

BOYS AND GIRLS

'Just my Luck.'

(Blanche Atkinson, in 'The Christian World'.)

'Yes, it is provoking, but it's no use fretting about it. You can't possibly go to a dance with a twisted foot!' Clare said calmly.

'It's all very well for you to take it so coolly. The "Haves" always tell the "Have-nots" it is no use fretting. I am miserably disappointed, and I don't see why I should not say so. But it is just my luck!'

The last speaker was on the sofa, with one foot bandaged. Her pretty face was woe-begone and her tone bitter. Clare, the elder sister, was ready dressed for the dance, and stood drawing on her dainty gloves.

'Well, at all events, Nan, don't sulk all the evening, and make poor mother miserable, too. She has enough to worry her. Dick has been making what he calls a "clean breast" of it once more, and his expenses have been something awful! I don't think we ought to have had these new frocks if we had known. It is too bad of Dick.'

'Dick couldn't help it!' Nan cried. 'He told me how vexed he was. But he didn't know things would cost so much. He is going to be ever so careful next term. Oh, here he is! And the cab is waiting. . . . You look—"ripping," doesn't she, mother? And Dick is a perfect darling in dress clothes!'

Dick was a handsome lad of nineteen. He had won a scholarship at Oxford, and his mother and sisters were determined that he at least should have a career. He came to Nan's side and kissed her. 'It's a shame to leave you behind!' he said.

'Just my luck!' she said, but laughing now. 'I don't see any "shame" about it—go off—and my blessing be with you, my children! Mind you behave prettily.'

Mrs. Osborne was standing by with a warm white shawl for Clare, and smiled proudly at her handsome boy and girl.

When they had driven away she came back with a heap of books and papers in her arms.

'I hope you have something amusing to read, Nan,' she said. 'I must go through these accounts.'

Without waiting for the girl's answer she sat down at her writing-table, and was soon engrossed in her work. Nan lay back on the sofa and watched her mother's face—that dear face—which she suddenly saw had more lines of care than it used to have. Her mother worked so hard with the school! It must have been a struggle for her to bring them all up comfortably, and never was a word of complaint heard.

'Is something wrong, mother?' Nan asked at last, feeling that she could not bear to be silent any longer. 'You look just as little Mary does when her sums won't come right.'

'That's exactly how I feel, Nan,' Mrs. Osborne said, with a smile and a sigh. 'And perhaps I had better put my papers away, my head aches!'

'Poor dear! I thought you had a headache,' Nan cried. 'You have been fretting about Dick's expenses, haven't you?'

'It would not have been so harassing at

any other time,' her mother said, wearily; 'but we had not a good term, you know; and I really hardly see how to begin the year without leaving something unpaid. I have such a horror of getting into debt! And unless I can get an extra fifty pounds I don't see how to avoid it. . . . But I ought not to worry you, dear, just when you have your own disappointment to bear, too!'

'Oh, never mind me!' Nan cried, cheerfully. 'It was just my luck to go and slip on a bit of orange peel and twist my foot. Such a sordid, stupid, uninteresting sort of accident. And, after all, worrying about £50 seems rather, rather small tragedy, doesn't it, mother darling. You won't when your headache is better.' Then she slipped off the sofa, seized the walking-stick which was close by her, and hobbled across to Mrs. Osborne's side, and threw her arm round her mother's neck.

'I'm not going to lie down again till you stuff all those horrid bills and things into your desk and lock them up; and then go upstairs to bed.'

'But you would be so dull, dear.'

'Not a bit. I rather enjoy the luxury, rare in this house, of being quite alone. At ten o'clock I shall send Jane to bed; then I shall make myself some delicious coffee, and write a jolly long letter to Frank.'

'But they may not be home till one or two o'clock!'

'All the better for Frank. I will send the dear boy such a screed!'

Mrs. Osborne rose. 'I shall be glad to go to bed—if you are sure that you don't mind, Nan. It has been hard for you, my dear, to miss the dance; and you have taken it so well.'

'Indeed, I have "not"! 'Nan exclaimed, 'I have been horrid about it all day. And you don't know how bad I felt when I saw Clare in her pretty gown. Good night. Shall I bring you anything?'

'No, dear, I only want bed.'

Nancy held the door open and listened until she heard her mother go into her own room. Then she limped back to the sofa, buried her face in the cushions and sobbed.

'Oh, it is hard—it is! I have scarcely ever a real treat; this was the only dance we may have this winter, and we had spent all Aunt Sophy's Christmas present in new frocks. I should have looked as nice as Clare—and Archie will be there. It is hard. And I don't believe any girl could help fretting. I grind away with those stupid children, and help mother as much as I can. And now when one little bit of brightness comes my way—"this" happiness! And poor darling mother is worried to death about this wretched money! Why, lots of people would think no more of fifty pounds than I do of sixpence; and yet the want of it gives poor mother a headache—and a heartache, too, I know—O dear! O dear!'

With her face on the cushions, and deafened by her passionate sobs, Nan did not hear any sound until the door of the room opened, and Jane said: 'There's a gentleman, miss, wants to see the mistress. I said you were—'

'Oh, but I'm "not"! 'Nan cried, sitting up. 'Don't let him come in!'

At the same moment the visitor came in not hearing her words. And Jane, in dis-

may, quickly withdrew, wondering what Miss Nancy would do.

What could she do but wipe her eyes, and try to look as if she had not been crying?

'Why, Nan! It is Nan, isn't it? What is the matter?' the stranger began. 'Well, there, never mind me. I'm not a stranger. I am your mother's cousin George, though you don't remember me. I have not been in town for seven years. So when my lawyer sent for me on business, and I found that I had to spend a night in town, I thought I would come and see my cousin Anne, your mother. The maid said Mrs. Osborne was not very well and had gone to bed early. But Miss Nancy was in. I remembered Nan, a merry little girl with curly locks. So in I came. Would you rather I went away, my dear?'

'No! Oh, no! And I'm very sorry you caught me crying. I don't often—really.'

Cousin George was much older than her mother. He had a tired expression in his eyes—but a wonderfully kind smile. He had seated himself near the sofa, and was looking at the bandaged foot.

'Is that painful? Is that what is the matter?' he asked.

'Partly,' Nan said, smiling. 'That's the cause of it. But I'm rather ashamed to tell you. You will think me so silly to cry—now that I am grown up.'

'Grown ups have a good deal more to cry for than children,' he said. 'But I'm glad it isn't very bad!'

'Oh! I don't suppose you will think I ought to have cried at all. But it was such a horrible disappointment—and my new frock was so pretty, and we get very few dances. And this morning, as I came in from town, I slipped on a piece of orange peel and twisted my foot. I can't put it to the ground, so it was no use going to a dance. . . . If it had only been to-morrow! But, of course, I know, as Clare said, it is no use fretting about it. It was just my luck, and that's all.'

'Poor little girl.' He looked at her so kindly that Nan wanted to tell him all about it. 'You see, other girls might not care so very much to miss one dance. But we work very hard. You know that mother has had school ever since she was left a widow?'

'Yes, I know. Very successful—is it not?'

'She keeps things going. But we all have to help, of course. So it is only in the holidays that we can go out at all. We have what people call a monotonous life. This dance was to be such a treat! We had looked forward to it for weeks. . . . And now—here I am!'

'Poor Nan!'

'I wonder if you are really sorry for me,' she said, suddenly. 'I so often miss a thing I want very much by some stupid accident like this. Of course, it is nobody's fault. It is just my luck!'

He was silent for a moment, and then said, 'Did you ever try how it felt to say "Just God's orders" instead of "Just my luck"?'

She shook her head. 'Why should he care whether a girl went to a dance or not? It seems absurd!'

'How do you know? Going or not going might influence the whole course of your life and of other lives. If you never