles slacken and leant back, limp and shapeless, against the cushions, while Rob, in his turn, gave a whistle of amazement.

“An engaged couple! Oh, I say! Has that deep old Rex stolen a march on us behind our backs, and brought his *fiancée*?”

“No, indeed! Nothing of the sort! Rex has no sweetheart except his old mother. I’d be delighted if he had—that’s to say, if he could find a girl worthy of him, but I’ve never seen her yet. Guess again, dears! You are very hot, but it’s not Rex.”

“Rosalind!” was Peggy’s first thought; but no, it could not be Rosalind. That, of course, was impossible, while Oswald was already a married man, and Mellicent obviously out of the question. Who could it be? Peggy mentally summoned before her every member of the old merry party, and hazarded yet another suggestion.

“Not Fräulein? Good old Fräulein, come back from Germany with a long-bearded professor in her train?”

“Not Fräulein, no, but the professor might apply. Nearer home, child! You have not guessed every member of the family yet. You have not thought of—”

“Esther!” screamed Peggy, and instantly read confirmation in the smiles of assent. “It is! It is! Esther and the man with the dusty coat! Oh, how lovely! How perfectly, deliciously lovely and quaint! Not an old maid, after all, but the first to be engaged and married! Oh, Esther, Esther! Who would have thought it? Who would have believed that you could condescend to such foolishness?”

“Ha! ha! ha!” guffawed Rob, in rolling, subterranean laughter. “What a joke! I’ll have something to say to Miss Esther on this subject! She must be made to realise the inconsistency of her conduct. What about the ladies’ school?”

“Is she fond of him? Is he fond of her? When did it happen? When did they come? How did they break it to you? Did they walk in together, hand in hand, and kneel down before you, so that you could say, ‘Bless you, my children,’ in approved stage fashion?”

“Yes, they did,” cried Mellicent gushingly. “At least, if they didn’t, it was almost as good. She was coming home over Sunday, you know, and he met her in town, and—and *asked* her, you know, and then he got into the train, and intended to go as far as the first station, and he went on and on, until suddenly here they were, and father and mother and I were standing on the platform to receive them. And *she* got out and *he* got out, and they looked so silly and she said, ‘M–m–my friend, Professor Reid,’ and he tried to shake hands with mother three separate times over, and couldn’t find her hand, he was so horribly embarrassed, and then we all drove home in the most horrible silence, and came into the drawing-room, and Esther went crimson in the face, and said, ‘Father and mother, I want to tell you—Professor Reid has asked me—I have per-omised to be his wife,’ and he scraped his feet on the floor and blurted out funny short sentences, three words at a time, ‘Love her dearly,’ ‘Feel much honoured,’ ‘Object of life,’ ‘Make her happy,’ and mother said, ‘Oh, my dear child, I am so glad! I am so thankful for your happiness!’ and set to work and cried all the rest of the evening, and father wriggled about in his coat and looked horribly uncomfortable, and said, ‘Hum—hum—hum. Come into the study, and have a smoke!’”

“My dear Mellicent! You have a most uncomfortable memory! Your capacity for unimportant detail is truly astounding!” cried the vicar protestingly; but Mellicent’s description had been received with so much interest by the visitors that the snub had but little effect. She proceeded to enlarge on the appearance, manner, and eccentricities of the brother-to-be, while Peggy gasped, gurgled, and exclaimed with a fervour great enough to satisfy the most exacting of gossips.

“I never, no, never, heard anything so exciting. Did she tell you that I met them in London? I remarked on the condition of his coat—inches thick in dust, I do assure you, and she was haughty, and gave me to understand that he had something better to do than brush his clothes. I hope she won’t bear me a grudge for my indiscretion. It will be a lesson to me not to make personal remarks for the future. Dear, dear me, how I do long to

peep in at the drawing-room window! Do you think they would mind very much, if they looked up and saw my face flattened against the pane? When are we going to see them, and to what class of engaged couples do they belong? Proper? Mediocre? Gushingly loving?"

"H'm!" deliberated Mellicent uncertainly. "He calls her, 'My dear.' If I were engaged, and a man called me 'My dear,' I should break it off on the spot; but I believe he likes her all the same. He kept handing her the butter and cruet at breakfast every other minute, and he jumps up to open the door for her, and asks if she doesn't feel the draught. And as for her, she perfectly scowls at you if you dare to breathe in his presence. She thinks he is the most wonderful man that ever lived."

"Quite right too! I mean to be very proud of him myself; for he is to be my own son. I don't know him yet, but from all we have heard I am sure it will be easy to take him into our hearts. Peggy dear, we have a quarter of an hour before tea, and we must not disturb the poor dears until then, so come into the garden and have a walk round with me. We haven't had a chat to ourselves for an age of Sundays."

No, Peggy reflected, this was quite true; but there had been reasons why she, at least, had avoided *tête-à-tête* interviews, and she had believed that Mrs Asplin would be even more anxious than herself to leave the dreaded subject untouched. Such, however, was evidently not the case, for no sooner was the garden reached than she burst into impetuous speech.

"Oh, Peggy, child, isn't this delightful? Isn't it beautiful? Isn't it just the most wonderful and unexpected answer to my prayers? Here have I been troubling my foolish head about what was to become of all these dear people when I was not here, and now this smooths every difficulty away. It troubled me to think of my dear girl working for herself, and finding the fight grow harder and harder as the years passed, as all women must, and of Austin left to Mellicent's scatter-brained care; but you see I might have had more faith, for my fears were needless Esther's home will be a stronghold for the family, and Professor Reid is so congenial in his tastes that Austin will find unending interest in his society. Of course they could not live together, but you know the vicar has decided that he cannot keep on his parish much longer, as he is not strong enough to do justice to the

work, and when the break comes it would be delightful if he and Mellicent could take a little house near Esther in Oxford, where they could see her constantly and have the benefit of her wise advice. It would be a great thing for ‘Chubby,’ too, for she has as much worldly wisdom as a baby, and indeed her dear father is little better. It’s no wonder I am pleased, is it, Peggy, when I think of all that this engagement means?”

Peggy looked at her wonderingly. Flushed cheeks, radiant smiles, eyes ashine with happiness, and all this pleasure at the thought of what was to happen after her own death! Twenty-one drew a breath of dismay, and cried reproachfully:

“I don’t know how you *can* talk so! I don’t know how you can bear to discuss such things in that complacent fashion. I won’t *think* of it even, but you seem quite calm about it. You can talk, and even *laugh*—”

“Yes!” cried Mrs Asplin quickly. “I can! I’m thankful for it. Many a time in these last few weeks, Peggy, I’ve thanked my old father for the gift of his irrepressible Irish spirit, and I’ve thanked God too, dear, that, old and weary as I am, I can still look on the bright side, and keep a cheery heart. It’s a great blessing, Peg, a wonderful blessing, for it helps not only ourselves, but those around us, over many a dismal road. You have the gift, so see that you cultivate it, child, and never let yourself imagine that you are pleasing God by going about with a gloomy face and a furnace of sighs. The world wants all the sunshine it can get, and deary me! what a pleasure it is to see a smiling face! It’s just a real help and lift on the way.”

“It’s a help to see *you*. I always feel better for it,” returned Peggy earnestly. There was a moment’s silence, then suddenly she clasped her hands round the other’s arm with an eager question. “Tell me, what does it feel like to be face to face with death as you are now? To live with the expectation of it with you day and night? To know for a certainty that it is near? Tell me, how does it feel?”

Mrs Asplin stood still in the middle of the path and drew a long fluttering breath. Her eyes grew rapt, and she clasped the girl’s hand in an ecstasy of emotion.

“Peggy, it’s—*wonderful*!” she sighed. “It is like being suddenly lifted on to

a plateau and seeing life above the clouds! Everything is different, everything is altered! Things that were forgotten before seem now to fill in the whole view; things that were large and looming, seem, oh, so small, so mean and trifling! I look back, and can hardly understand how I worried myself about useless trifles—little shabbinesses about the house, upset of arrangements, clothes and food and holiday-making. When you once realise the uncertainty of life, they seem of such unutterable unimportance. And it helps one to be gentle, too, because if by chance it should happen to be the last day one had to live, how sad it would be to speak hasty words, or to leave some one sorrowing because of neglect or unkindness! It makes one long to do kind things and say cheering words, and oh, so terrified of losing an opportunity which may never come again! The doctor's verdict was a great shock to me at first, but I am gradually coming to look upon it as one of the greatest of blessings, for it's a hasty, impetuous creature I've been all my days, and this quiet waiting time is going to teach me many lessons. I ought to be grateful and happy that it has been granted me."

Peggy bit her lips and looked at the ground. She could not trust herself to speak, but in her heart she was saying:

"And after all, she may live longer than I! Every life is uncertain. *I* ought to feel like that too. I ought to climb up to that high ground above the clouds. It's because she is a Christian that she feels like that. I used always to think that very good people must be dull and gloomy, but Mrs Asplin is the happiest creature I know, and so full of fun... We used to go to her for help in all our school-day pranks, and now when she knows she is going to die, she is happy still, and quite calm and bright. I should like—oh, I should like to be good like that! One can't always be young, and pretty, and happy, and strong; and if I am going to be a Christian at all, I want to begin now, and not wait until the troubles begin. That would feel mean! I wouldn't treat any one on earth like that—ignore him altogether so long as everything went well, and fly to him for help the moment I was in difficulties... That awful night when Arthur told us that the doctors would not pass him for the Army, Mrs Asplin said that there were more ways than one of being a soldier, and I knew what she meant. 'A soldier of Christ!' *I* could be that as well as Arthur, and I have been longing to fight all my life... How does it go? ...

“‘Soldiers of Christ arise,
And put your armour on,
Strong in the strength which God supplies
Through His Eternal Son!’

“Oh, what a glorious army! What an honour to belong to it! I’m only a poor little recruit, but if Christ would train me—”

Peggy’s heart swelled with longing, and she clasped her hands nervously together. It was a great moment, and her wonted self-confidence failed her on this threshold of another life. The downcast fame grew so anxious and troubled that Mrs Asplin became distressed at the sight, and, as usual, took the blame upon herself.

“Dear child,” she said fondly, “I’m afraid I have oppressed you with the weight of my burdens. It seems a strange thing that I should have chosen a young thing like you as *confidante*, but at the time my thoughts seemed to turn naturally to you. If Esther had known how weak I was, she would have felt it her duty to give up her situation and come home, and I was most unwilling to interfere with what I then believed to be her life’s work. Mellicent would have been quite overwhelmed, poor child; and as for my boy, he would have worried himself to death, when he needs all his courage to help him through these years of waiting. But you were here, almost like a second daughter, and yet living so much apart that you would not be constantly shadowed by the remembrance, and so it came to pass that to you, dear, I opened my heart. You have been all sweetness and consideration, and for my own sake I have no regrets, but I shall be miserable if I see you depressed. No more sighs, Peggy, *please*! I tell you honestly, dear, that I am better in health than I was two months ago! Rest and care, and freedom from suspense, have done good work already, so don’t begin to lament too soon, for I may cheat the doctors yet. Now smile and look like yourself, for we can allow no doleful faces to-day. It is a happy day for me, for once more I have two sons to love and be proud of. There goes the bell, and we must go in to tea and to entertain the lovers. Don’t be *too* severe, darling, for they are very new and most amusingly self-conscious. I am sure poor dear Esther will feel it quite an ordeal to face you.”

Peggy smiled at that, as it had been intended she should, and the next

moment Mellicent came flying down the path, her eyes dancing with excitement.

“They’ve come!” she cried. “They are in the schoolroom waiting for you. The professor is standing in the middle of the floor smiling into space like a china image, and Esther is horribly embarrassed. I told her that Peggy was here, and she *q–quailed*! Literally quailed before me. I saw her do it!”

“She may well quail!” cried Peggy meaningly. She threw back her head, peaked her brows over eyes of solemnest reproof, and marched into the house with a Mariquita stride.

Chapter Eighteen.

The glance of shamed apprehension which Esther cast at Peggy as she appeared upon the threshold afforded immense delight to those who watched the meeting between the two girls. The old danger signals were all to the fore, as Peggy walked across the room—the peaked brows, pursed-up lips, and air of gracious patronage; but the dignity of later years seemed but to have added fresh weapons to her armament. A pigtail could never by any chance have been so imposing as the glossy coils which were now wound round the little head. The rustle of silken skirts heralded her approach in a manner infinitely more stately than the scamper of thin brown legs, and the wave of the little hand was emphasised by the twinkle of diamonds.

Esther grasped the back of her chair and gulped miserably. If only, only Edward had not been present, she could have faced the worst; but being still bashful and embarrassed in his presence, she trembled at the thought of what was to come, and supplicated dumbly with her eyes.

“My dear Esther, a thousand felicitations! I do indeed rejoice in your happiness,” murmured Peggy sweetly, and pecked her cheek with a condescending kiss. Esther’s face disappeared for a moment, and came into view again with a fine access of colour and such an expression of anguish as seemed incomprehensible to those who did not know with what force Peggy’s foot had been pressed on a pet corn, or had not heard the threatening whisper, “You *would*, would you? Wait till I get you

alone!” which had belied the honeyed words. The two girls stood together in silence a moment longer, while the other occupants of the room gazed upon them with curious eyes; then Peggy held out her hand to the professor in her most fascinating manner. “We should not need an introduction, Professor Reid, since we are already united by a mutual love and admiration. I congratulate you truly. To be approved by Esther has ever been the ambition of her friends. To be chosen above all others is indeed an honour.”

“I feel it so! I feel it so!” agreed the professor eagerly. He was charmed to discover so understanding an appreciation of his *fiancée*, and rose to the bait with innocent alacrity. “I feel very deeply the responsibility attached to such a trust and my own unworthiness to possess it, but I know that Esther will be patient with me and help me to overcome my failings. She is so wise, so gentle—”

“So sensible—”

“So sensible, as you observe; so kind, so patient—”

“So faithful to her resolutions, so strong, so *consistent* in her actions!”

“Consistent, indeed!” echoed the professor, and rubbed his hands with satisfaction. He saw only a remarkably affable, agreeable little lady, who expressed herself with great propriety, and could not understand why at this last word there was a general “family coach” movement in the room, every one rushing hurriedly to take up a new position, or why Esther herself should hang her head with an expression of guilty embarrassment. How was he to know how often in that self-same company his Esther had sung the praises of a single life, and vowed that no mere man should be allowed to stand between herself and her life’s work.

Mrs Asplin took refuge at the tea-table, and rattled the cups with a trembling hand. The vicar tip-toed gently up and down in his carpet slippers, and, in his efforts to look solemn, dropped his chin until his face looked about half a yard long. Mellicent spluttered contentedly in a corner, and Rob rubbed his hands and whispered, “Go it, Peg!” at every fresh opportunity.

The conversation during tea-time was conducted mainly between the professor and Miss Saville, and that young woman's friends listened with amazed admiration to the high-flown eloquence of her remarks. Who would have believed that Peggy was so well read, or able to conduct so learned a conversation? Even her old instructor was surprised at her knowledge, forgetting for the moment that education is by no means finished when a girl leaves the schoolroom. Miss Peggy had associated with many clever men during her four years' sojourn in India, had rubbed her sharp little wits against theirs, and not only heard but remembered what they had had to tell. She had likewise had abundant opportunity of cultivating her natural gift for conversation, and the little minx was by no means sorry to have an opportunity of quoting *à propos* remarks in assent to the professor's axioms, and thus impressing old and new friends at the same time.

Rob scowled in the background and scraped his feet on the carpet, a sign of disapproval peculiarly trying to the nerves of his hostess; but then, as Mellicent sagely observed, Rob always *was* furious if Peggy talked to any one but himself; so that it was no use taking any notice of *him*, and so soon as tea was over, Mrs Asplin ordered him away with the two older men, feeling sure that the girls were longing for a chat by themselves. The two stooping figures went down the garden-path, with Rob's stalwart form towering behind, and the three women who loved them watched from the window, and murmured benedictions in their hearts.

"Austin looks as young as the professor himself, not one bit more bowed. He is so happy, bless him, to have gained another son."

"Edward will have a talk with father, and father will find out what he is like. How intellectual he looks! He has the true scholarly air, such a contrast to big, lumbering Rob."

"Two dear good pigmies, but the giant for me! What a comfort to see brain and muscle together! As a rule one seems to entirely absorb the other," sighed Miss Peggy happily, then turned to accost Esther with uplifted finger. "Esther, oh, Esther, who would have thought it?"

"It was very mean of you, Peggy, to make fun of me like that. I was most uncomfortable. If Edward had guessed you were making fun—"

“But he did not, you see, so no harm is done, and you could not expect to escape scot free. *You* to get engaged, after all your vows and protestations! You to fall in love like an ordinary, ignorant girl! You to condescend to marriage, when you might have spent your life teaching in a high school! Oh, Esther, Esther, well might I call you consistent! After this I shall have no more faith in strong-minded women.”

“Don’t call her strong-minded! I won’t have it; it sounds too unlovable for my dear, good girl!” cried Esther’s mother fondly, and then immediately contradicting herself; “And indeed she would need to be strong-minded,” she declared, “to venture to many a literary man. Tiresome creatures! that they are, always living in the clouds and coming in late for meals. An aunt of my own married an author, who ruined his health poring over his desk from morning to night, and half-way through the night into the bargain. Her great object in life was to tempt him out of doors, and at first she could never do it; but she was a woman of resource, and got the better of him in the end. She said she had nothing to do but to ring the dinner-bell, and out he would fly and scour the country-side for hours on end! So, indeed, she rang it regularly half-way through the afternoon, and the poor soul was too lost in dreams to discover the deception. He just thought he had been out for ten minutes’ constitutional, and that the meal had been kept hot until his return. I’ve known several literary couples in my time, but they were the only really happy pair, for not one woman in fifty has the wit to manage a man without letting him suspect it. Remember, Esther, when the professor is aggravating—”

“He never will be! Mother, how *can* you?” protested the *fiancée* indignantly, at which Mrs Asplin beamed with delight, Mellicent chuckled, and Peggy groaned in sepulchral fashion.

“Just wait and see. He’ll wear you to a skeleton, my dear, and you never had too much flesh to boast of. I’ve heard tales about literary men which would make your flesh creep. Being late for meals is nothing—literally nothing! I’m told they never speak for months at a time when they are in the throes of composition, and habitually sit up at night writing until they fall asleep, knock over the lamp, and set the house on fire. You had better keep fire-escapes on every landing, for you are bound to need them.”

It was of no use. Esther refused to be alarmed or even depressed. She sat smiling and complacent, her hands folded on her knee, her usually serious face softened into a radiance of contented happiness. Her state of illusion was such that, if any one had dared to hint that the professor might possibly mingle some trifling failing with his many virtues, she would have laughed the idea to scorn, and her companions realised as much, and made no further efforts to convince her.

“It’s no use talking!” Mellicent cried in scorn. “She thinks he is perfect, and that we are all too stupid and ignorant to appreciate him. It’s the way all girls go on when they get engaged, and the only thing to do is to keep quiet, and let them find out their mistake. They are mad, poor dears, and don’t know what they are doing. Let us talk about the wedding; that will be more interesting. I have simply ached to have a wedding in the family, and felt quite low because I thought mine would be the first, and I should be cheated out of the fun of being a bridesmaid and having all the fuss and excitement.”

“I am afraid you will have very little of that, Mill, as it is, for it will be very, very quiet. I should hate a fashionable wedding, and feel that it took away half the solemnity of the service to have one’s thoughts taken up with dress and furbelows. Edward wants to be married very soon, in two months, if possible, for he says he has waited long enough for a home, and there is no reason for delay. We are quite sure of our own minds, and there will be no difficulty in finding another governess for the little boys; so, mother dear, we must try to be ready for a very quiet wedding by that time. I shall not need an elaborate trousseau, you know; just a few plain, useful dresses.”

Mellicent groaned, and threw up her hands in despair.

“Oh dear, what a thing it is to be sensible! Just listen to her, Peggy, with her ‘few useful dresses.’ I must say it’s very hard on me, to have a sister who never takes my feelings into account. What is the good of having a wedding at all, if it isn’t properly done with a choral service and bridesmaids and pretty frocks? I don’t think you *could* be so selfish, Esther, as to say I shall not be bridesmaid. I’d break my heart if you did. Just Peggy and me, and one or two of his relatives, and Rosalind Darcy, and the little boys as pages to hold up your train. They would look sweet

as pages, and every one has them now.—It's quite the proper thing."

But Esther laughed derisively at the very idea.

"Pages indeed! Trains indeed! I sha'n't have any train to carry. My own idea is to be married in my travelling-dress at eight o'clock in the morning, and drive straight to the station; but we must talk it over with Edward and see what he says. You can call yourself a bridesmaid, Mill, if you like to stand beside me, and Peggy will be there, of course, but she will understand that it is no lack of love which makes me ask her as a guest only. If there were going to be bridesmaids outside the family, she would be the first to be asked."

Peggy made a bow of gracious acknowledgment.

"And I am not so sure that there won't be even yet. Men, I have observed, are extremely prosaic about other people's weddings and sentimental about their own. The professor may object to the travelling-dress, and want to see you in the orthodox white, in which case Mellicent will have her desire, for, of course, you will give in to him in that, as in every other instance. I hope he does, for I must confess I like to see a bride in white."

"And so do I," agreed the bride's mother. "I think it's a sin for a girl to be married in anything else when she is young, and the dress has to be bought in any case for wearing afterwards. You know, Esther dear, you will be asked out a great deal in Oxford, and you must have a good trousseau. No one can call me extravagant, but I am determined not to let you leave home without seeing that you are well supplied, and have everything that you need."

Mellicent's eyes brightened with expectation.

"That's right, mother, that's right! That's the way to talk to her. If it's too painful to her feelings to buy nice things, you and I will go up to town and get them for her. Just wait until it comes to *my* turn, and won't I enjoy myself just! Oh, dear me, how miserable I've been many and many a time reading those wonderful accounts of trousseaux in the newspapers, and thinking that I should never, never have the things for my own! Dozens of hats, dozens of jackets, parasols to match every dress, and as

for blouses, hundreds, my dears, literally hundreds, of every sort and description!"

"Wicked waste and extravagance," Esther said severely. "I have often wondered how brides in high position can show such a want of taste and nice feeling in first wasting so much money, and then making a public show of what is a purely personal matter. It's beautiful and poetic to prepare new garments for the new home, but it's vulgar and prosaic to make a show of them to satisfy public curiosity. If I could afford it a hundred times over, I would not condescend to such folly. Would you, Peggy? Whom do you agree with now, Mellicent or me?"

"Both," said Peggy calmly. "I would have no exhibition of my fineries, but I'd love to have them all the same, and would thoroughly enjoy the selection. What is more. I believe you will yourself, for, having once forgotten yourself so far as to get engaged, there is no saying what folly you may descend to; but whatever you do, dear, I'll help you, and come over on the eventful morn, to see that your wreath is not put on *too* tidily, and to give a few artistic touches to your painfully neat attire. You will let me be with you on your wedding morning, won't you?"

"Indeed I will! I shall want every one I love around me to share in my happiness; and you, dear Peg, are associated with some of the brightest recollections of my childhood."

"Oh, good gracious, now they are getting sentimental! I am going out into the garden to eat gooseberries!" cried Mellicent, jumping up from her seat and rushing out of the room. Mrs Asplin hesitated for a moment, and then followed suit, and the two girls who were left behind looked at one another with shy, embarrassed glances. For the first time since the announcement of the great news they were alone together, and each waited bashfully for the other to speak. Naturally, however, it was Peggy who first broke the silence.

"Then you thought it well over, Esther," she said slowly, "and decided that you would rather marry the professor than go on with your work? You were so full of ambition for the future and so interested in your plans that it must have been difficult to give them up and resign yourself to a quiet domestic life. But I suppose you are quite sure."

Esther smiled with that ineffable superiority of experience which divides the engaged girl from her old associates.

“I never thought it over. I never ‘decided’ or ‘resigned myself’ or anything of the kind. Edward wanted me, and that was enough. There was not room in my mind to think of anything but him. To be with him and help him is all I care for now.”

“And it was no effort, none at all, to give up what you had worked for all your life? When he asked you to marry him, and you thought of your work, had you no hesitation, no qualm?”

“I—I never thought of it! I forgot all about it!” said Esther, blushing; and Peggy bent forward to kiss her with a smile on her lips and a tear in her eye.

“You dear thing! I am so glad! I am so glad! It is all just as it should be, and I can see you are going to be an ideal Darby and Joan. You will forgive me, won’t you, for saying that his collar was dusty, for how was I ever to guess that he was going to belong to you? I much admire the classical outline of his features, and I’ll make a point of studying it exclusively in the future, and never allow my eyes to wander to his garments. After all, what is dust, that it should be allowed to affect our estimate of a fellow-creature? He may be as dusty as he likes, Esther, my dear, and I shall never breathe a word of reproach to you on the subject.”

“Much obliged, but your generosity is unnecessary. You will never see *my* husband dusty, if I know it!” cried Esther in disdain, and blushed so prettily at the sound of that magic word that Peggy capered round the room in delight, humming an air the while which was intended to be the Wedding March, but which was, alas! so lamentably out of tune that Esther congratulated herself that, even if overheard, it would never be recognised by the beloved listener in the garden.

Chapter Nineteen.

For the next few weeks Esther’s approaching marriage seemed to engross attention to the exclusion of every other topic. To Mellicent’s

delight the professor fulfilled Peggy's prophecy by putting his veto on the travelling-dress proposition. The wedding should be quiet, the quieter the better, but Esther must wear the orthodox attire, for he wished to keep the memory of a white-robed bride with him throughout life. Alone with Esther, he added one or two lover-like speeches on the point, which more than reconciled her for the extra fuss and flurry which were involved in gratifying his desire. A white dress involved bridesmaids, so Peggy received her invitation, and was the less appreciative of the position since every day brought with it a fresh interview with Mellicent, eager, incoherent, brimming over with an entirely new set of ideas on the all-important subject of dress. Esther herself went about her preparations in characteristic fashion, thoughtful of expense, of fatigue for others, yet with a transparent appreciation of her own importance, which was altogether girl-like and natural, and Mrs Asplin entered into every detail of the arrangements with whole-hearted zeal. She was so happy in Esther's happiness, so thankful for the feeling of additional strength and comfort for the future given by the prospect of the new home, so proud of her distinguished son-in-law, that the old merry spirit sparkled forth as brightly as ever, and with it such a marked improvement in health as rejoiced Peggy's heart to behold.

"Indeed, it's a perfect fraud I feel!" she explained one day, when the girl had expressed delight at her altered looks; "for I seem able to do all I want, while just as soon as I begin a tiresome duty I'm tired all over, and feel fit for nothing but to lie down on my bed. I can stand any amount of happiness, Peg, and not one little scrap of worry, and that's a disgraceful confession for a woman of my years to make to a girl like you! Ah, well, dearie, I've borne my own share of worries, and when the old ships are worn out, they don't brave the storms any more, but sail peacefully up and down the quiet streams. It's just a useless old derelict I am, and that's the truth of it."

"Derelict, indeed! You will never be more than seventeen, if you live to be seventy. You are the youngest member of the family at this moment, and if you spoke the honest truth you would acknowledge that you are in your element in the midst of these wedding preparations! I believe you are far more excited than Esther herself."

"Indeed and I am. There is nothing I enjoy more than planning and

contriving, and making a great deal out of nothing at all. I've had a grand turn out of my boxes and cupboards, and brought to light some forgotten treasures which will come in most usefully just now. It reminds me of the time before my own marriage, when I sat stitching dreams of bliss into every seam, and indeed they have been fulfilled, for I have been a blessedly happy woman! Now just look at these things half a moment, my child, and tell me what you think I could do with them. You are so clever at planning, and poor dear Esther is not a bit of good in that direction. If you could suggest what to make, I could cut out the patterns and set to work at once."

Mrs Asplin waved her hands towards a table on which her resurrected treasures were spread out to view, and Peggy dropped her chin with a preternaturally solemn expression, to avoid bursting into laughter. It was such a melancholy-looking bundle, and Mrs Asplin looked so proud of it, and it was so deliciously like the old vicarage way, to endeavour to make everything out of something else, and to rummage out a store of old rubbish, as the first step towards manufacturing a new garment! The treasures which were to contribute towards Esther's trousseau consisted of a moth-eaten Paisley shawl, a checked silk skirt of unbelievable hideousness, a muslin scarf; yellow with age, a broken ivory fan, and a pair of mittens. A vision of Esther figuring as a bride in this old-world costume, rose before Peggy's quick-seeing eyes, the checked silk transforming her slim figure into Mother-Bunch proportions, the shawl folded primly round her shoulders, the fan waving to and fro in the mittened hand. Do what she would, she could not control the inward spasm of laughter; her shoulders heaved and shook, and Mrs Asplin felt the movement, and turned a quick glance upon her.

"Laughing? What for? Don't you like them then? You saucy child, and I thought they were so nice!"

"Oh, mater dear, and so they are—in their present condition; but the idea of converting them into fashionable new garments is too funny altogether. You might as well try to cut up an oak-tree into fancy borderings. Leave them as they are, dear, and lend them to me, so that I may dress up and amuse my people. Then they will be doing real good work."

"I'll do nothing of the kind. Much obliged to you for the suggestion, but I

can make better use of them than that. You are as bad as Mellicent, laughing at my poor old treasures. I don't know what the world is coming to, I'm sure. Such upsetting notions the young folks are getting." Mrs Asplin swept up the despised trophies in her arms, and bustled out of the room with a show of displeasure, which, truth to tell, had little effect upon the culprit. It was not the first, nor the second, nor the twentieth time that a similar scene had been enacted, for "mother's resurrections" were a standing joke in the Asplin family, and the final fate thereof an open secret. However lofty might be the first suggested use, the end was always the same. Her offerings scorned by ungrateful relatives, she took refuge in dusters, and patiently hemmed squares of the rejected fabrics, with which to enrich the already lordly store of these useful commodities. On the present occasion she had hardly passed the door before she had decided that for drawing-room use nothing was really so good as a soft silk duster. The fate of the old check skirt was sealed!

The summer passed away very rapidly for Peggy, dividing her time between two happy homes, on both of which the sun shone as brightly and continuously as in the world without, and shadows seemed for the present to have hidden themselves away. Colonel and Mrs Saville were full of delight in their new home, and the sense of rest and security which came from being settled down in England, with their children beside them. Arthur's prospects improved from day to day as he became more widely known and appreciated, while Peggy was an hourly comfort and delight. Her post as only daughter was no sinecure, for a delicate mother left all the household management in her hands, while an exacting father grumbled loudly if she were not ready to bestow her company upon him at a moment's notice. Like most men who have lived in India and have been accustomed to an unlimited number of native servants, Colonel Saville was by no means easy to satisfy. He expected the household arrangements to move along as if on oiled wheels, whereas, needless to say, a *ménage* over which Miss Peggy presided, was subject on the contrary to some painful vicissitudes. When the post of housekeeper had been deputed to her, Peggy had been greatly elated by her increased importance, and with characteristic modesty had expatiated upon her peculiar fitness for the post, and declared her intention of exhibiting a really well-conducted establishment to the gaze of the world. She provided herself with a huge account book, marched about the house jingling an enormous bunch of keys, and would allow no one else but

herself to weigh out provisions in the store-room. The first week's bill made Colonel Saville open his eyes, but his daughter explained with much suavity that, living so far from shops of every description, it was necessary to lay in a large stock of dried goods, so that one should be able to supplement a meal on the arrival of unexpected visitors, and also be independent of the vagaries of parcel post. This was an unanswerable argument, and the colonel was the more inclined to acquiesce, since the menus of the last week had been all that even his exacting taste could desire.

There were few things which Peggy could not manage to accomplish if she gave her mind to the subject, and while the novelty of the charge lasted she spared neither time nor pains to ensure success. The morning's consultation with the cook was a solemn function with which nothing was allowed to interfere. New and fantastic arrangements of flowers graced the dinner-table each day, and the parlour-maid quailed before an eye which seemed able to descry dust in the most out-of-the-way corners.

For the first week, then, all went well, and the new housekeeper sunned herself in an atmosphere of praise and congratulation. The colonel tugged his moustache and vowed that at this rate she would beat the "boy" who had managed his Indian home. Mrs Saville murmured:

"My darling, you are so clever! I can't think how you do it!" and the cook said that she had seen a deal of the world, and knew her way about as well as most, but never, no never, had she met a young lady with her head screwed so straight on her shoulders.

Protestations, however, do not go on for ever, and it is astonishing how speedily a new regime loses its novelty, and is taken as a matter of course. When Peggy had been in command a fortnight, no one thought of praising her efforts any more, or of expressing satisfaction at their result. It was simply taken for granted that she would fulfil her duty without any more being said on the subject. She had been congratulated on her start, and that was all that was required. One could not be expected to lay daily tribute of praise at her feet. Unfortunately, however, this was just what Miss Peggy *did* expect, and in proportion as the applause died away, so did her interest in her duties. It grew monotonous to weigh out everlasting

stores: dinners and lunches seemed to come round with disgraceful rapidity, and the question of food absorbed an unreasonable amount of time out of one's life. Cook looked askance when two courses were suddenly cut off the evening dinner, and cold meat ordered as the *pièce de résistance* at lunch, hut there were worse things in store!

There came a morning when she waited for her young mistress's appearance until ten o'clock came, and eleven, and twelve, and waited in vain, for Miss Peggy was far away, scouring the country on her bicycle, with never a thought for home duties until a spasm of hunger brought with it a pang of recollection. Horrors! she had forgotten all about the morning's orders and here it was close upon lunch-time, and her father doubtless already wending his way home, hungrily anticipating his tiffin.

Surely, surely cook would rise to the occasion and arrange a menu on her own account! Peggy comforted herself in the certainty that this would be the case, the while she pedalled home as fast as wheels would take her. But she was mistaken in her surmises. Mistress Cook had no idea of being played fast and loose with in this haphazard fashion, and having, moreover, been elaborately snubbed on a previous occasion when she had ventured to advance her own views, was not altogether unwilling to avenge her dignity now that opportunity had arisen.

When Peggy rushed breathlessly into the kitchen at half-past twelve, there were the remnants of yesterday's repast spread out on the table for her inspection, and not one single preparation made for the meal which was so near at hand. Cook was frigid, Peggy desperate, but difficulty had the effect of stimulating her faculties, and she approached the offended dignitary in a manner at once so ingenious and so beguiling that her anger melted away like snow before the sun.

"Emergency," quoth Miss Peggy grandiloquently, smiling into the sullen face—"emergency is the test of genius! You have now one quarter of an hour in which to prepare a meal, and very poor material with which to work. Here is a chance to distinguish yourself! I am so ignorant that I had best leave you to your own resources; but anything you need from the store-room I will bring down at once. Just give me your orders!"

Could anything have been more diplomatic? To be asked at the eleventh

hour to fulfil a definite order would have been an additional offence, but it was not in cook-nature not to rise to so insinuating a bait! Punctual to time such a tempting little luncheon appeared upon the table as evoked special praise from the fastidious master, the cook being commended for the success of omelette, *entrée* and savoury, and Peggy coming in for her own share of congratulation on her powers as a caterer. The crisis was passed, and passed successfully, but the anxiety consequent thereon had the beneficial effect of arousing Peggy's attention to the danger of her own position, and giving a fresh lease of life to her energies. Mrs Beeton, the account book, and the keys were more in evidence than ever, and it was fully a fortnight before the second relapse recurred. It came on, however, slowly but surely, and other crises occurred which could not be so successfully overcome, as when Peggy drove a distance of three miles to interview butcher and fishmonger, and meeting Rob *en route* went off on a ferning expedition, returning home rosy and beaming, to discover an empty larder and a stormy parent; or again when she forgot the Thursday holiday, and deferred her orders until closed doors barred her entrance. The stores were frequently in request in those days, so that monotony became the order of the day, and the colonel inquired ironically if he were living in the Bush, since he was put on a diet of tinned food. Peggy peaked miserable brows, and said she never had seen such a stupid little village! She did her best. Only this very day she had left an enthralling story to cycle miles and miles to buy fish and meat, had suffered tortures *en route* from the heat and dust, and behold the shops were closed! It always *was* Thursday afternoon somehow. She could not think how it occurred. But the colonel was not so easily appeased. His moustache bristled and his eyes flashed with the steel-like glance which always came when he was annoyed.

"Excuses!" he thundered. "Idle excuses! It is your own fault for forgetting what it is your business to remember, and it only adds to the offence to shield yourself by blaming others. Fine thing this, to be starved in my own house by my own daughter! I'd better sell up at once and go and live in a club. If you were a practical, well-regulated young woman, as you ought to be, you would put business first, and make no more of these stupid blunders!"

"But I *should* be so uninteresting! Practical people who never make mistakes are such dreary bores. Novelty is the spice of life, father dear,

and if you would only regard it in the right light, even a bad dinner is a blessing in disguise. It does so help one to appreciate a good one when it comes! At least you must acknowledge that there is no monotony in my method!"

But for once the colonel refused to smile, and when he had marched out of the room, Mrs Saville took advantage of the occasion to speak one of those rare words of admonition which were all-powerful in her daughter's ear.

"Don't worry your father, Peg darling!" she said. "It doesn't matter for ourselves when we are alone, for we don't care what we eat, but men are different. They like comfortable meals, and it is only right that they should have them. Give a little thought to your work, and try to arrange things more equally, so that we shall not have a feast one night and a fast the next. Little careless ways like these are more annoying to a man's temper than more serious offences. It is difficult for you, I know, dearie, but I won't offer to release you from the responsibility, for it will be valuable experience. Some day you will have a house of your own and a husband to consider."

Peggy gave a grunt of disapproval.

"I'll marry a vegetarian, and live on nuts," she declared gloomily. "But I will try to do better, mummie dear, I will indeed, so don't you worry your sweet head! I'll be as good as a little automatic machine, and never forget nothing no more. When Eunice comes, I'll ask her to say, 'Lunch, lunch! Dinner, dinner!' to me every morning regularly at nine o'clock, and then I can't forget. I like Eunice! She is such an agreeable complement to myself. I can help her where she fails, and she can do the same for me. You will see, mother dear, that Eunice will exert a most beneficial influence over me! She is one of those gentle, mousy people who have an immense influence when they choose to exert it."

"She seems to have that. I've noticed it more than once," said Mrs Saville drily, and her eyes wandered to a closely written sheet which lay on the table by her side. It was Arthur's latest letter, and in it his mother's watchful eyes had discovered an unprecedented number of references to his chiefs daughter. "Miss Rollo did this; Miss Rollo did that; Miss Rollo

said one thing and planned another.” Five separate times had that name been connected with Arthur’s own experiences. Mrs Saville drew her delicate brows together and heaved a sigh. A mother’s unselfishness is never perhaps so hardly tried as when she feels her ascendency threatened in the affections of an only son.

Chapter Twenty.

Two days before Eunice was expected at Yew Hedge, Peg was summoned from the garden to receive a mysterious visitor, and stared in bewilderment to see Rosalind herself awaiting in the drawing-room. No one else was present, and in the wery moment of entering Peggy realised that the news which she had expected so long was an accomplished fact. There was suppressed excitement in Rosalind's manner, an embarrassment in her glance, which told their own tale; and the kiss of greeting had hardly been exchanged before she was stammering out:

"Mariquita, I came—I wanted to tell you myself—I thought you ought to know—"

"That you are engaged to Lord Everscourt!" said Peggy, with one last pang for the memory of Arthur's loss, but keeping her hand still linked in Rosalind's, in remembrance of her promise to that dear brother. "I have been expecting it, Rosalind, and am not at all surprised. I told you, you remember, that it was bound to happen. I congratulate you, and wish you every happiness."

"Thank you," said Rosalind meekly; so meekly that the other raised her eyes in astonishment, to see whether the expression emphasised or contradicted so unusual a tone. The lovely face looked down into hers, wistful and quivering, and the blue eyes softened with tears. "Oh, kiss me, Peggy!" she cried. "Be kind to me! I have no sister of my own, and mother is away, and I came to you first of all! I made an excuse and came down for two nights, just to have a talk with you and to ask you to help me!"

"Help you!" echoed Peggy blankly. She was alternately amazed and embarrassed by the manner in which Rosalind leant upon her in every difficulty; but now, as ever, the spell of the winsome presence proved irresistibly softening, and it was in a far gentler tone that she continued. "If everything is settled, in what way do you want my help, Rosalind?"

Rosalind sat down upon the sofa, still retaining her grip of her friend's

hand, and drawing her down on the seat by her own. She stared aimlessly up and down the room, opening her lips as if about to speak, and closing them again in despair of expressing her thoughts, until suddenly the words came out in a breathless rush.

“I pwomised to marry him, and I mean to keep my word, but it is harder than I thought. It would be easier if he were diffewent, but he loves me so much, and believes in me, and thinks I must care for him too. If he knew I had taken him for his position, he would despise me, and I don’t want him to do that. I have given up so much, and if he turned against me too, what should I have left? It fwightens me to think of it, and I came away to consider what I had better do, and to talk to you and ask your advice.” She looked at Peggy appealingly, and added in a breathless whisper, “I want to do what is right, you know! I want to treat him well! You think I am selfish and worldly, Peggy, but I am not all bad. If I mawwy him, I will do my best. I want him to be fond of me, not to grow tired or dissatisfied. That would make me wetched.”

Peggy smiled pitifully. It was so like Rosalind to be distressed at the idea of losing a love she could not return, and to show a pathetic eagerness to make a wrong step right. Her own Spartan judgment could never overlook the sin of preferring money before love, but she realised that it was too late in the day to preach this doctrine, and cast about in her mind for more practical advice.

“If you try to make him happy, that will be your best plan, Rosalind. If I were in your place, I’d try to forget about the past, and think only of the future. I’d find out the very best in him, and be proud of it, and study his tastes, so that I might be able to talk about the things he liked best, and be a real companion to him, and I’d be grateful to him for his love, and try to love him in return. Every one says he is a good fellow and devoted to you, so it ought not to be difficult.”

“No–o!” echoed Rosalind doubtfully. “Only if you are going to love people, you genewally do it without twying, and if you don’t love them, little things aggwavate you, and rub you the wong way, which you would never notice in people you really cared for! Everscourt is a good fellow, but he worries me to distwaction sometimes, and I am so afraid of getting cwoss. I don’t want him to think me bad-tempered. I think your plan is very good,

Peggy, and I will try to follow it. I ought to succeed, for you see how anxious I am to do what is right! You can't call me selfish this time, can you, for I am thinking only of his happiness!"

Peggy lifted her brows with arch reproach. "Oh, Rosalind, no! You think you are, but you are really distressed about your own position, in case he may ever think you any less charming and angelic than he does at this moment. It's your own vanity that concerns you, far more than his happiness."

"You have no business to say anything of the kind. If he is disappointed in me, won't that make him miserable, and if I twy to please him, is not that making him happy in the best way possible? But you always think the worst of me, Peggy Saville, and put a wong constwuction on what I do. When I pay you the compliment of coming to you for help, I do think you might be a little kinder and more sympathetic."

"It would be easier to say a lot of polite things that I didn't wean. It is the best proof that I do care for your happiness that I have the courage to be disagreeable. You know, Rosalind, the plain truth is that you want to act a part to gain admiration and applause, but it's absurd to think you can go on doing that all your life, and to a person who is with you on every occasion. It must be *real*, not pretence, if it is to succeed, so try not to think so much about his opinion of you, and more about how you can help him, and be the sort of wife he wants. And if he worries you in any little way, tell him so quietly, and don't let it get into a habit. I'm talking as if I were seventy-seven at the very least, and had been married a dozen times over, but you know how easy it is to preach to other people and how clearly one can see their duty! As a matter of fact, I know nothing whatever about it, but one can argue with so much more freedom when one is not hampered with facts! I am sorry if I have seemed unkind, but —"

"No, no! I know what you mean. I think you are vewy kind to me, Peggy, considering—considering everything!" murmured Rosalind softly. She sat silent for a moment, gathering courage to ask another question which was fluttering to her lips.

"Will—will—do you think Arthur will be *vewy* miserable?"

Peggy's little form stiffened at that into a poker of wounded dignity. She felt it in the worst possible taste of Rosalind to have introduced her brother's name into the conversation, and was in arms at once at the tone of commiseration.

"My brother and I had a talk on the subject when I was in town," she replied coldly, "and he entirely agreed with me that it was the best thing for you. He will be in no wise surprised, but only relieved that the arrangement is completed. He is very well and in good spirits, and is coming down next week with Eunice Rollo to pay us a visit, when we have planned a succession of amusements."

"Oh," remarked Rosalind shortly. "Is he, indeed!" She tried to say she was rejoiced to hear it, but her lips refused to form the lie, for Peggy's words had been so many daggers in her heart. Arthur would be "relieved," he was in "good spirits," he was coming down to enjoy himself in the country in company with. Eunice Rollo! Could anything be more wounding to the vanity which made her treasure the idea of broken-hearted grief? Once more Rosalind called Peggy cruel in her heart, and Peggy mentally justified her harshness by reminding herself that the knowledge of Arthur's fortitude would do more towards turning Rosalind's heart toward her *fiancé* than a volume of moral reflections. Some slave to worship and adore, she *must* possess, and if she could no longer think of Arthur in that position, so much the more chance that she would appreciate his successor. No more was said on the subject, and in a few minutes Rosalind rose to say good-bye and take her way to the vicarage.

"For I must congwatulate Esther!" she said, laughing.

"That is to say, if I can contwive to do it without laughing outwight. It is *too* widiculous to think of Esther being mawwied! She is a born old maid, and I hear he is quite old, nearly forty, with grey hair and spectacles and a stoop to his back. He teaches, doesn't he, or lectures or something, and I suppose he is as poor as a church mouse. What in the world induced the silly girl to accept him?"

"Look in her face and see!" said Peggy shortly. "And don't waste your pity, Rosalind, for it is not required. Professor Reid is as big a man in his own way as Lord Everscourt himself; and from a worldly point of view

Esther is making a good match. That, however, is not what her face will tell you. They are going to be married in October, and Mellicent and I are to be bridesmaids."

"And drive to church in a village fly, and come back to a scwamble meal in the dining-woom! Pwesents laid out on the schoolwoom table, and all the pawishioners cwowding together in the dwawingwoom. I can't just imagine a vicarage marriage, and how you have the courage to face it, Mawiquita, I weally can't think!" cried Rosalind, in her most society drawl. "You must be *my* bwidesmaid, dear, and I'll pwomise you a charming gown and a real good time into the bargain. I'm determined it shall be the smartest affair of the season!"

Peggy murmured a few non-committal words, and Rosalind floated away, restored to complacency by the contrast between the prospect of her own wedding and that of poor old Esther. They would indeed be different occasions; and so thought Peggy also, as she stood watching her friend depart, contrasting her lovely restless face with Esther's radiant calm, and the gloomy town residence of Lord Darcy with the breezy country vicarage.

The next morning at breakfast Colonel Saville discussed the coming weddings from an outsider's point of view.

"Two presents!" he groaned. "That's what it means to me, and pretty good ones too, I suppose, for everything has grown to such a pitch of extravagance in these days that one is expected to come down handsomely. When we were married we thought ourselves rich with twenty or thirty offerings, but now they are reckoned by hundreds, and the happy recipients have to employ detectives to guard their treasures. Esther, I suppose, will be content with a piece of silver, but we shall have to launch out for once, and give Miss Darcy something worthy of her position."

"I think, dear, if we launch out at all it must be for Esther, not Rosalind. If I had my way, I should give some pretty trifle to Rosalind, who will be overdone with presents, and spend all we can spare on something really handsome for Esther," said his wife gently; and Peggy cried, "Hear! Hear!" and banged such uproarious applause with her heels that the

colonel felt himself hopelessly out-voted.

“If you had your way, indeed!” he grumbled, pushing his chair back from the table and preparing to leave the room. “When do you *not* get your way, I’d like to know? It’s a case of serving two masters with a vengeance, when a man has a wife and a grown-up daughter! Settle it to please yourselves, and don’t take any notice of me. I’m going out shooting, and won’t be home until tea-time, so you will have plenty of time to talk it over in peace and quietness!”

Peggy ran after him with a little skip, slipped her hand through his arm, and rubbed her face coaxingly against the shoulder of his rough tweed suit.

“He is just a down-trodden old dear, isn’t he? So mild and obedient—a perfectly nonentity in his own house! No one trembles before him! He never lays down the law as if he were the Tsar of All the Russias, or twenty German Emperors rolled into one! Now does that really mean that you are to be out for lunch? I’m housekeeper, you know, and it makes a difference to my arrangement. You won’t say you are going to be out, then appear suddenly at the last moment?”

“Not I! I shall be miles away, and cannot spare the time to come so far; but for that matter I cannot see why it should make any difference. One person more or less can be of no importance.”

“He is though, very much indeed, when it happens to be the head of the family!” remarked Peggy sagely to her mother when they were left alone, “because I don’t mind confessing to you, dear, that, owing to the agitation consequent on my interview with the fair Rosalind, I entirely omitted to post my order for the butcher! If father had been at home, I should have been compelled to drive over in the heat and dust; but as it is, I can send a card by the early post, and the things will be here for dinner. You don’t object, I know, for you have a mind above trifles, and I can provide quite a nice little meal for two.”

“Oh, I don’t mind for myself, but do be careful to send your orders regularly, darling!” pleaded her mother earnestly. “We are so entirely in the country that a day might come when you were not able to get

supplies at the last moment, and *then* what would you do? Imagine how awkward it might be!”

“I’d rather not, if you don’t mind! It would be quite bad enough if it really happened. We won’t anticipate evil, but have a lazy morning together in the garden, browsing in deck-chairs, and eating fruit at frequent intervals. It is so lovely to sit under one’s own trees, in one’s own garden, with one’s very own mummie by one’s side. Girls who have lived in England all their lives can never appreciate having home and parents at the same time, in the same way in which I do. It seems almost too good to be true, to be really settled down together!”

“Oh, thank God, we never were really separated, Peg! One of the heart-breaking things of a life abroad is that parents and children so often grow up practical strangers to each other; but you and I were always together at heart, and your dear letters were so transparent that I seemed to read all that was in your mind. It was partly Mrs Asplin’s doing too—dear good woman, for she gave you the care and mothering which you needed to develop your character, yet never tried to take my place. Yes, indeed, we must do all we can for Esther! Find out what she would like, dear, and we will go to town together and buy the best of its kind. I can never do enough for Mrs Asplin’s children.”

There was so much to talk about, so much to discuss, that when lunch-time approached both mother and daughter were surprised to find how quickly the morning had passed. It was so cool and breezy sitting under the shade of the trees that they were both unwilling to return to the house, and at Peggy’s suggestion orders were given that lunch should be served where they sat.

“It will do me more credit; for what would appear a paltry provision spread out on the big dining-room table, will look quite sylvan and luxurious against this flowery background,” she said brightly, and in the very moment of speaking her jaw dropped, and her eyes grew blank and fixed, as if beholding a vision too terrible to be real.

Round the corner or the house, one—two—three masculine forms were coming into view; three men in Norfolk jackets, shooting breeches and deer-stalker caps; dusty and dishevelled, yet with that indefinable air of

relaxation which spoke of rest well-earned. They were no chance visitors, they had come to stay, to stay to be fed! Every confident step proved as much, every smile of assured welcome. Peggy's groan of despair aroused her mother's attention, she turned and gave an echoing exclamation.

"Your father! Back after all—and two men with him. Mr Cathcart, and—yes! Hector Darcy himself. I did not know he had come down. My dear child, what *shall* we do?"

But Peggy was speechless, stricken for once beyond power of repartee at the thought of the predicament which her carelessness had brought about. Her own humiliation and cook's disgust were as nothing, compared with the thought of her father's anger at the violation of his hospitable instincts. She could not retain even the semblance of composure, and the nervous, incoherent greeting which she accorded to the strangers was strangely in contrast with her usual self-possession.

Hector Darcy looked down into the flushed little face, and listened to the faltering words, his own heavy features lighting with pleasure. It was the first time he had seen Peggy lose her self-possession, and if he connected the fact with his own sudden appearance, it was no more than was to be expected from masculine vanity. He told himself that he had never seen her more dainty and pretty than she looked now, in her white dress, with the touch of pink, matching the colour on her cheeks, and Colonel Saville thought the same, and cast a glance of pride upon her as he cried:

"Back again, you see! I met Cathcart and Hector, as they meant to pay you a call in any case, I thought I had better bring them home with me to lunch. I told them I was not expected, but that my clever little housekeeper would be able to give us a meal. Anything you have, my dear; but be quick about it! We don't care what we have, but we want it at once. Waiting is the one thing we cannot stand."

That was the way in which he invariably spoke; but, alas, never were words more falsely uttered. The "clever little housekeeper" realised how difficult would be the task of giving satisfaction, and mentally rent her garments in despair.

“I will do the best I can, but you must allow me a little grace!” she said, twisting her features into a smile. “Mother and I were going to have our lunch out here, so it will take some time to have the table laid. You do not care for a picnic arrangement?”

“No, no, no! Detest out-of-door meals. Nothing but flies and discomfort,” declared the colonel roundly; and Peggy walked away towards the house, profoundly wishing that she could make her escape altogether, and scour the country until the dreaded hour was passed.

Cook was furious, as any right-minded cook would, under such circumstances, be.

“How,” she demanded, “could she be expected to make anything out of nothing? She knew her work as well as most, and no one couldn’t say but what she made the best of materials, but she wasn’t a magician, nor yet a conjurer, and didn’t set up to be, and therefore could not be expected to cook a dinner when there was no dinner to cook. It was enough to wear a body out, all these upsets and bothers, and she was sick of it. It was no good living in a place where you were blamed for what was not your fault. She did her best, and saints could do no more!” So on and so on, while Peggy stood by, sighing like a furnace, and feeling it a just punishment for her sins that she should be condemned to listen without excuses. Meekness, however, is sometimes a more powerful weapon than severity, and despite her hot temper cook adored her young mistress, and could not long endure the sight of the disconsolate face. The angry words died away into subdued murmurings, she rolled up her sleeves, and announced herself ready to obey orders. “For no one should say as she hadn’t done her duty by any house, as long as she lived in it.”

“It’s more than can be said of me, cook, I’m afraid; but help me out of this scrape like a good soul, and I’ll be a reformed character for the rest of my life! This will be a lesson which I shall never forget!” declared Peggy honestly; but she did not suspect in how serious a sense her words would become true. The adventures of that morning were not yet over, and the consequences therefrom were more lasting than she could anticipate.

Chapter Twenty One.

It is a well-known axiom that misfortunes never come singly, and if those misfortunes are brought about by our own carelessness, they are none the less easy to bear. What were Peggy's feelings then, on going to her key basket, to find it lying empty on the floor, with never a sign of its contents to be seen! Where had she put them? Memory brought back a misty recollection of hurrying through her work the morning before, in order to begin some more congenial occupation, and of having laid down the bunch in careless fashion, thinking the while that she would come back for it later on. But where had she placed it? Where, oh, where? Up and down the room she raced, to and fro she ran, wringing her hands in distress, and scanning every inch of wall, floor, and ceiling with her eager glance.

"They are staring me in the face most likely; they are right before my eyes, and I can't see them!" she cried in despair. "My keys! My keys! If I can't find them, I can do nothing. I shall be disgraced for ever! I should have given out the stores yesterday, but I put it off, miserable, procrastinating wretch that I am! Oh, keys, keys, where are you, keys? Don't hide from me, *please*, I want you so badly—badly!"

But the keys refused to reveal themselves. They were lying contentedly in the bottom of a china vase on the staircase, into which they had been dropped midway in a hasty descent the day before, and, however willing they might have been to obey their mistress's request, they were clearly powerless in the matter, since not even the echo of her voice reached their ears. Peggy searched in a frenzy of impatience, summoned a housemaid to assist her, and turned the contents of drawers and cupboards upside down upon her bed, but no success greeted her efforts. At the end of ten minutes' time she was in a more pitiable plight than before, since every likely place had been explored, and not the wildest idea had she where next to repair.

"Wh–at," quoth the housemaid tremblingly, "what shall I say to cook?" and at that Miss Peggy's eyes sent out a flash which made her look the image of her soldier father.

"Tell her to get on with what she can," she cried. "She shall have the

stores in five minutes from now!" and away she flew downstairs, leaving the astonished maid to wonder whether her brain had given way beneath the strain of the occasion.

Get into the store-room, Peggy was determined she *would*! By fair means or foul, that citadel must be stormed, and its treasures brought forth. If the door were closed, the window remained open, and the gardener's ladder lay conveniently at hand. To scale it so far as the second storey could be no difficult task for a girl who had been taught to climb trees and scramble over fences by the most fearless of masculine guides, and once inside the room the rest was easy, for in the first flush of careful forethought, a duplicate key had been provided, which hung on a nail near the door, ready for use if need should arise. It was characteristic of Peggy that its resting-place should have been inside the room, instead of out, but there it was, and nothing remained but to get possession of it as speedily as possible.

She seized the ladder, then, and dragged it towards the desired spot; it was so top-heavy that it was with difficulty that she could preserve its balance, but she struggled gallantly until it was placed against the sill, and as firmly settled as her inexperience could contrive. To mount it was the next thing, and—what was more difficult—to lower herself safely through the window when it was reached. That was the only part of the proceeding of which she had any dread, but, as it turned out, she was not to attempt it, for before she had ascended two rungs of the ladder a voice called her sharply by name, and she turned to find Hector Darcy standing by her side.

"For pity's sake, Peggy, what are you doing?" he cried, and laid his hand on her arm with a frightened gesture. "Come down this instant! How dare you be so rash? You don't mean to tell me seriously that you were going to climb that ladder?"

"A great deal more seriously than you imagine!" sighed Peggy dolefully. "Oh, why did you come and interrupt? You don't know how important it is. How did you come to see me here at all?"

"I was going into the house to give myself a brush up in your father's room, and I saw a glimpse of your dress through the tree."

“And the others—are they coming too? I don’t want them to see me; they must not see me.”

“No! No! They are sitting with your mother, having a smoke until lunch is ready. You need not be afraid; but tell me what is the matter? What on earth induced you to think of doing such a mad thing?”

Peggy leant against the ladder, and sighed in helpless resignation. She had not yet descended from her perch, so that her face was almost on a level with Hector’s own. The hazel eyes had lost their mocking gleam, and the peaked brows were furrowed with distress; it was a very forlorn and disconsolate but withal charming little Peggy who faltered out her humiliating confession.

“I—have been—so naughty, Hector! I’m supposed to be housekeeper, and I forgot to send my orders to the tradesmen last night, so that nothing has arrived this morning. That’s my store-room up there, and the key is lost, and I *must* get in, or you will have nothing to eat. I daren’t tell father, for he has warned me to be careful over and over again, and he would be so angry. I’m in a horrible scrape, Hector, and there’s no other way out of it. Do please, please, go away and let me get on!”

Hector stared at her, his handsome face blank with astonishment. Given a hundred guineas, he would never have thought of such an explanation, and coming from a home where the advent of a dozen unexpected visitors would have made no confusion, he found it difficult to realise the seriousness of the occasion. There was no doubting Peggy’s distress, however, and that was the important point. Whether she was imagining her trouble or not, he must come to her aid, and that as quickly as possible. He stretched out his arms, set her lightly on the ground, and put his own foot on the ladder.

“I will stay and help you,” he said firmly; “that will be better than going away! You don’t expect me to walk off and leave you to risk your little neck climbing up ladders to provide food for me, do you? Not quite, Peggy, I think! Tell me what to do, and I’ll do it. You want me to get into the room up there?”

Peggy looked at him doubtfully. The window was small, and Hector was

big; she was afraid he would find it no easy task, but his ready offer relieved and touched her more than she could express, for he had such an acute sense of his own dignity that it meant much for him to perform such a feat.

“You really mean it? It is good of you! You don’t mind doing it to help me?”

“I’d do a great deal more than that to please you, Peggy, if you would give me the chance!”

This was dreadful. He was growing sentimental, gazing at her with an expression which filled her with embarrassment, and speaking in a tone which implied even more than the words. She could not snub him in the face of an offered service; the only hope was to be brisk and matter-of-fact.

“Up with you, then!” she cried, stepping back, and waving her hand with imperious gesture. “Time is precious, and I am already far too late. I’ll watch here until you have got through the window. You will find a key hanging on a nail. Open the door with it, and you will find me panting on the threshold!”

No sooner said than done. Hector attempted no more sentimentalities, but mounted the ladder and squeezed his heavy form through the store-room window. It was no easy feat, and Peggy had one or two bad moments as she watched him trembling on the brink. When one foot had already disappeared he seemed for a moment to overbalance, and righted himself only by a vigorous effort, but finally he reached the room, and Peggy ran to meet him, aglow with relief. The key turned in the lock as she approached, and she rushed forward to select her stores with hardly a glance in Hector’s direction, though with many eager expressions of thanks.

“You are good! I am relieved! You deserve the Victoria Cross at least. I was quite agitated watching you, but you managed splendidly-splendidly. Did you get horribly dusty squeezing through?”

“I think I did, rather. I will go to your father’s room and have a brush. I’ll see you at lunch.”

“Yes, yes!” Peggy flew past, her arms full of the tins and bottles for which cook was waiting, leaving the things which were not immediately needed to be selected on a second visit. When she returned, five minutes later, Hector had disappeared, and she had leisure to look around, and feel a pang of shame at the general disorder. A room with more elaborate preparation for order, and less success in attaining it, it would have been difficult to discover. Shelves and cupboards were profusely labelled, and every nook or corner had been dedicated to some special use, but, alas! practice had fallen short of precept, and the labels now served no other purpose than that of confusion, since they had no longer any bearing on their position. Odd morsels of string and paper were littered over the floor, and empty cases, instead of being stored away, were thrown together in an unsightly heap beneath the window. A broken case showed where Hector’s foot had descended, and the boards lay kicked aside, the nails sticking out of their jagged edges.

“Misery me! and himself a soldier too, with eyes staring out of every side of him!” sighed Peggy, with a doleful imitation of Mrs Asplin’s Irish accent. “If this isn’t a lesson to you, Mariquita Saville, there’s no hope left! It’s most perturbing to have one’s secret faults exhibited to the public gaze. It will be quite an age before I dare put on airs to Hector, after this!”

She made a mental vow to set the room in order first thing next day, but at present could think of nothing but lunch; and when her own preparations were completed she rejoined the little party in the garden, and beguiled her father into talking of his past adventures, to prevent the time from hanging too heavily on his hands.

Hector did not appear until at last the gong sounded, and when he did, the first glance at him evoked a chorus of exclamations. His face was white and drawn, and he dragged one foot after him in halting fashion. In spite of his air of indifference, it was evident that he was in considerable pain, and as soon as he saw that deception could not be kept up, he sank down in a chair, as if thankful to give up the strain.

“Turned my foot a little, that’s all! Afraid the ankle has gone wrong!”

“Turned your foot! When did you do that? Must have given it a wrench getting over some of those stiles to-day, I suppose; but you did not speak

of it at the time. You felt nothing walking home?”

“No!”

“It has just begun to trouble you now? Pretty badly too, I’m afraid, for you look pale, old fellow. Come, we must have off that boot, and get the leg up on a sofa! It won’t do to let it hang down like that. I’ll take you upstairs and doctor it properly, for if there is one thing I do flatter myself I understand, it is how to treat a sprained ankle. Will you come now, or wait until after lunch?”

“Oh, have your lunch first, please! It will be time enough when you have finished. It would be too bad to take you away now, when Peggy has had so much trouble to prepare a meal for us!”

Hector smiled at the girl in encouraging fashion, but there was no answering smile upon Peggy’s face. She stood up stiff and straight, her brows puckered in lines of distress. Hector’s evasive answers had not deceived her, for she knew too well that the accident had happened after, not before, he had reached Yew Hedge. In some fashion he had strained his foot in mounting the ladder, and he was now trying to screen her from the result of her carelessness. To allow such a thing as that, however, was not Peggy Saville’s way. Her eyes gleamed, and her voice rang out clear and distinct.

“I am afraid it is I who am to blame. I am afraid you hurt yourself climbing into the store-room for me. You were quite well when you came in, so that must have been how it happened. You stepped on a box in getting through, and it gave way beneath you, and turned your ankle. That was it, wasn’t it?”

“I—I’m afraid it was. It was stupid of me not to look where I was going. I thought at the time that it was only a wrench, but it seems to be growing worse.”

“Box! Store-room! Climbing! What on earth are you talking about?” echoed Colonel Saville, looking in bewilderment from one speaker to another. “You two have been up to some mischief together since we arrived. What was it? I don’t understand.”

“Oh, nothing at all! Peggy wanted to get into the store-room without wasting time looking for a key that was mislaid, and I ran up a ladder and got in by the window. That was all; but unfortunately I put down my foot trusting to alight on the floor, leant all my weight on an empty box, and—this is the consequence!”

It was an extraordinary statement, despite the matter-of-course manner in which the words were uttered. It is not usual in well-conducted households for gentlemen visitors to scramble through windows on the second storey, or for the daughter of the house to utilise such services to remedy the effect of her own carelessness. The parents of ordinary children would have been breathless with horror at listening to such a recital, but it must be remembered that Arthur and Peggy Saville had never been ordinary in their habits. From earliest youth they had scorned the obvious ways of locomotion, had chosen to descend the staircase on a toboggan improvised out of a kitchen tea-tray rather than to walk from step to step like rational beings, and to ascend on the outside rather than the inside of the banisters, so that their belongings had grown to expect the unexpected, and Major Darcy’s explanation caused less consternation than might have been expected.

Mrs Saville sighed, and her husband uttered an exclamation of impatience, but both were much more concerned about the condition of the invalid than the cause of his accident, for it was evident that with every moment the pain in the foot grew more severe.

“A pretty bad consequence, it seems to me!” quoth the colonel grimly. “I’ll tell you what it is, my dear fellow; you had better come into the library with me at once, and let me take you in hand. The others can get on with their lunch while Mary brings me what I want. I’ll make you comfortable in ten minutes, and then we’ll send over a cart to The Larches and get a bag packed, and keep you here for a day or two until you can get about again. Least thing we can do to nurse you round, when you have hurt yourself in our service.”

Hector protested, but in no very vigorous fashion. Truth to tell, the prospect of being housed at Yew Hedge, with the colonel as companion and Peggy as nurse, was much more congenial than the thought of returning to the big, desolate house where Rob reigned in solitary state

and the sitting-rooms were shrouded in holland wrappings. He allowed himself to be persuaded, submitted to the sponging and binding which ensued with a docility which advanced him far in the host's good graces, and ate his luncheon on the sofa in approved invalid fashion.

It was not until late in the afternoon that Peggy had a chance of interviewing Hector alone, and of expressing her thanks for the double service which he had rendered, but when Mrs Saville retired for her usual rest, and the colonel accompanied the other guest down the drive, her opportunity came. She was sitting by the tea-table, which had been placed close to the sofa for the convenience of the invalid, and Hector was leaning against his cushions watching her little hands flying in and out of her work. Peggy always made a great affectation of being busy, and had at least half-a-dozen pieces of fancy work hidden away in as many drawers, waiting completion at that indefinite period when she should remember their existence. She glanced at him now, and tried to speak, threaded a new length of silk, and stitched more assiduously than ever, glanced again, began a sentence, broke off in confusion, and to her inward rage felt her cheeks flaming with colour.

Why did he stare so fixedly? Why did he look so queer? It was most embarrassing, most annoying. She would have liked to show her displeasure, but how could she, when he was suffering through her folly, and had been so chivalrous in shielding her from blame?

"I—I want to say all sorts of things," she stammered uncomfortably, "and I can't think of one! I'm sorry, I'm ashamed, I'm grateful, I feel a miserable culprit. I don't know what you must think of me and my miserable carelessness. I wish you would be cross, and say every horrid thing you could think of. It would help me more than anything else!"

But Hector only laughed, a cheerful, complacent laugh.

"I don't feel the least inclined to be cross. I have had no pain since your father doctored me, and I am remarkably comfortable sitting on this sofa. I look upon the little *contretemps* as a blessing in disguise, since it has gained me some days at Yew Hedge. Don't be sorry any more, Peggy, but be as grateful as you please, and show your gratitude by giving me as much of your society as you can spare from your many interests. My

time is growing short now, and I have seen so little of you lately."

"You have been so busy going about among your grand friends that you have had no time to spare for the country. Oh yes, indeed, I'll do all I can to cheer your solitude. You shall read aloud to me while I sew, and add up my accounts while I do my housekeeping, and—"

"Seems to me that is rather the wrong way about, isn't it? I thought you were to amuse me, whereas it seems—"

"Reciprocity! Reciprocity!" murmured Peggy, shaking her head at him solemnly, and cocking her little finger in the air, as she drew her thread to its full length. "Reciprocity is the basis of all true friendship! Mutual service, cheerfully rendered, cements and establishes amicable relationships. If I were to leave you idle, and pander to your fancies, it would have a most deleterious effect on your character. I must endeavour to show my gratitude by doing you good, not harm."

Hector laid back his head, and chuckled in delighted amusement.

"Bravo, Peggy! Most excellent sentiments! When all trades fail, you might turn your attention to composing copy-book headings! It's a field in which you would certainly make a reputation. You have the most remarkable flow of moral precepts."

"I have!" assented Peggy readily. "It's astonishing. I wish my behaviour bore more resemblance to my conversation, but indeed the two have never seemed to have any influence on each other. I've sometimes thought I should like to keep a girls' school, for I could lecture the pupils so beautifully against all the faults I myself have committed."

"You will have something better to do than keep a school, Peggy. We can't spare you for that!" said Hector tenderly. He thought he had never seen anything prettier than the sparkling, mischievous little face, or listened to conversation more charming than the quaint, sententious phrases. What a delight to be with Peggy Saville again after those weeks of fashionable visiting! What a contrast she was to the society belles, who made the same remarks, laughed the same laugh, smiled the same forced artificial smiles! They had bored him to distraction, but there was no feeling bored in Peggy's society; she was always interesting, always

bright, always charming. He felt no more doubts as to his own feeling, for absence had made him only the more appreciative of Peggy's charms. He loved her, he could not endure to part from her, she must be his wife! He looked at her with a kindling eye; but Peggy was folding up her work, and did not notice the danger signal.

"Ah, well," she said, laughing, "judging from recent experiences that's just as well, for if I forgot to provide food for the poor dears, and then set them on break-ankle expeditions to rescue my belongings, the school might not succeed so well as could be desired. I'm off now to write some letters which must go by the early post; but before I go I must just say again how grateful I am for your help to-day, and still more for the way in which you tried to shield me from blame. You were very, very good, and I'll not forget it!"

She held out her hand with a frank gesture of gratitude, and Hector took it and held it firmly in his own.

"I'd do more than that to please you, Peggy," he said once more. "A great deal more than that!" He looked her full in the face with his big grey eyes as he spoke, and brought his other hand down to press hers more closely, while Peggy sat with crimson cheeks and downcast eyes, conscious that she was behaving like any foolish school-girl, yet miserably incapable of doing otherwise. Then suddenly her hand was dropped, Hector sat upright with an elaborate affection of indifference, and a voice spoke from the further end of the room.

"I beg your pardon. I did not mean to interrupt. I came over with your bag. I heard you had had an accident."

"My dear fellow, come in, come in! It is nothing at all. I have merely given my ankle a turn. Come in, and we will tell you all about it."

Rob came forward slowly, and Peggy heard as in a dream the murmur of the two voices, questioning, replying, making arrangements for the future, but for her own part she could not stir nor lift her eyes from the floor. She sat in an agony, seeing as in a mirror the scene which had greeted Rob as he entered the room—Hector's eager glance, her own embarrassment, his hand and hers clasped tightly together.

What would Rob think? What *could* he think? If he judged by appearances, there could be but one solution, and that was that she was deliberately encouraging Hector's attentions!

Peggy felt sure that he would be furiously angry, but Rob's voice had no sound of anger in it as he talked to his brother. It was even quieter than usual, with only a slight tone of formality, to show that anything unusual had occurred. She summoned up courage to glance across the room, and met the dark eyes fixed full upon her. Rob had beautiful eyes, and they had never looked more beautiful than at this moment as he smiled back with tender, reassuring glance. But Peggy's heart died down within her, for, oh, if Rob were *not* angry, things were far, far worse than she had imagined!

Chapter Twenty Two.

Rob stayed behind after Peggy left the room, and had a long talk with his brother. He refused to stay to dinner, it is true, but showed no signs of ill-temper, and was more gentle than usual in his manner with Hector, towards whom he usually adopted an air of superiority. He came over the following day to inquire about the progress of the sprained ankle, and seemed so anxious to soothe Peggy's embarrassment, so laboriously pleasant and affectionate, that he succeeded in plunging her into confusion worse confounded. If only he would scold, storm, rage, express disgust, or demand apology, how easy it would be to wipe away the misunderstanding! but it was impossible to offer an explanation of what was never questioned. The very thought of referring to the subject of her own accord made Peggy's cheeks burn. The most she could do was to give Rob an opportunity of speaking, which she did without delay, walking with him to the gate, and keeping purposely silent the while; but it was of no use, for he seemed resolved to avoid personal subjects, would not mention Hector's name, and discoursed on vegetable life to an audience inclined to wish that such a thing as plant or flower had never existed!

Why was not he angry? Peggy asked herself drearily, as she returned to the house. Another girl might have realised that Rob had not the right to be angry, seeing that she was in no wise pledged to himself; but at heart Peggy considered herself pledged, and felt sore and wounded that Rob

did not realise her position.

Care for another man while Rob was near? Impossible! Share her life with another, and leave Rob lonely and uncared for? The very thought sent a pang to her heart. Rob and she had held together since they were children, they had always belonged to each other; he should have realised as much, and not have insulted her by believing for a moment that she could be false to her trust. Peggy's little head tilted back to a defiant angle, and her lips closed in determined line. Very well, then; if Rob were not angry, she was! If he chose to take things for granted, he could do as he pleased. Let him go on being magnanimous and complacent. Two could play at that game. Never should it be said that Peggy Saville ran after a man who seemed pleased at the prospect of getting rid of her. And then, as the drive took a turn which brought it in sight of the road, Miss Peggy waved her hand towards the library window, and quickened her pace into a run. There was nobody in the window, it is true, but then there might have been, and if people chose to build up theories of their own, it was really a kindness to provide them with materials!

So far as Hector himself was concerned, the episode of Rob's unexpected appearance put an effectual stop to those *tête-à-têtes* which he had anticipated. Peggy was as slippery as an eel, and as his ankle kept him confined to one room, he was obliged to put up with her caprices, and resign himself to solitude during those hours when host and hostess were engaged. She would talk to him, read to him, play games with him, amuse him by a dozen quaint representations and monologues, providing always that a third person was in the room, but directly they were left alone together, sudden business summoned her to another part of the house, and she whisked away before he had time to protest. He longed for his ankle to be well enough to allow pursuit; but when that time came Arthur and Eunice were due, and he must needs return to The Larches to make way for their arrival. It was disappointing, but he reminded himself that he had at least made one step in advance. Peggy knew what he wished; she would have time to get accustomed to the idea, and within the next month he would certainly find his opportunity.

To Peggy, jarred and wounded with the strain of acting a double part,

what a relief it was to see Arthur's beloved face again, and to discover at the first glimpse that Rosalind's engagement had had no power to shadow the radiance of his smile. Whatever he had suffered he had borne in secret, as his manner was, keeping a brave front to the world, and seeming to lift the burden of others by the very magnetism of his cheery presence. Peggy had driven to the station in the lowest possible stage of dejection, but she felt life worth living again, as Arthur pinched her arm in acknowledgment of a new coat, gave a dexterous little jerk to her elbow, which sent her parasol flying along the platform, and murmured plaintively:

"Still scattering possessions broadcast! How do you think I can afford to buy you fineries, if you throw them about in that slipshod fashion?"

"You may pick it up yourself—I won't!" cried Peggy haughtily; but before Arthur had a chance of disputing the point, Eunice had stepped into the breach, and was presenting at once the parasol and her own smiling face for Peggy's greeting. The shy glance of the grey eyes affected Peggy with all the old pleasure, for they were so eloquent of their owner's enjoyment, so charmingly diffident as to the feelings of others.

"You dear little Eunice, how are you again? Welcome to Yew Hedge. Such a pleasah to see you!" cried Peggy, falling into quite a society drawl in her amiable condescension, and smiling at her friend with a graciousness unaffected by the fact that her own head came barely up to Eunice's ear. It was delightful to have a girl visitor! The worst of Arthur's visits was that he was always running away on some unsociable masculine pursuit, fishing, shooting, and the like, instead of staying at home like a sensible fellow and amusing his sister. But Eunice would be different, for she was the most womanly of womanly women. No shooting-boots for her, no divided skirts, nor hard felt hats! She was a remnant of that good old type of which our mothers and grand mothers were made, timid and nervous in everyday affairs, yet with an unexpected store of courage which showed itself when danger menaced the welfare of those she loved. Peggy felt that she had much to learn from this sweet new friend, and fulfilled her intention of consulting her on household topics on the first possible occasion. She gave a dramatic recital of her misadventures, and once more Eunice proved herself a delightful hearer, for she sighed and groaned at exactly the right points,

kept her eyes fixed attentively on the speaker's face, and while confessing the utmost horror at the *contretemps* described, was convinced that she herself would have fared even worse.

"For by your own account, Peggy, you managed extremely well when you did remember. Even cook praised you! Now, I should not forget, because I happen to have a good memory, but I should provide hopelessly badly from first to last. I should have no idea what to order, or how to choose, or make a variety. I have never had anything of the sort to do, you see. We have a housekeeper who looks after all such things, and I am in utter ignorance about them!"

Here was a delightful confession! When you have abased yourself before a friend, have confessed your own shortcomings, and braced yourself to bear reproaches, what can be more delightful than to hear that her own ignorance is greater than yours? Peggy was overjoyed to find herself restored to a position of superiority, and as usual made the most of the opportunity.

"My love," she croaked, "my love!" and up went both hands in elderly gestures. "But what a lamentable confession! The sphere of a true woman is Home, and it should be her first duty to master those arts which are necessary for its comfort. What hired hands can ever minister to our dear ones so deftly, so efficiently, as those which love has trained and dutiful affection called to service?"

Eunice gasped and blinked her eyes, overwhelmed by the flood of Peggy's eloquence, but when she had abstracted the meaning from the high-flown phrase, her expression altered into one of dubious protest.

"I am not so sure! I am afraid a dinner cooked by my loving hands would not please father nearly so well as the ones he gets from his hired domestics. I don't think it can always follow—"

But Peggy was launched on the flood of eloquence, and could not be thus lightly checked.

"You must learn!" she cried. "You must educate yourself until you are so efficient that you could fill every domestic position. Even if you never do the work yourself, you cannot be a good mistress unless you understand

enough of each maid's work to give instructions, and point out the remedy for defects. A man, my dear, expects to come home to a comfortable meal, and it is right that he should get it! We women are above such considerations, but trifling discomforts are more trying to a man's temper than more serious offences, and they are apt to become impatient and irritable."

"They are! They are! You should just hear father when—" interrupted Eunice eagerly, but Peggy silenced her with a wave of the hand. When she herself had smarted beneath her mother's words of reproach, she had never imagined that she could have the satisfaction of hurling those same words at the head of another, and she was enjoying herself so intensely that she was anxious to prolong the experience.

"Exactly so; and it should be our mission in life to prevent such friction. There are girls in the present day who sneer at Home Life, and profess to consider domestic duties as a slavery demeaning to a woman's dignity, but for my own part I ask no higher sphere. To be Queen of a Home, Guardian of its happiness, its Architect, Ruler, and Controller, the Reins of Government grasped within my hands, what more could I desire?" She gave a toss to her sleek little head, then wheeled round at the sound of a stifled chuckle, met the grey eyes swimming in tears, and demanded sternly, "You seem amused! May I ask at what you are laughing?"

"He—he—he!" sniggered Eunice softly. "You—you looked so fierce, and you gave such a tug to the reins! I couldn't help thinking what a hard driver you would be! You say it is impossible to be a good mistress unless you are first a good servant, but you don't seem to be very expert yourself, and yet you can order people about better than any one I know. I noticed that from the first. People always seem to do what you want. How do you reconcile that with your argument?" She smiled as she spoke, not without a spice of triumph at having cornered the redoubtable Peggy; but she had yet to learn the extraordinary manner in which that young woman could twist and turn, arguing first in one direction and then in the other, as suited the convenience of the moment. On the present occasion she beamed acknowledgment of the compliment, and cried airily:

"Some are born to command, and some to serve! It would be idle to deny

that I belong to the former species. If I cannot do the work myself, I can at least help others to do it, and point out their faults in a convincing manner. I should like to have a large household of servants, and make them pass before me in turns, while I sat in an easy-chair and issued orders, and I should consider that my share of the labour exceeded theirs, for brain toil is more exhausting than manual. It takes a great deal of study to manage a household, and as a rule girls in our position give no thought to the matter. They are engrossed with the pleasures of society, but a butterfly life would never satisfy me. My leanings are Domestic. I have an ever-growing desire to become Domestic!"

"Oh, so have I!" cried Eunice eagerly. "So have I! Let us be domestic together, Peggy, do! Let us begin now, while I am here. It would be so much nicer than trying alone. Do—do let us begin at once!"

She was quite excited. The grey eyes were shining, and there was a pretty pink flush on the pale cheeks. Peggy smiled at her, and patted her knee, with the kindly amusement with which one receives the petitions of an eager child.

"Well," she said graciously, "suppose we do! It would be quite amusing. I am willing, dear, if you will suggest in what way you would like to begin."

"We might ask your cook to give us lessons in cooking!"

"No, my dear, we might not. I couldn't consent to it. Most injudicious to display your ignorance before a person whom you have to command. You must think of something else."

"We might go marketing, and learn what everything costs, and how much one ought to buy, and—"

"No use, my dear! We get nothing but meat and fish from the village. Fruit and vegetables come from the garden, and all the groceries from town."

"We might sew."

"Ha! I have it!" cried Peggy dramatically. "We'll dress-make! What a joke! We'll each make a blouse, and wear them at dinner one evening. It will be delightful. Every girl ought to be able to make her own clothes, and it's

so simple, so easy."

"Is it?" Eunice arched her brows in surprise. "Have you ever tried?"

"Not exactly, but they were always doing it at the vicarage, and I used to help. I always drew the designs, and criticised the things when they were done. It's quite easy. You get a pattern, pin it to the stuff, cut it out, run it up, and there you are."

"And you really think I could manage?"

"Of course you could. We will work together, and I'll help you. That's to say, if you would like to try."

"Oh, I should indeed. Fancy wearing something I had made myself! I'd be so proud. I'll have mine very, very simple, as plain as possible."

"I sha'n't! Mine shall be elaborate and fussy and mysterious—one of those things in which you cannot see any fastenings, or imagine how on earth the owner gets in or out. There's a model in this week's *Queen* which will be just the thing, and I have a piece of flowered pink silk upstairs which will do for you as well as for me. It is a remnant which I bought in Paris. I have a mania for remnants. I always think they will come in usefully, but somehow they don't. This will be the exception, however, and it will be nice to be alike!"

"Thank you so much; but you won't tell any one what we are going to do, will you? We had better not say anything yet, in case we don't succeed."

"Don't succeed, indeed! Don't let me hear such words, my dear, I beg! To imagine failure is to invite defeat!" Peggy shook her head with her most copy-book air. "We shall succeed, and therefore it would be selfish to keep our plans to ourselves. It will be quite an excitement in prospect. Let me see: to-day is Tuesday. How would it be if we said Saturday night?"

"Too soon! Too soon! I should say a week at the very soonest. We can't manage in less."

"Oh yes, we can if we try. We will give up our mornings to work, and the afternoons to pleasure. There is very little making in a blouse—three

seams, and the sleeves, that's all! Four days are quite enough; besides, it is really five, for we will begin this morning."

"Now? At once? But I haven't thought, I haven't planned, nothing is ready! Surely it would be wise to wait, and think it over first?"

But impetuous Peggy could not be brought to acknowledge that procrastination could ever be wise. If she had had her way, she would have been hard at work hacking out her blouse within ten minutes of its first suggestion; but fortunately for all concerned Arthur appeared upon the scene at this minute, and put down his foot at the mention of sewing.

"Not if I know it, on a beautiful summer afternoon! Leave that until it rains, or I don't need your society. Now I do. I want you to come over to the vicarage with me, while I pay my congratulations to the bride. I've got an offering for her too. Something I brought from town, and I want you to carry it for me."

"So likely, isn't it?" sniffed Peggy scornfully. "It shall never be said of me that I trained my brother so badly that I carried even an umbrella in his company! What is it, Arthur? Do tell us? What have you got?"

But Arthur refused to tell. He slung the box on the crook of his stick, and led the way across the fields, smiling enigmatically at the girls' inquiries, but vouchsafing no clue to satisfy their curiosity. There was evidently some mystery afoot, and the expectation of its unravelment gave a spice of excitement to the coming visit. The box contained something nice; Peggy felt sure of that, for when Arthur gave a present he gave something worth having. How pleased Esther would be, and how embarrassed! What fun it would be to witness the presentation, and help out her acknowledgments by appropriate cheers and interjections!

Chapter Twenty Three.

When the vicarage was reached a reconnoitre round the garden discovered the murmur of voices in the schoolroom, and marshalled by Arthur the three visitors crept silently forward until they were close upon the window, when Eunice hung modestly in the rear, while her companions flattened their faces against the panes. A shriek of dismay sounded from within, as Mellicent dropped a work-basket on the floor and buried her face in her hands, under the conviction that the house was besieged by wild Indians, and the advance party close upon her. A smaller shriek echoed from the further end of the room where Esther stood, being pinned up in a calico lining by the hands of the local dressmaker, and the smallest shriek of all came from the region of the sewing-machine, where Mrs Asplin let the treadle work up and down by itself, and clasped her heart instead of the seam. Esther fled precipitately behind a screen, Mellicent flopped on a chair, and Mrs Asplin cried loudly:

“Go away, go away. Come in, dear boy! Is it really you? What in the world do you mean by startling us like this?”

“I’ve told you before, Arthur Saville, that it drives me crazy when people come suddenly glaring in through the window! You’ll kill me some, day, or turn me into a jibbering idiot, and *then* you’ll be sorry! Front doors are made to come in by, ’specially—especially when visitors are with you!” cried Mellicent severely, and at this Mrs Asplin turned towards Eunice with her sunny, welcoming smile.

“You are Miss Rollo, aren’t you, dear? This bad boy had no business to bring you in here, but I’ve heard of you so often from Mellicent that you don’t seem like a stranger. We are hard at work preparing for the wedding, so you must excuse the muddle. We are delighted to see you!”

“Oh, Eunice won’t mind. She has heard so much about you too, mater, that she would have been quite disappointed to have found you sitting in the drawing-room like any ordinary, commonplace person. Sorry I startled you! I wouldn’t make you jibber for the world, Chubby, so I’ll knock next time, to let you know I’m coming. But where’s the bride? Where’s the

bride? Is she coming out from behind that screen, or have I to go and fetch her?”

At that Esther came forth quickly enough, a blue jacket fastened over the calico lining, and her cheeks aglow with blushes, for here was a double embarrassment—to face Arthur’s banter for the first time since her engagement, and to be introduced to the great Miss Rollo in a dressing-jacket! “The great Miss Rollo,” however, turned out to be a simple-looking girl, who looked much more afraid of her companions than her companions were of her, while when she came face to face with Arthur he seemed suddenly sobered, and uttered his congratulations in quite a quiet, earnest voice. Was this Esther? he was asking himself—this rosy, smiling girl the sober, long-visaged Esther who had seemed so far removed from youthful romance? Love was indeed a mighty force, if it could bring about such a change as this—the right sort of love—that is to say, unselfish, ennobling, a love which has no thought for itself, but lives in the happiness of another. As Arthur looked at his old friend, and noted the softening of eye and lip, the new sweetness of expression, there rose before his imagination another face, which for many years had seemed to him the most beautiful in the world, but which now appeared suddenly hard and loveless. He never realised the fact for himself, but it was really in this moment of meeting with Esther in the flush of her happiness that the last link was snapped in the chain which had bound him to Rosalind Darcy.

The dream seemed to him to have lasted quite a long time, but in reality the pause was but of a moment’s duration, and had been abundantly filled by Mellicent, who having spied Arthur’s parcel was consumed with curiosity to discover its contents.

“What’s in the box?” she cried with the directness for which she was celebrated, and Arthur picked up his parcel, and balanced it in his hands with a roguish glance in the bride’s direction.

“Something for Esther, for the bottom drawer.”

“The bottom drawer! What *are* you talking about?”

“Every engaged young woman has a bottom drawer! It’s part of the

performance, and you can't be properly engaged without it. It's the bottom drawer of the wardrobe generally, and all sorts of things live in it—everything and anything that she can lay hands on, to put aside for the new house. Fancy work, pictures, pottery, Christmas presents, and bazaar gleanings—in they go, and when she has friends to tea they sit in rows on the floor, and she undoes the wrapping, and they groan with envy, and cry, 'How sweet! How perfectly sweet! Won't it look sweet in the drawing-room!'"

"You seem to know a great deal about it!"

"I do! I've heard about it scores of times, and of course I knew that Esther would have a bottom drawer like the rest."

"You were mistaken then! Esther has nothing of the sort. I am to be engaged such a short time, Arthur, that I have had no leisure to think of such things. In any case, I don't think it is much in my line."

"Well, you needn't be so superior! If you haven't got a bottom drawer, you have the next thing to it. Who went over the house the very day she came home, grabbing all the things that belonged to her, and taking them up to her room?" cried Mellicent the irrepressible. "Who took the little blue jug off my mantelpiece? Who took the brass candlestick from the hall? Who took the pictures from the schoolroom? Who took the toilet-cover that she said I might have, and left me with nothing but two horrid mats? You *did*, you know you did, and it is not a bit of use giving yourself airs!"

Evidently not. Esther hung her head, and admitted the impeachment. Well, she *had* thought that it would be nice to have her own things—it *did* seem wise to collect them at once, before she grew too busy! It was very, very kind of Arthur, and she was truly grateful. Should she open the parcel now?

"Of course you must! Your first present! It is quite an event, and just what I should have expected, that it should come from Arthur. Dear lad, always so thoughtful!" murmured Mrs Asplin fondly. "Open it on the table, and we will sit round and watch. Come, Miss Rollo, sit by me. Perhaps you are in the secret already, and know what it is?"

"No, we don't know. We inquired, but he wouldn't tell us anything about

it.”

“But it’s probably salt-cellars! Men have so little imagination. They always take refuge in salt-cellars!”

This from Peggy, while Esther looked polite and murmured:

“Most useful, I’m sure. Nothing more so!” and Mellicent grimaced vigorously.

“Uninteresting, I call it! Now joolery is far nicer. I wish it were joolery, but I’m afraid it’s too big. Open it, do! Cut the string, and don’t fumble all day at one knot! The professor will buy you some more, if you ask him nicely.”

“Mellicent!” cried Esther deeply; but she cut the string as desired, laid back the wrappings, and took up a small tissue paper parcel.

“Just a small trifle. Something useful for the bottom drawer!” murmured Arthur modestly, and the next moment the parcel fell on the table with a crash, while every one shrieked in chorus. Something had gone off with a bang, something fell out of its wrappings and clattered wood against wood. A mouse-trap! A little, penny mouse-trap of plainest, commonest description! They could hardly believe their eyes—could do nothing but exclaim, gasp, and upbraid at one and the same moment.

“You *said* it was a wedding present!”

“I never did. It was you who said that. I said ‘something useful for the bottom drawer.’ I hope, dear Esther, that you may find it very, very useful.”

“You mean creature! I hope it may be nothing of the kind; I might have known it was a trick. Now, what is in the other parcels? because if there are any more Jack-in-the-box springs, I prefer not to open them. One shock of that kind is quite enough.”

But Arthur vowed that not another spring was to be found, and, thus reassured, Esther opened in turns a spice-box, a nutmeg-grater, a box of matches, a flour dredger, and a bundle of clothes-pegs.

Each object was greeted with a fresh peal of laughter from the onlookers, who, having recovered from the first disappointment, thoroughly enjoyed the joke played upon the sober Esther, while Esther herself tried hard to be superior and scathing, and Peggy's bright eyes roamed round in search of a final development.

It was not like Arthur, she told herself, to disappoint a friend even in fun, and she felt convinced that the joke would not end as it had begun. One by one she picked up the scattered articles and examined them gingerly. The mouse-trap was guiltless of bait, the spice-box empty as when it left the shop, but the matchbox felt strangely heavy. She shook it, and felt something tilt forward, peeped inside, and spied a small morocco box.

"Joolery! Joolery!" shrieked Mellicent loudly. "It is—I said it was! Oh, the darling—sweety—pet! I wish—I wish I were going to be married!"

It was the daintiest little diamond brooch that was ever seen. A gold bar with a cluster of stones in the centre; handsome, yet unobtrusive; brilliant, yet modest; the very thing to suit at once the bride's quiet taste, and the sphere into which she was going. She was unaffectedly charmed, holding it out to the light to admire the stones, her own eyes almost as bright as themselves.

"Oh, Arthur dear, and I called you mean! It was just like you to choose a ridiculous way of giving this lovely present. Fancy me with a diamond brooch—I shall feel so grand. How can I ever thank you enough?"

Mrs Asplin dropped a tear on the shabby table-cloth, for she never *could* resist a tear when she was very happy, and Mellicent wailed sadly:

"I wish I were married! I wish I were married! It would suit me far better than her. I wish I had been engaged first, after all, because now every one will give Esther a present as a compliment to the family, and when it comes to my turn they will think they have done their duty, and send nothing at all, or only some horrid, niggly little thing like a bread-fork or crumb-scoop! I just know how it will be—"

"But you won't need presents, dear. You are going to marry a millionaire, and live in the lap of luxury ever after. You settled that years ago," said Peggy slyly; but Arthur smiled reassuringly in the troubled face, and said:

“Never mind, Chubby, you shall have exactly the same present from me, at any rate! Diamond brooch, mouse-trap, clothes-pegs, all complete. I’ll stand by you. Just drop me a line when it’s settled, and I will look after them at once.”

“Oh, thank you, Arthur—I will!” agreed Mellicent with a fervour which evoked a peal of laughter from her companions. Esther gathered together her possessions and ran off to her own room to put on her dress, and Mrs Asplin escorted her visitors to the drawing-room, where tea was served for their refreshment. Another woman might have apologised for the shabby dress which she had donned for a hard day’s work, and felt uncomfortable at having been discovered in such guise by a young lady accustomed to move in the highest circle of London society, but that was not Mrs Asplin’s way. She seated herself in the sunniest seat that the room afforded, and picked off the odd ends of thread which were scattered over her skirt with smiling unconcern, too much engrossed in thinking of her guests to have any care for her own appearance. She made Eunice sit beside her, and seeing that the girl looked shy, chatted away to her in friendly Irish fashion, so as to put her at her ease. Her face lightened as she did so, for she was thinking to herself: “But she is charming! A dear, little tender face that might be quite beautiful some day. The child is half alive, but if some one woke her up—I wonder now if Arthur—” She turned suddenly, and met Arthur’s eyes fixed upon her, intent and questioning, as if for some reason he was keenly interested in her impressions of Eunice Rollo. Was it imagination, or did he flush beneath her questioning glance? For one moment she felt sure that he did, but the next it seemed as if she must have been mistaken, for he was addressing her with all his wonted self-possession.

“Mater, I’ve been telling these girls that I’m going to get up a picnic next week. I want to arrange some sort of a jollification before Esther goes, and a picnic seems the best thing to try for in this weather. Professor Reid will be here, so he will take care of Esther, and I’ll get the two Darcys to join, and hire a chaperon for the occasion. It would be too tiring for you or my mother, for I want to fly to pasture new and go some little distance; but if I speak nicely to little Mrs Bryce, she’ll come like a shot, and be an addition to the party, for she is a dear little soul, and younger than many people of half her age. You’ll trust the girls to me, won’t you, if I can fix it up?”

“Of course I will! It will be a pleasant break in the midst of our preparations. Where do you think of going? Have you made any plans, or is it still in the air?”

Arthur nodded his head in complacent fashion. “Now I’ll tell you all about it! I have been making inquiries for the last few days, and have pretty well made out my programme. This picnic is to be given in Esther’s honour, and for once I am going to be extravagant, and hire a saloon carriage to take us in state to the place where we would be. You live in the country, and woods and dales are no novelty to you, so we are going to be adventurous this time, and go to the sea!”

“The sea!” echoed Mrs Asplin in dismay; but her quiet voice was drowned by the chorus of exclamations in which the girls gave vent to their delight. To people who live in inland places the very idea of visiting the sea brings with it a sense of exhilaration, and the expectation of Arthur’s picnic was trebled at once by the sound of that magic name. They questioned eagerly, even Eunice putting in her query with the rest, and Arthur smilingly unfolded his scheme.

A two hours’ journey would take them within five miles of an East Coast village, where some years before he had discovered an ideal spot for a picnic. This was no less than a tiny island lying out some distance from the shore—a charming little islet, its shores washed by the waves, its crest covered with grass, and shadowed by a tuft of trees. There were a few good boats to be obtained, and the fishermen would help Rob and himself to row the party across, while, once arrived on the island, what could be more delightful than to sit on the sand with the waves splashing up to their very feet, to drink in the fresh sea breeze, and enjoy their luncheon under the shade of the trees? They would have to leave early, as it might grow chilly in such an exposed place, but as the last train left the station at seven o’clock, they would have no temptation to prolong their stay.

The chorus of delight grew louder than ever as he spoke, and Mrs Asplin’s feeble objections were scarcely allowed a hearing. The girls laughed her to scorn when she tried to prove the superiority of places in the neighbourhood, and even Arthur paid less than his usual deference to her opinion, though he did check himself in the midst of an explanation to

ask what objections she had to offer to his plan.

“I—I—Oh, none at all, only it is so far-off, and I’m nervous about you, dears! If you were late getting back—”

“But we can’t be late! The train settles that question. If that is the only fear you have, you may put your mind at rest at once, dear. The train settles that business for us.”

Arthur turned aside, as if the last word had been spoken on the subject; but Peggy suspected a deeper meaning to Mrs Asplin’s words, and hung back on her way to the gate, to link her arm in that of her kind friend, and beg for an explanation.

“Oh, Peg, it’s the sea, the cruel sea!” cried Mrs Asplin then. “I have such a terror of the water since my boy was drowned! It’s over ten years ago now, but it’s as fresh with me as if it had been just yesterday. My bonnie boy! You never saw him, Peg, but he was my first, and even Rex himself was never quite the same. It’s foolish of me, and sinful into the bargain, for you are in God’s keeping, wherever you may go, and it would be selfish to spoil your enjoyment. I will try to overcome my fear, but, Peggy dear, you know what good reason I have for dreading suspense just now —and as you love me, don’t let them miss that train! If you were late, if you didn’t appear at the right time, I should be terrified, and imagine all sorts of horrors. I—I don’t know what would happen to me! Let nothing, *nothing* make you late. Remember me, Peg, in the midst of your pleasuring!”

“Mater, I will!” cried Peggy solemnly. She looked in the sweet, worn face, and her heart beat quickly. A hundred resolutions had she made in her life, and alas! had also broken, but this time it would go hardly with her if she neglected her vow to her second mother.

Chapter Twenty Four.

The next morning Peggy and Eunice converted the library into a work-room, and cut out their blouses by the aid of paper patterns borrowed from Mrs Saville’s maid. This dignitary had made several offers of help,

which had been courteously but firmly refused, for the two new hands were determined to accomplish their task unaided, and thereby to secure the honour and glory to themselves.

“The first step is easy enough. Any baby could cut out by a pattern!” Peggy declared, but an hour’s work proved that it would have required a very intelligent baby indeed to have accomplished the feat. It was extraordinary how confusing a paper pattern could be! The only thing that seemed more confusing than the pattern itself was the explanation which accompanied it. Peggy tossed the separate pieces to and fro, the while she groaned over the mysterious phrases. “‘Place the perforated edge on the bias of the cloth!’ Which is the perforated edge? Which is the bias? ‘Be careful to see that the nicked holes come exactly in the middle of—’ I don’t know in the least which they call the ‘nicked holes!’ I can’t think what is the use of half these silly little pieces. If I couldn’t cut out a pattern better than that, I’d retire from the business. Why can’t they tell you plainly what you have to do?”

So on she stormed, prancing from one side of the table to the other, shaking the flimsy sheets in an angry hand, and scattering pins and needles broadcast on the carpet, while Eunice, like the tortoise, toiled slowly away, until bit by bit the puzzle became clear to her mind. She discovered that one piece of the pattern stood for half only of a particular seam, while others, such as collar and cuffs, represented a whole; mastered the mystery of holes and notches, and explained the same to Peggy, who was by no means too grateful for her assistance.

“Well, I’ll take your word for it,” she said. “I myself can make nothing out of an explanation so illogical and lacking in common-sense. I’ll cut the stupid thing out as you say, and see what comes of it. Here goes—”

Her scissors were in the silk before Eunice had time to protest, and away she hacked, with such speed and daring that she had finished the cutting out before the other had finished her careful preparation of the first seam.

“Now then for the tacking!” she cried, and for five minutes on end there was silence, until— “Dear me!” quoth Miss Peggy in a tone of dismay, and peaked solemn brows over her work.

“What is the matter? Has something gone wrong?”

“Um—yes! Seems to have done. The stupid old silk must have got twisted about somehow, when I was cutting out this back. The roses are all upside down!” She spoke in a studiedly careless manner, but Eunice’s face was a picture of woe. To her orderly mind the accident seemed irretrievable; and yet how was it to be remedied, when extravagant Peggy had used every fragment of her material? Her face fell, her voice thrilled with horror.

“Never! You don’t mean it! How dreadful! What will you do? Oh, Peggy, take mine, do, and let me buy something else for myself.”

“Not an inch! It’s no use, Eunice, I will not do it! We are going to have blouses alike, and that’s settled. That’s the worst of these flower patterns, they do cut out so badly: but it is no use grieving over what cannot be cured. Go on with your work, my dear, and don’t mind me.”

“But what will you—”

“Sew it up as it is! I’m not sure that it won’t look better, after all. More Frenchy!” and Peggy pinned the odd pieces together, and smiled at the effect with a complacency which left the other breathless with astonishment. She seemed oblivious of the fact that she had made a mistake, and utterly unconcerned at the prospect of wearing a garment in which the pattern reversed itself in back and front. Such a state of mind was inconceivable to the patient toiler, who rounded every corner with her scissors as carefully as if an untoward nick meant destruction, and pinned and repinned half-a-dozen times over before she could satisfy herself of the absence of crinkles. Peggy was ready to be “tried on” before Eunice had half finished the first process, and though she went obediently at the first call, the ordeal was a painful one to all concerned. Eunice was so nervous and ignorant that she dare hardly make an alteration, for fear of making bad worse, while Peggy wriggled like an eel, turning her head now over this shoulder, now over that, and issued half-a-dozen contradictory orders at the same moment.

“The shoulder creases—put the pins in tighter! The back is too wide—take a great handful out of the middle seam. Why does it stick out like

that at the waist, just where it ought to go in? Oh, the fulness, of course, I forgot that. Leave that alone then, and go on to the neck. Put pins in all round where the band ought to go."

"Tryings on" were numerous during the next few mornings; but, while Eunice's blouse gradually assumed a trig and reputable appearance, Peggy's developed each time a fresh set of creases and wrinkles. Neither girl was experienced enough to understand that carelessly cut and badly tacked material can never attain to a satisfactory result, nor in truth did they trouble very much over the deficiency, for Peggy no sooner descried a fault, than her inventive genius hit on a method of concealing it. Revers, niches, and bows were tacked on with a recklessness which made Eunice gasp with dismay, but she could not deny that the effect was "Frenchy" and even artistic, for, whatever might be Miss Peggy's shortcomings as a plain sew-er, she had a gift of graceful draping which amounted almost to genius. After the first day's experience Peggy had readily consented to her friend's plea for a week's preparation, and well it was that she had done so, for it was five good days before the bodices were sufficiently finished to allow the sleeves to be taken in hand. Oh, those sleeves! Who would ever have believed that it could be so difficult to fit such simple things, or to persuade them to adapt themselves to holes expressly provided for their accommodation? The girls spent weary hours turning, twisting, pleating in, letting out, tacking, and untacking, until at length Peggy's long-worn patience gave way altogether, and she vowed that not once again should the blouse go on her back until she donned it for the evening's exhibition.

"If they are not right this way, they will have to be wrong! I can't waste all my life fussing over a pair of sleeves. What can it matter whether they are put an inch one way or the other? They have just not to settle down and be happy where I put them, for I'm not going to move them any more!"

She frowned as she spoke and drew an impatient sigh, which did not altogether refer to the work on hand. There was a weight on her heart which refused to be conjured away even by the presence of Arthur and Eunice, and the interests and occupations which they brought with them. Rob was angry—no, what was even worse, he was not angry, but, with a stupid masculine blindness, had taken for granted that his company was no longer desired. Nearly a fortnight had passed since that miserable

afternoon, and not once had he been inside the gates of Yew Hedge. She had met him twice, and each time had come home from the interview feeling more miserable, as Rob elaborately sustained his old friendly manner. To cry, “Hallo, Peggy!” on meeting; to discuss the doings of the neighbourhood in an easy-going fashion, as if no cloud hovered between them, and then to march past the very gates without coming in, refuse invitations on trumpery excuses, and attend a church at the opposite end of the parish—such behaviour as this was worse than inconsistent in Peggy’s eyes, it approached perilously near hypocrisy!

“I don’t care!” she told herself recklessly; but she did care all the same, and her heart gave a throb of relief when on the morning of what had come to be known in the family as “Blouse day,” Arthur announced his intention of asking both the Darcy brothers to dinner.

“After your hard work you ought to have an audience to admire and applaud,” he said, “and I shall tell them we want them particularly. They were asking how your dressmaking was getting on the other day, so I am sure they will be glad to accept. You won’t want an answer, I suppose, Mistress Housekeeper? They can return with me or not, as the case may be?”

“Certainly! Certainly! It makes no difference,” said Peggy loftily; and thus it happened that the girls went upstairs to dress that evening without knowing who would be waiting to receive them when they made their entrance into the drawing-room. The blouses were laid out in the dressing-room which connected the two bedrooms, and to a casual glance there was no doubt which was the more successful. The one could boast no remove from the commonplace, the other was both artistic and uncommon, a garment which might have come direct from the hands of a French *modiste*. Eunice’s face fell as she looked, and she breathed a sigh of depression.

“Oh, Peggy, how horrid mine looks beside yours! What a mean, skimpy little rag! I am ashamed to appear in it. You will look beautiful, perfectly beautiful! You have done it splendidly.”

Peggy gave a murmur of polite disclaimer, and pursed in her lips to restrain a smile.

“Wait until they are on, dear. You can never tell how a thing looks until it is on,” she said reassuringly; but alas, for Peggy, little did she dream how painfully she would discover the truth of her own words.

A quarter of an hour later Eunice was hooking the front of her bodice, when the door burst open and in rushed Peggy, red in the face, gasping for breath, her neck craned forward, her arms sticking out stiffly on either side, for all the world like a waxen figure in a shop window.

“My neck!” she gasped. “My sleeves! They torture me! My arms are screwed up like sausages. The collar band cuts like a knife. I’m like a trussed fowl—I’ll burst! I know I shall! I’ll die of asphyxiation. What shall I do? What shall I do? What can have happened to make it like this?”

“Oh dear! oh dear! You do look uncomfortable. It was big enough when you tried it on last. You must have drawn in the arm-holes while you were sewing them. Yes, you have! I can see the puckers, and the sleeves are stretched so tight too. You didn’t take them in again, surely?”

“Just a tiny bit. They looked so baggy. But the collar, Eunice, the collar! For pity’s sake take it off! I shall be raw in a moment. Take the scissors, pull—tug! Get it off as quick as you can.”

“Take it off! But then what will you—” pleaded Eunice; but Peggy’s eyes flashed at her with so imperious a command that she began to snip without further protest. The band came off easily—astonishingly easily, and Peggy heaved a sigh of relief, and flapped her arms in the air.

“When! That’s better. I can breathe again. I could not have borne it another moment. Now I should be fairly comfortable, if only—only—the sleeves were a little bigger! It is too late to let them out, but just round the arm-holes, eh? A little tiny snip here and there to relieve the pressure?”

She put her head on one side in her most insinuating fashion, but Eunice was adamant. Never, she protested, would she consent to such a step. No seam could be expected to hold, if treated in such fashion. How would Peggy like it if her sleeve came off altogether in the course of the evening? There would be humiliation! Better a thousand times a trifling discomfort than such a downfall as that!

“Trifling!” echoed Peggy sadly. “Trifling indeed. Shows all you know. I am suffering tortures, my dear, and you stand there, cool and comfortable, preaching at me!” She paused for a moment, and for the first time stared scrutinously at her friend. Eunice looked charming, the simplicity of her dress giving a quaint, Quaker-like appearance to the sweet face. Plain as her blouse was, it was a remarkable success for a first effort, and though it had necessarily a dozen faults, the whole effect was neat and dainty.

“What did I tell you?” groaned Peggy dismally. “Who looks better now, you or I? I look ‘beautiful,’ don’t I, perfectly beautiful! It’s so becoming to have no collar band, and one’s arms sticking out like flails! I sha’n’t be able to eat a bite. It’s as much as I can do to sit still, much less move about. I’ll put on a fichu, and then I can leave some hooks unfastened, to give myself a little air.”

It seemed, indeed, the best solution, since somehow or other it was necessary to conceal the jagged silk round the neck. Peggy pinned on a square of chiffon; but the numerous trimmings over which it lay gave a clumsy appearance to her usually trim little figure, while discomfort and annoyance steadily raised the colour in her cheeks. She was conscious of appearing at her worst, and for one moment was tempted to throw aside her plan, and take to ordinary evening-dress. Only for one moment, however, for the next she decided roundly against so mean a course. What if she had failed? her guest had succeeded, and why rob her of praise well-earned? After all, would she not have been a hundred times more distressed if positions had been reversed, and Eunice was suffering her present discomfort? The cloud left her brow, and she led the way downstairs with a jaunty air.

“Come along, come along! I’ve always vowed that I enjoyed a good beating, and now I’ve got a chance of proving the truth of my words. You are a born dressmaker, my dear, and the sooner I retire from the business the better. You will be the hero of the occasion, and I shall be the butt; but don’t look so remorseful, I implore you. It has been a great joke, and some day—years hence!—I may even see some humour in the present condition of my arms. I’m accustomed to being teased, and don’t care one little bit how much they deride me!”

A moment later, as the drawing-room door opened, she realised indeed

how little she cared, for Rob was not there. His excuses had evidently already been made, for no allusion was made to his absence, while her own appearance with Eunice was the signal for a general rising, every one exclaiming and applauding, and walking round in admiring circles. Eunice was overwhelmed with congratulations, while Peggy had to run the gauntlet of remorseless family banter.

Only one voice was raised in her behalf, but Hector Darcy declared with unblushing effrontery that he voted in her favour, and held to his decision, in spite of all that the others could say. Peggy deplored his want of taste, yet felt a dreary sense of comfort in his fealty. It soothed the ache at her heart, and made her so unconsciously gentle in return that the major's hopes went up at a bound.

After dinner, chairs were carried into the verandah, and Peggy made no demur when Hector set her seat and his own at a little distance from the rest. Perhaps at heart she was even a little grateful to him for being so anxious to enjoy her society, for no one else seemed to desire it for that moment. Colonel and Mrs Saville were talking contentedly together, Arthur was engrossed with Eunice, Rob—ah, where was Rob? Had he made up his mind never to enter Yew Hedge again? Peggy turned her conversational gift to account, and led the subject so subtly in the way she would have it go, that presently Hector found himself explaining the cause of his brother's absence, believing that that explanation was entirely of his own offering.

"Rob is busy writing a paper for some magazine or review, and can think of nothing else. You know what he is when he once gets mounted on his hobby! He would have thought it a terrible waste of time to have left his papers to come out to dinner."

Well, well, the time had been when Rob would not have thought it waste of time to spend an evening with his friend; when not even an article for a review would have prevented him from witnessing the completion of an enterprise in which his partner was interested.

It was a very woe-begone Peggy who crept into bed that evening. Her arms were stiff and sore from their long pressure, there were the deep red marks on her shoulders where the seams had pressed into the flesh,

but the ache in her heart was worse to bear than either one or the other. She burrowed her little brown head into the pillow, and the salt tears trickled down her nose.

“Nobody loves me!” she sobbed. “Nobody loves me! Mellicent was right. He loves beetles better than me!”

Chapter Twenty Five.

A week later Arthur’s picnic came off under circumstances of unusual *éclat*. The extravagant fellow had arranged everything on so luxurious a scale that Mellicent sat in a dream of happiness, building castles in the air, in which she continually drove about in dog-carts, travelled in reserved carriages, and ate luncheons provided by Buzzard. Her plump face assumed quite a haughty aspect, as she mentally acknowledged the salutations of the crowd, and issued orders to flunkies, gorgeous in powder and knee-breeches. It was enough happiness just to sit and think of it, and munch the delicious chocolates which Arthur dispensed among his guests.

It was a pretty scene—that group of young people in the Pullman carriage, the girls in their white dresses, the tall, handsome men, the cheery little chaperon in the centre. The professor and Esther sat by a window whispering earnestly together, for having been separated for a weary length of ten whole days, they had naturally large arrears of talk to make up. Arthur pointed out the various objects of interest to Eunice, as the train whizzed past, and Peggy sat glued to the side of Mrs Bryce, determined not to be monopolised by Hector thus early in the day. Rob had come with his brother, but she felt little satisfaction in his presence, knowing that he had tried to refuse the invitation, and had only yielded on Arthur’s assertion that he was needed for help, not ornament, and must come whether he liked it or not, to lend a hand with the oars. He looked pre-occupied and solemn, but was absolutely friendly in his manner, rejoicing in the fineness of the weather, and congratulating Peggy on the success of her dressmaking experiment, of which he had heard from his brother. To explain that Hector’s report was entirely prejudiced, seemed but a tacit acknowledgment of his infatuation, and Peggy blushed in sheer anger at the perversity of Fate, the while she gave the true version

of the affair, and dilated on her own sufferings.

“It will be a lesson to me for life not to interfere with the business of others, and take the bread out of the mouths of professionals by amateur interference,” she concluded grandiloquently, and Rob smiled in his grave, kindly fashion. It seemed to Peggy that there was an added kindliness in his smile of late, and several times during the morning she looked up suddenly, to discover his eyes fixed upon her with a scrutiny at once so tender, so anxious, and so searching, that she was obliged to turn aside to conceal her tears.

When the train arrived at its destination, a couple of carriages conveyed the travellers on the next stage of their journey, and with their arrival at the little fishing village came the first hitch in the programme. Arthur had written in advance to ask that two of the best boats should be reserved for his party, and that a fisherman should be in readiness to go in each, so that his friends need not exert themselves more than they felt inclined. It is one thing, however, to despatch an order to the depths of the country, and quite another to find it fulfilled. As a matter of fact, the letter was even now lying unopened in the village post-office, and Arthur was confronted with the intelligence that men and boats had departed *en masse* to attend a regatta which was taking place some miles along the coast. Only a few of the oldest and most unwieldy boats had been left behind, and neither man nor boy could be found to row them. Here was a fine predicament! A snapshot taken of the party at this moment would have been an eloquent study in disappointment, and each one looked expectantly at Arthur, waiting for him to find a solution of the difficulty.

“Here is a fine pickle! I’m furious with myself, and yet I don’t see what more I could have done. There are two alternatives before us, so far as I can see—either we must get into one of these old tubs and row ourselves across, or give up the island altogether, and spend the day where we are.”

At this there was a groan of dismay, for, truth to tell, the village was of an uninteresting character, and the sands felt like an oven in the shadeless noon. To spend the day here would indeed be waste of time, while only a few miles off lay the island of their dreams—that wonderful island, with the blue waves splashing its shores, the kindly trees shading its crest.

“The island! the island!” cried the girls in chorus, while the men looked at each other, braced themselves up, and said:

“We can do it. Why not? It will be a stiff pull, but the day is our own. We can take our time, and rest when we are tired. Let us go at once and choose a boat.”

It was Dobson’s choice, however, or very nearly so, for the only boats left were tubs indeed, in which a score of passengers could have been accommodated as easily as eight. Large as they were, however, there was one member of the party who seemed diffident about their sea-going quality, and, wonderful to relate, that person was Peggy herself.

“Is it safe?” she kept asking. “Is it safe? Are you quite sure it is safe?”—and her companions stared in amazement at this sudden access of nervousness.

“Why, Peggy, you are surely not turning coward in your old age!” Arthur cried laughingly, as he dragged at the unwieldy bulk. “If you are afraid of this old bark, I don’t know when you would feel safe. It is like going to sea in a pantechnicon!”

“And after a voyage to India, too! How funny! I am not a bit afraid, and I have never been out of England in my life. Are you afraid of being drowned?” chimed in Mellicent, with an air of superiority which goaded Peggy past endurance.

“I was not thinking of myself. It is possible sometimes to be nervous for another,” she blurted out, and the next moment wished her tongue had been bitten off before she had uttered such a rash remark; for what could Rob think, or his companions either, but that the person for whom she was anxious was present among them? They had not heard Mrs Asplin’s words of entreaty, or seen the strained expression on her face as she murmured, “Remember, dear! Oh, be sure to remember!”

She turned and walked along the shore by herself, clasping her hands in a passion of longing and pity.

“I gave her my promise, and I’ll keep it, whatever they think. It will be my fault if anything goes wrong. I know, and they don’t!”

It was one o’clock before the island was reached, for the row out took a long time, despite the fact that the amateur oarsmen were all fairly proficient at their work. Even the professor pulled with a will, while to see haughty Hector in his shirt sleeves, with his hair matted on his forehead, was indeed a novel experience. Arthur was stroke, and Mellicent sat in front and coached him in his duty, to the amusement of the company and his own unspeakable delight, and Eunice dabbled her hand in the water, and sent little showers of spray tossing up into the air. Every now and then, when Arthur made a reply to Eunice more professedly deferential than usual, her eyes met his, and they smiled at each other—that smile of happy, mutual understanding which had grown common between them in the last few months. Peggy intercepted one of the glances, and felt at once rejoiced and sorrowful; rejoiced because it was good to see Arthur started on the way she would have him go, sorrowful because she realised, as many another had done before her, that his gain must also be her loss, and that just in proportion as Eunice became necessary to him her own importance must decrease.

When all was said and done, however, it was impossible to indulge in low spirits in the hours that followed. Oh, the delights of that island, the dear, shingly beach with its little pools full of a hundred briny treasures, the long trails of seaweeds, which were credited with the gift of foretelling weather as well as any barometer; the tiny crabs that burrowed among the stones; the sea anemones, the jelly-fish, so innocent to regard, so deadly to encounter. They were all there, with tiny little pink-lined shells, and pebbles of marvellous transparency which must surely, surely, be worth taking to a lapidary to examine! What cries of delight followed the landing, what hasty summoning of the whole party to witness some fresh discovery; what trippings on slippery stones, and splashing of fresh white dresses! Then, too, the long-checked pangs of hunger asserted themselves, and would no longer be restrained, and the men were hardly allowed time to fasten the boat, go imperiously were they hurried on shore with the precious freight of hampers.

Lunch was spread beneath the tree, and was no sooner finished than Mellicent inquired, “When’s tea?” a request which the hearers felt bound to deride, though in reality it found an echo in every heart. Astonishing as it may appear, a picnic lunch invariably seems to create a longing for the cup which cheers, and on this occasion the sea air had a sleepifying

influence which increased that desire.

“I re–ally think we had better have it soon. I can hardly keep from y–awning all the time!” cried Mrs Bryce, suiting the action to the word, and such was the result of infection that two pairs of hands went up to as many mouths even as she spoke.

“Very well, then, say four o’clock. Can’t possibly have it before then,” said Arthur, struggling vainly to keep his jaws together. “Oh, this will never do. Come down to the rocks, all of you, and get a good blow to freshen you up. I never saw such a company of sleepers!”

Eunice and Mellicent followed obediently enough, while the lovers seated themselves in a quiet corner, and Rob lay down on the sand beside one of the little pools, to watch the movements of the crawling insects. His trained glance was quick to understand the purport of what would have seemed aimless fittings to and fro to an ordinary observer, and soon out came notebook and pencil, and he was hard at work chronicling a dozen interesting discoveries. Peggy lingered behind to offer her help to Mrs Bryce, but that good lady, being secretly anxious to indulge in forty winks, seconded Hector Darcy’s protest in so emphatic a manner that she had no loophole for delay. She strolled with him down to the shore, following Arthur and his companions, but not so closely that there was not a distance of several yards between the two big stones which had been selected as resting-places. So far as privacy of conversation was concerned, the yards might have been miles, for the waves dashed up with a continual murmur, and the breeze seemed to carry the sound of the voices far out to sea. Peggy clasped her hands on her knee, and gazed before her with dreamy eyes. Her little face looked very sweet and thoughtful, and Hector Darcy watched her beneath the brim of his hat, and built his own castle in the air, a castle which had grown dearer and more desirable ever since his return to England. The opportunity for which he had been waiting had come at last, and surely it was an omen for good that it had come by the side of that sea which had witnessed their meeting; which, if all went well, would witness their start together on the new life!

“I shall be going back to India soon, Peggy,” he said softly. “The time is drawing near;” and Peggy looked in his face, and realised that what she

had dreaded was at hand, and could not be avoided. She heard her own voice murmur words of conventional regret, but Hector took no notice except to look still deeper into her eyes.

“Am I to go alone, Peggy?” he asked gently. “I have been an independent fellow all my life, and thought I needed no one but myself, but that is all altered since I met you! I should get along badly now without you to help me, and share my lot!”

“Oh, Hector, no! Don’t say so. It’s all a mistake. How could I help you? I have been a hindrance, not a help. It was owing to my carelessness that you hurt yourself, and it was only your generosity which made light of it. Father says it is a serious thing for a soldier to sprain his ankle, for it is never so strong again, and may fail him at a critical moment. I know quite well how much harm I have done you.”

“Do you, Peggy? I don’t agree with you there; but if it is so, is not that all the more reason why you should do me a good turn now? I don’t mind your blaming yourself, dear, if it makes you the more inclined to be generous. I have loved you ever since we met, and it would be impossible to part from you now. I need you, Peggy; come to me! Be my wife, and give me the happiness of having you always beside me.”

He spoke with a whole-hearted earnestness which brought the tears into Peggy’s eyes, but she shook her head none the less firmly.

“I can’t! I can’t! It would be doing you a worse injury than the first. I should be no help to you, Hector, for I don’t care for you in the way you mean, and I could never marry a man unless I loved him with all my heart. It is all a mistake—indeed it is. You only imagine that you care for me because you have seen a great deal of me lately, and I seem part of home and the old life. When you have gone back to India, you will forget all about me, or be glad that I did not take you at your word.”

Hector pressed his lips together and gave a strained attempt at a smile.

“I am not a boy, Peggy. I know what I want, but you—you are so young, how can you be sure of yourself yet? I am not going to take ‘No’ for an answer. I will wait—ask for an extension of leave—come home for you later on. You shall have time, plenty of time, but I will not let you decide at

once. You don’t know your own mind!”

“Oh, Hector!” Even at that critical moment a gleam of fun twinkled in Peggy’s eyes. “Oh, Hector, how can you? No one has ever accused me before of not knowing my own mind. I know it only too well, and I will not let you wait on, to gain nothing but a second disappointment. I should not change, and listen, Hector—it would be a bad thing if I did! I like you very much—far, far better than I ever believed I could do when we first met, for you seemed so different then, so haughty and self-satisfied, that if you had not been Rob’s brother I should have disliked you outright. I see now that I judged you too quickly, but there is still so much difference between us that we should never be happy together. You are a man of the world, and like to live in the world, and conform to its ways, and at heart I am nothing but a Bohemian. I have no respect for the rules and regulations of Society, and the only feeling they arouse in me is a desperate desire to break through them and shock Mrs Grundy. I am erratic, and careless, and forgetful. I am ashamed of it, and honestly mean to improve, but, oh, poor Hector, how you would suffer if you had to put up with me during the process! You ought to marry a clever woman who would keep your house as you would like it kept, and help you on by her gracious ways, not a madcap girl who has not learned to manage herself, much less other people. Dear Hector, I thank you with all my heart for thinking so kindly of me and paying me such an honour, but, indeed, indeed, it cannot be.”

She laid her hand on his as she spoke with a pretty, winsome gesture, and Hector just touched it with his own, and then let it drop. His expression had altered completely while she was speaking, and he had lost his air of assurance. Those few words which had dropped out so unconsciously had convinced him of the hopelessness of his cause more entirely than any argument. “If you had not been Rob’s brother.” She would have disliked him if he had not been Rob’s brother. She could not dislike one who was Rob’s brother! Innocent Peggy little suspected the eloquence of that confession, but Hector understood, and read in it the downfall of his hopes. He sat gazing out to sea, while she looked at him with anxious eyes, and for a long time neither spoke a word. Then—“I could have loved you very dearly, Peggy,” he said softly, “very dearly!” The strong chin trembled, and Peggy’s heart yearned pitifully over him, but she noticed with relief that he spoke in problematical fashion, as if the love were more a possibility of the future than a present fact. Men of

Hector Darcy's type set an exaggerated value on anything which belongs to themselves, the while they unconsciously depreciate what is denied them. Peggy understood that the very fact of her refusal of himself had lessened her attractions in his sight, and the knowledge brought with it nothing but purest satisfaction.

It was a relief to both when the summons to tea relieved them from their painful *tête-à-tête*, but if they flattered themselves that their disturbed looks escaped the notice of their friends, they were quite mistaken. Each member of the party, even to Mellicent herself, was aware that some development of the situation had taken place since lunch, and pondered anxiously as to what it could be. At the one moment it seemed that they must surely be engaged; at the next it was as evident that they were not; and Mellicent composed imaginary interviews the while she demolished cakes and biscuits, in which she heard Peggy's voice murmuring alternate vows of love and friendship.

"He has proposed to her, I'm certain of it!" she told herself, "and oh, how I wish I had been there! I'd simply love to have heard him do it. I'm glad women don't have to ask men to marry them, it must be so embarrassing to be refused! Now, if Hector Darcy had proposed to me, I should have said 'Yes' out of sheer fright, but Peggy would refuse a prince to-morrow, if she got the chance. I wonder what she said to him! In books the girl always says, 'I cannot give you my love, but I will always be your friend.' I should be so cross, if she said that to me, that I should want to shake her. How could you be friends with a person who had made you so miserable? ... Now she is smiling at him as pleasantly as ever ... They *must* be engaged! I'll be bridesmaid again, and get a nice present! I wonder what Rob—"

But at this interesting moment Arthur broke in upon her surmises by calling attention to the current which was sweeping round the island.

"Just look at that water rushing past!" he cried. "We didn't notice anything like that when we rowed across. It was slack tide then, I suppose, and now it is rising. It is running strong! I say, what about that boat? We had better look after her at once."

Rob leapt to his feet before the words were well spoken, and ran

hurriedly forward. His companions watched him go, saw him cross the plot of grass, come out from beneath the shadow of the trees, and stand for a moment silhouetted against the sky; then he stopped short, and threw up his hands with a gesture of dismay. It was indeed a sight to fill the onlooker with dismay, for the tide had reached the spot where the boat was moored, and was drifting her rapidly towards the shore!

Chapter Twenty Six.

In another moment all the members of the party had left their seats, and were standing by Rob's side, gazing disconsolately at the lost boat. Already it had been carried to a considerable distance, and the four men stared into each other's faces in horrified bewilderment.

"This is a nice state of things!"

"What *is* to be done? How on earth are we to get her back?"

"She has floated so far—too far, I am afraid, for anyone to swim after her."

"I could not last out such a distance. It seems a risky thing to attempt, much too risky. It would not improve matters to have a drowning case into the bargain. I am afraid none of us dare attempt it."

Then there was a pause, while the girls huddled together in a group, watching the men's faces with anxious glances. Arthur stood frowning and biting his moustache, his eyes bright with anger.

"I should like to shoot myself for my stupidity! Why could I not have thought of the tide when we were beaching the boat? It would have been just as easy to drag her up a few yards higher, and then we should have been safe. We should not have been in such a stupid hurry to be finished, but I heard Peggy's voice calling to me and—"

"Oh no, no! Don't say it—don't say it! Arthur, Arthur, don't say it was my fault!" cried Peggy in a voice of such agonised distress as startled the ears of her companions. Arthur's eyes turned from the boat for the first time, and he hastened to her side.

"Why, Peg," he cried, "what's the matter, dear? Nobody was blaming you; there is not a shadow of blame to be laid on you. The fault is ours for not giving more thought to what we were about. Rob and I ought to know how to beach a boat by this time, seeing the amount of yachting we have done in our day, but, indeed, I don't need to blame any one but myself; I was in charge, and should have taken proper care."

“Well, it is not much use discussing who is to blame; the mischief is done, and we had better set our wits to work to remedy it,” cried the little chaperon briskly. “If the boat cannot be brought back, I suppose it means that we must stay here until—”

“Oh, how exciting! It’s just like the *Swiss Family Robinson*, and *Leila on the Desert Island*. It’s as good as being shipwrecked, without any of the bother,” interrupted Mellicent gushingly. “Now, then, we must make a tent, and examine the trees to see which are good to eat, and catch crabs and lobsters, and shoot the birds as they fly past, and Professor Reid shall be the father—the wise, well-informed man who knows what everything is, and how everything should be done—and Esther shall be his wife, and—”

“Mellicent, don’t! Don’t be silly, dear!” pleaded Esther gently. “It is not a subject for jokes. Seriously, Arthur, how long may we have to stay? Is there any chance of being left here for the night?”

“Not the slightest, I should say. If we don’t get back in time for our drive to the station, the flymen will give the alarm, and some one will come over to see what has gone wrong. The worst that may happen is that we shall have to wait until the men get back from their regatta, but you need have no fear of remaining for the night.”

“But in any case it will be impossible to catch our train.”

“I fear it will. We shall have to make the best of it, and camp at the inn until morning. It’s unfortunate, but there are worse troubles at sea. Don’t look so miserable, Peggy; I promise you, you shall come to no harm.”

“But, mother—Mrs Asplin—what will they think? If we don’t get back until late, can we send a telegram to them? It is such a tiny place that the office might be closed.”

Arthur’s face clouded over, for this was a view of the case which had not occurred to him, and former experiences of country villages did not tend to reassure him.

“I can’t tell you. I will drive to the station and do my best to send a wire from there, but that’s all I can say. There is one comfort: they know at home that if we miss the seven o’clock train, we are fixed for the night, so

they won’t be as anxious as they might otherwise have been. They will probably guess pretty well what has happened.”

He spoke with an assumption of confidence, but Peggy was not to be deceived, and she turned on her heel and walked along the shore, wringing her hands together, and catching her breath in short, gasping sobs.

“Help me! Oh, help me!” she repeated over and over again in a quivering voice, and the cry was addressed to no human ear. She was speaking direct to One who understood her trouble, who knew without being told the reason of her anxiety. Not in vain had Mrs Asplin set an example of a Christian’s faith and trust before the girl’s quick-seeing eyes. Peggy had never forgotten her sweet calm on hearing the doctor’s verdict, or that other interview in the vicarage garden when she herself had first resolved to join the great army of Christ, and the habit was growing daily stronger to turn to Him for help in all the difficult paths of life. Now in “this moment of intensest anxiety her first impulse was to leave her companions,” and go away by herself where she could pour out her heart in a deep, voiceless prayer. She walked round to the further side of the little islet, and seating herself on the same stone which an hour earlier had been the scene of her *tête-à-tête* with Hector, covered her face with her hands and rocked to and fro in an abandonment of grief. They could not catch the train ... They could send no telegram of reassurement; the night would pass—the long, long night, and no word would be received of their safety ... For her own father and mother she was not seriously concerned, for they were too old travellers not to allow for unexpected delays, and had moreover prophesied more than once that such a scatter-brained party would be certain to miss their train; but Mrs Asplin with her exaggerated ideas of distance, her terror of the sea, her nervous forebodings of evil—how would she endure those long waiting hours? With her imaginative eye, Peggy saw before her the scene in the drawing-room at the vicarage, as the hour of arrival passed by without bringing the return of the travellers; saw the sweet, worn face grow even paler and more strained, the thin hands pressed against the heart. She recalled the pathetic plea which had been made to her, and her own vow of remembrance, and once more the responsibility of the position seemed heavier than she could bear. “Oh, help me!” she murmured once more. “Help me *now*!” and then a voice spoke to her by name, and she

looked up, to see Rob's anxious face looking into hers.

"What is it, Peggy? Something troubles you—something more than you will tell the others. Can you tell me? Can I help you, dear?"

It was the old Rob back again at the first hint of trouble, the old Rob, with no trace of the laboured pleasantness of the past weeks, but with eyes full of faithful friendship. Peggy gave a gasp of relief, and clutched his arm with an eager hand.

"Oh, Rob, yes! I'll tell you! It was a secret, but I must tell some one, I must have some one to consult." And then in hurried accents she confided to him her promise to Mrs Asplin, and the sad reason which made it so necessary to preserve her from alarm. "You see, Rob, it is very serious," she said in conclusion. "It may be a case of life and death, for the doctor said she couldn't bear any strain, and when I promised, knowing so well all that it meant, she will feel she has good reason for fear, if we do not return. All the night long, and both her girls here! Oh, Rob, think what it will be! I feel as if I could not bear it; is if I could run all the way home to comfort her. You always helped me, Rob; you used to find a way for me out of my old childish troubles—do help me now! Think of *some* way by which we can get back."

Rob looked at her fixedly, and his lips smiled, but his eyes were grave and steady.

"I'll try, Peggy," he said, "I'll do my best. There is nothing I would not do for Mrs Asplin and—*you*! Remember always, whatever happens, that nothing you could have done for me to-day would have made me so happy as asking my help in your trouble." He turned away as he spoke the last word, for the rest of the party were now approaching along the sands, bearing with them a branch of a tree, and the table-cloth which had been used for lunch. It had occurred to Arthur that if a flag could be erected at this particular spot, it might possibly catch the eyes of the fishermen, and attract them to call at the island on their way to the shore, and the idea had been enthusiastically welcomed by his friends. It is astonishing how speedily the charms of a situation are minimised when that situation becomes a necessity instead of a choice. Before the discovery of the missing boat, the island had seemed all that was

charming and romantic; now it seemed suddenly to have become chilly and forsaken, a bank of sand in a waste of water; a prison-house rather than a pleasure-ground. Eunice began to shiver, Mrs Bryce felt certain that the grass was damp, and the professor was full of anxiety about his *fiancée*. One and all they were thankful for the occupation of erecting the flagstaff, and Arthur had no lack of assistants in his task. The hole was dug out to the proper depth with the assistance of such motley tools as the ferrules of sticks and parasols, and the stones which were scattered along the beach, while the cloth was sewed to the stick by the careful Esther, who never by any chance travelled about without a needle full of cotton in her pocket, in company with such other usefuls as sticking-plaster, hair-pins, and camphor pills. The camphor pills were brought forth now, and received a very different welcome from that which would have been afforded them an hour before. Even Peggy took her turn with the rest, and though the men drew the line at such an exhibition of weakness, they hinted that an additional cup of tea would be acceptable in its stead.

“We have done all we can, so now let us go back to our meal, and be as jolly as we can,” said Arthur.

“We will brew a fresh lot of tea and drown our sorrows in the bowl; and if the viands give out, Mellicent can get us bread from the bread-trees and milk from the cocoanuts. Rob can climb up and bring one down, as he is accustomed to savage regions. Where *is* Rob, by the bye? He was here ten minutes ago.”

“He walked over to the other end of the island. I’ll go round and give him a call,” Hector said; and in default of anything better to do his companions followed in a long, straggling line, but no sign of Rob did they find, only a little heap of clothing on the shore—a pair of boots, a coat, and waistcoat, and a sailor hat, which told their own tale plainly enough, even without the sight of the dark head which could presently be observed bobbing up and down between the waves. Rob had swum off to try to recover the boat, and was risking his life in the effort!—For a moment horror held his friends dumb, then the men broke into a chorus of denunciations.

“He’ll never do it! He had no right to go off like that without consulting us

—without saying a word to a soul! A foolhardy trick!”

“He knew we would not let him try it. He is a capital swimmer, but it’s a stiff pull, and he can’t catch her up, for she will drift with the tide further and further away.”

“*Will* she? Are you sure? Does she seem to you any further off now than she was a quarter of an hour ago? I don’t think she is. I can see her just as distinctly. Ah! I believe I understand it now. She has drifted on to a sandbank, and is not moving at all. Good old Rob! He knows what he is about. If he can only hold out, he’ll get her sure enough.”

“If—yes, but if he does not? If he gets cramped or exhausted, there is no one to help him. We should have to stand here helpless, and see him sink. It was mad—mad—he should not have risked it! I’ll give him a piece of my mind when he gets back!” cried Arthur hotly, and then, “Good old Rob!” he added in another voice. “Good old Rob! Just like him to steal away without saying a word to a soul. Just like him to think of every one else before himself. Give him a cheer, boys! Give him a cheer to help him along.”

And what a cheer that was that burst forth in response to his words! It rang over the sea, eloquent with all the hope, and fear, and longing that were beating in eight anxious hearts; once and yet again it sounded, with Peggy’s high treble ringing out over all the rest. “Bravo, Rob! Bravo! Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!”

The dark head turned, a white arm waved in the air, and then Rob settled himself once more to his task, while his friends watched in tense anxiety. The professor drew Esther’s hand through his arm and clasped it unashamed, and Arthur turned abruptly aside, putting his hands to his face.

“I can’t watch him;” he cried brokenly. “I must go away. Come and talk to me till it is over—help me to bear it!” His eyes met Peggy’s as he finished speaking, passed on with an unsatisfied expression, and fastened upon Eunice. “You!” his expression said as plainly as words could say it, “I mean *you*!” and Eunice followed without a word.

At another time the episode would have attracted universal attention, but

the four remaining members of the party were so much engrossed with their own thoughts that hardly a glance was cast after the retreating couple. Mrs Bryce was eager to take Major Darcy aside, and ask his advice as a soldier and campaigner as to what steps could be taken to prepare for a possible night's vigil. "Hope for the best and prepare for the worst," was her motto; and she had already hit on a spot where, by pegging down the branches of trees, and fastening cloaks over the gaps, a very fair tent could be manufactured. She bore Hector away to survey it, and Peggy and Mellicent were left alone together, the latter staring with curious eyes in her companion's face. An hour ago Peggy had been the most agitated of the party, and had showed a terror inconsistent with her character, yet now, when there seemed an even greater need for anxiety, she was calm and quiet, a little white image of composure.

"Peggy," she whispered softly, "aren't you frightened? Do you think he will —get there, Peggy? Do you think he will be—safe?"

"I know he will be safe, Mellicent."

"But they say it is so dangerous! They say it is a risk. He *might* be drowned!"

"He will be safe, Mellicent. I am quite sure of it."

"But, oh, Peggy, how can you tell? How can you be sure?"

Peggy's eyes came round with a flash, and stared full in Mellicent's face.

"Because I love him, Mellicent! Because we belong to one another, Rob and I, and I cannot live without him. Because I have asked God to take care of him for me, and I know He will do it!"

Mellicent shrank back aghast. What a confession to have heard from Peggy's own lips! Peggy, the reserved and dignified; Peggy, who was so scrupulously reticent about her own feelings! She could hardly believe her ears. It seemed unnatural, alarming, almost shocking. Her eyes dropped to the ground, she shuffled uneasily to and fro, and crept quietly away.

Chapter Twenty Seven.

Peggy's faith was justified, for though the way was long, and the current often swept him aside, Rob struggled on gallantly until, after what seemed an interminable period of suspense, his friends saw him clamber into the boat as she lay on the sandbank. Then for some minutes there was no movement, and though it was to be expected that he would need a rest after his exertions, the faces on shore began to lengthen as time passed by, and brought no sign of an advance.

"I don't know how he is going to move her now that he *is* there! Rob is strong enough, but one man is little use in a boat of that size. How can he expect to row her back alone?"

"Against the tide, too! He would wear himself out, and make no progress. I expect he recognises that by this time, and will not attempt it. It would not help us much to see him carried away."

"He cannot be in a condition to do much pulling, poor fellow! He must be pretty well played out. I'm afraid after all it has been a waste of energy."

"Rob would not have gone if he had not had some plan in his head. He always thinks before he acts. He would never have risked his life to get to the boat if he had no means of moving her," said Peggy proudly; and even as she spoke a simultaneous exclamation of delight went up from the watchers, as the end of a sail flapped in the breeze. They were at too great a distance to distinguish the mast, but all had noticed its presence in the bottom of the boat as they rowed out to the island, and now realised in a flash its value under the circumstances. Rob would have no struggling with the oars, he would trust to the sail to carry him back, and so experienced a yachtsman might be trusted to make the most of the opportunity. Arthur tossed his cap into the air, and shouted aloud in pure gladness of heart. Though he had tried to make the best of the situation, he had been oppressed by dread, and each moment, as it passed, had seemed to bring with it some fresh possibility of disaster. The fishermen might not return from their regatta until the following day; the flymen might not be able to organise a search; the weather might change, and turn to rain or wind. The very thought of the consequences of a night spent on the island made him grind his teeth in despair, while Rob's

hazardous expedition had appeared a veritable last straw. But now, in a moment, everything was changed; what before had seemed a hopeless, almost criminal attempt, had become practical certainty, as, borne by the friendly sail, the boat drew nearer and nearer to her goal. Rob's figure could now be plainly discerned, and presently even his face was distinguishable as he waved back acknowledgments of the cheers sent to him across the water. Half-a-dozen eager hands were waiting to help with the boat as she ran ashore, and there he stood, the water dripping from his clothes, his hair ruffled into a veritable mop of dark brown curls, his face beaming with pleasure and triumph.

"Got her at last!" he gasped. "Got her at last! Bundle in! Bundle in! We'll catch our train yet. I'll give you a hand with the hampers." He had no thought for his own drenched condition, but Arthur shook him affectionately by the shoulders and cried:

"You'll do nothing of the kind! We have still ten minutes to spare before we need start, and you'll just come apart with me and have a good rub down! You have done your share of the work. Let the others look after the hampers."

"And you shall have a cup of tea—a good hot cup the moment you are ready for it!" cried Mrs Bryce, nodding her cheery head in his direction. "You are a hero, Mr Darcy, and you shall write your name in my autograph volume as a reward for valour. This is the first adventure I've ever had, and I shall brag about it all the rest of my life."

"And so shall I!" affirmed Mellicent truthfully. "Only I wish I had swum out myself. It's stupid having an adventure when you are not the hero." But Peggy said only three short words: "Thank you, Rob!" and pressed his fingers in an eager grip.

Ten minutes later they had left the island, and Rob was pulling at the oars as vigorously as if he felt no fatigue from his previous exertions. Truth to tell, he did not, for the mind has a more powerful influence over the body than many of us suspect, and the last hour had revealed a secret which made it seem impossible ever again to feel tired or discouraged. Peggy loved him! The doubts of the past weeks had been but ugly dreams, and he was awake once more, and in the sunshine. Throughout the drive to

the station and the railway journey home, he kept intentionally apart, not trusting himself to speak to her in the presence of strangers; but if he seemed neglectful, Arthur abundantly made up for his absence by hanging lovingly round his little sister, and waiting upon her with a persistency which seemed to betray some inner remorse. At last, as they were left together for a few minutes at the end of the corridor carriage, his discomfort forced itself into words, and he said uneasily:

“I feel as if I had neglected you, Peg, and thought too little of you in the midst of my excitement. If any one had told me that we should be in danger, and that my first thought would not be of you, I should have knocked him down for his pains, but—but you saw how it was, and you can’t be more astonished than I am myself! I never thought I was that kind of fellow. Can you understand how a man could be so weak and fickle as to believe himself in love with one woman, and then suddenly discover—”

“I can understand that a man might believe that he had found his ideal in one place, and discover that he had made a mistake, and that in reality it was waiting for him somewhere else; and I call that open-minded and enlightened—not in the least weak or fickle!” cried Peggy in reply; whereat Arthur smiled at her with kindly eyes.

“You nice little dear!” he said. “How refreshing it is to hear one’s conduct described in the right terms! You are a prejudiced judge, I fear, Peg, but I like your verdict. Don’t leap to conclusions now in your usual impetuous fashion, and believe that everything is settled, because it isn’t, and won’t be for a long time to come. I will not pay *her* the poor compliment of seeming to regard her as a solace for the old disappointment. I will wait and work, and try to make myself more worthy of her, and then if she will allow me, I’ll try to pay her back a little for all she has done for me. There’s a good time coming, Peg! Yes, yes, I feel it! Some day I shall look back, and see that all the disappointments I have had to bear have worked together to bring you to the place where I should meet the greatest blessing of my life. So now, Peggikins, I have made my confession, and I don’t know that I should have done it even to you, but that my conscience upbraided me for having treated you shabbily to-day.”

“But bless your innocent heart, I knew it long ago. So did Mrs Asplin, so

did mother. So did every one with a head on his shoulders. You can't go about *staring* at a person, and keeping your eyes *glued* on a person, and looking as if you could never take your eyes *off* a person without attracting *some* attention among intelligent onlookers, my love! Now, now at this very moment while you are talking to me you are twisting your head over your shoulder and trying to see what—"

But at this Arthur fled precipitately to the other end of the carriage, and Peggy laughed softly to herself, not without a sigh of relief at having escaped any reproaches on her own account. Her eye followed the dear, handsome fellow, and her heart swelled with thankfulness at the thought that his troubles seemed indeed to be drawing to an end and a brighter day dawning before him. There was little doubt what Eunice's answer would be when the right time came, while Mr Rollo's enthusiastic appreciation of Arthur seemed to promise that he also would be pleased to welcome him into his family.

"And he will help Arthur on, as he can do so well, and he will become famous and celebrated, as we always knew he would. I shall see him yet, my own brother, with every one crowding around and doing him honour!" she cried to herself in a little rapture of delight, for old dreams die hard, and she had not yet outgrown the regret for the scarlet coat, the plumed hat, the array of medals at the breast.

When the train stopped at the quiet station, a fly and two dog-carts were in waiting to convey the travellers to their homes, but the professor and Esther elected to walk, and then the unexpected happened, for, as Peggy was preparing to drive with the rest, Rob's big figure loomed suddenly beside her, and his voice said:

"We will walk, too, Peggy!" and Peggy turned without a word and walked away by his side. Her little face looked very white in the moonlight, and the meekness with which she had agreed to his command was so unusual that Rob looked down at her with an anxious scrutiny.

"You sha'n't walk all the way," he said, "only just as far as the vicarage, then you can take Mellicent's seat, but I wanted to have you to myself for a few minutes first. I want to speak to you."

“And I to you. Oh, Rob, I have not thanked you half enough, and yet I want to scold you too. When I asked you to help me, I never meant for a moment that you should risk your own life—”

“I know that, Peg; but it was not so great a risk as you think, for I am almost as much at home in the water as on land, and even if my strength had given out, I could have floated ashore with the tide. It was well worth risking, after what you told me.”

“Ah, yes, you have saved Mrs Asplin a terrible experience. You may have saved her life—and think how much that means to every one who knows her! You couldn’t have a better reward, Rob.”

“I have pleased you, Peggy!” said Rob simply. He made no protestation, but Peggy understood all that the words implied, and her heart beat fast with happiness. They had taken the path across the fields, following the lead of the lovers, whose figures could be seen ahead like two dark shadows, flitting through the trees, and after these words of Rob’s they walked in silence until the first stile was reached. Rob was over in one spring, for his long legs found no difficulty in leaping so low a barrier, but Peggy made three steps of it, and in the last of the three found her way blocked by a tall, black figure. Rob’s hands clasped hers, Rob’s eyes looked into her face, and Rob’s voice cried with a tremor of nervousness in the deep tones:

“Is this *my* Peggy? Does she belong to me?”

“Yes, Rob, always! She always did; but you—you didn’t trust her,” replied Peggy, with a firmness which ended in a sob. “You took for granted—”

“Peggy, I didn’t!” cried Rob earnestly. “Don’t think so poorly of me. I know to what you refer—that afternoon in the library—and now I can explain all that has troubled you. I had a talk with Hector after you left, and we discovered that we both wanted the same thing. He thought he had the first claim, and that it was my duty to stand aside until he had had his chance, and I agreed that he was right. Not because he was the older! I would not have acknowledged such a plea in this matter, but because he had so much more to offer you. Compared to myself he is a rich man, and you would have been better off with him. I promised to stand aside

and put no obstacle in his way, and having given a promise I tried to keep it unselfishly, and to show you that I cared for your happiness before my own by remaining friendly and pleasant."

Peggy's grimace of disfavour was an eloquent comment. "I hated your pleasantness!" she said tersely. "I hated your friendship! I wanted you to be furious, and rage, and storm, and demand an explanation. You made me very wretched with your 'pleasantness,' I can tell you that!"

"Not half so wretched as I made myself. I wouldn't live through the last month again for any inducement you could offer; but you are not altogether free from blame yourself, for you have no idea what a little poker of dignity you have been to me all the time. Only to-day, when you asked my help, my own little Peggy came back, and then in the train Hector gave me a hint of what had happened. Poor old fellow, it's rough on him, but I can't pity him as I ought, for I am so outrageously happy! Partners, Mariquita! We are going to be partners all our lives. It seems too good to be true! I shall have to give up all thought of journeys to unknown lands; but, thank goodness! work seems to open out more and more at home, and we will be as happy as sandboys in a little home near your parents, working together and helping one another as we can do so well."

"We will! We will! You shall supply the facts, and I will write them up. You do write such commonplace English, dear—not one bit picturesque! Wait until I have worked up your articles for you; you won't know them, they will be so altered!"

"I believe you there!" said Rob demurely; but Peggy was launched on the stream of eloquence, and oblivious of sarcasm.

"Oh, oh! It will be lovely!" she cried. "We will have the dearest little house, with a study for you, and a study for me, and a garden, and a pony cart, and a conservatory, and immaculate servants who do everything they should do, and never need looking after. And we will trot about together, and work and play, and do everything just exactly as we like, and have no one to order us about. Think of it! We shall be master and mistress—no one can interfere—no one can find fault. If I forget all about dinner some fine day, there won't be a soul who will have the right to blame me, or fly

into a temper."

"Oh, won't there just! Don't make any mistake about that!" cried Rob. "If you forget your duties, you will have me to reckon with, and I am not too amiable when I'm hungry. It will be my business to help you to overcome your failings, just as it will be yours to help me with mine."

"You haven't got any," said Peggy quickly. "At least—I mean, yes, you have—lots—but I like them. They will keep mine company. No, seriously, Rob, I'll try to be good. I made up my mind to-day that if you came back safe, I would try with all my strength to be a better girl, and overcome my careless ways. And now I have more reason than before to persevere. I'll begin at once, and try so hard that by the time we are married I shall be quite a staid, responsible housewife."

"Humph!" said Rob in ungrateful fashion. "Don't try too hard. I don't want my Peggy altered out of recognition. There are thousands of staid, responsible housewives in existence, but Peggy Savilles are rare. I prefer her of the two."

"And yet you want to be rid of her! Poor, dear, little thing! If you get your way, she won't be in existence much longer. How can you make up your mind to be so cruel?"

"I shall love Peggy Darcy better," said Rob firmly, and at that Peggy gave a gulp and relapsed into silence. Peggy *Darcy*! The name brought with it a dozen thrilling reflections. Rosalind's sister, Hector's sister, daughter to Lady Darcy, and the dear, kind old lord, and, oh, most wonderful of all, Rob's wife! His partner for ever, in the truest sense of the word! The sound of that eloquent word had thrilled through Rob also, and silenced the word on his lips. His clasp tightened on Peggy's fingers, and they walked hand in hand through the fields together, in a blissful trance of happiness which has no need for speech.

When the vicarage gates were reached the carriage was already in sight; but Peggy hung back, and Rob called a passing direction to the coachman to stop on his way back after leaving Mellicent at the door. Neither he nor Peggy felt inclined to encounter even the oldest of friends in the first flush of their happiness, but they stood together watching the

scene which greeted the return of the travellers, and rejoicing in the ease of mind which they had been instrumental in securing.

The door opened, and the light of the lamps streamed out into the darkness. They saw the figure of the Vicar standing upon the threshold, and that of his wife by his side: they saw Esther and Mellicent run up the steps, and the mother's arms stretched wide to receive them; then the door shut once more, and the light died out. The moonlight seemed cold and wan after that bright ray, but not so cold as it had been before, for some of the atmosphere of love and kindness for which that home was famous seemed to have escaped through the open door, and warmed the hearts of those who looked on.

"If we can make a home like that, Peg, we shall never be poor, however little money we may have to spend. We shall have found the greatest treasure the world can give," said Rob softly; and "Amen!" sighed Peggy Saville beneath her breath.

The End.

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