

merrily on the figures of the girls as they flitted to and fro in the performance of their household duties, while their sweet voices and musical laughter rang through the old hall and the long vaulted passages.

Constance, the eldest sister, was thirty years of age. In figure she was unusually tall, but formed with perfect symmetry. Her shoulders were rather broad, but they were so finely formed, and carried so gracefully, that the blemish almost became a beauty. Her complexion was pale, yet healthy; her features were perfect, though the quiet thoughtfulness which habitually shaded them prevented a casual observer from perceiving her extreme beauty at the first glance. Her large and well-developed head might have given her a masculine appearance, but for the abundant jet black hair which, growing low on her ample forehead, made her appear what she really was, a most womanly and lovable woman.

At the age of eighteen she had been a happy girl, the heiress of great wealth, her father being one of London's merchant princes. At one fell swoop all this was changed. It was the old story of speculation, followed by sudden ruin. Mr. Conroy was brought home dead, killed by the sudden loss; and, after a short period of uncertainty and confusion, Constance found herself with two helpless children on her hands—for her step-mother, her senior by only ten years, was utterly helpless—and with only the widow's annuity of three hundred pounds for their support. She had her own private source of sorrow in addition to that which she shared with her family; but this she resolutely put aside, having no time to spare for the indulgence of merely selfish griefs. Her lover—a man of rank—had accepted his freedom with ill-concealed eagerness. She had loved him in a girlish way—loved him sincerely, as she thought, or she would not have dreamed of marrying him; but now so strong a portion of contempt mingled with her sentiments towards him that she doubted whether she could ever have given him her whole heart's love.

"It was a mistake," she said to herself; "he is not what I believed him to be. My idol has feet of clay, or perhaps he is all clay, gilded by my imagination." And she calmly put aside all thoughts of love as a possibility of her own future, and set herself to the discharge of her duties.

But this short period of bitter trial had changed her from a light-hearted girl into a thoughtful, earnest woman. And, as she stood now, with her large calm eyes lighted up with pleasure, and watched the two young creatures whom she loved with a mother's love, and listened to their lively talk and merry peals of laughter, she felt amply repaid for the years of toil and anxious saving, whereby she had secured for them that queer but delightful home in which their high spirits ran riot.

Isabel, aged twenty-two, was of middle height, plump and pleasant, with dark brown hair and bright hazel eyes, and a graceful figure. Though not so beautiful as her sister, she was undeniably very pretty. With a large amount of good sense and shrewdness, and possessed of more general information than most girls of her age, she was full of fun as a kitten.

Sylvia was twenty, but looked no more than sixteen. She was very small, but exquisitely proportioned and graceful. Her pink-and-white complexion, wavy golden hair, and large limpid blue eyes gave her an appearance of fragility which was quite deceptive, for the young lady was particularly healthy and, for her size, strong.

The three sisters were all very plainly dressed. Constance wore the simple gray uniform of a professional nurse. The two younger were clad in neat serge frocks, and all wore large white aprons with capacious bibs, which was their costume while performing their household duties. They had just had a lesson in cookery, and had turned out some very creditable mince pies. On the previous day they had assisted in the manufacture of a large plum-pudding, which was now boiling on the kitchen fire; while a turkey lay on the dresser, ready to be put down to roast when the proper time arrived.

Constance was determined that their first Christmas in their own home should be celebrated in good old-fashioned style, though the circumstances would have made the very plainest fare enjoyable.

"This is perfectly heavenly!" exclaimed Isabel, clasping her hands and looking around upon the bright space within the screen. "The very storm outside makes the inside more delightful. Just listen to the wind! How it howls in the chimney, as if it wanted to get at us that way! But the jolly fire flames up all the more, and drives the wind back again."

"It is nice!" responded Sylvia, with a sigh of satisfaction, as she knelt before the sofa and caressed her Persian cat, who lay there, the very picture of luxurious ease and comfort. "And it is so pleasant to know that we are shut in here all by ourselves, and nobody can by any possibility get at us."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Isabel. "Suppose any one had lost his way on the moor, he'd see the smoke of these chimneys and make straight for the house. I should not like that unless he was somebody very charming indeed."

"What fun it would be," cried Sylvia, looking up from her cat, "to have a really delightful clever man—a gentleman, of course—driven here by the storm! We could not turn him out, and we could have plenty of dinner to give him."

"I fear, young ladies," said Constance, "you must give up all hope of your errant knight arriving by way of the moor. He could not see the smoke through this blinding snowstorm, and common sense would tell him to follow a downward track, as the villages lie chiefly in the sheltered combs."

"Oh, I'm sure we don't want him!" said Isabel. "Let him wait till the summer. Then we can invite him to dinner, if we like the looks of him; and, if we don't, we can show him the way to the inn."

Sylvia started to her feet.

"Oh, look there!" she cried. "If knights errant can't find us out, it seems the dogs can. Oh, Conny, look at him! The poor thing seems half-starved. Oh, the poor dear little thing! He keeps on trying to sit up and beg, and he has not strength to keep up!"

It was indeed a piteous object that had suddenly appeared among them—a rough half-bred terrier, very soiled and dirty, and nearly starved. His intelligent eyes, his feeble whining, and the futile efforts he made to rear himself up into the attitude of a canine mendicant, instantly won for him the sympathy of those on whom he had intruded.

"Poor fellow, he is starving!" said Constance, taking him in her arms and running into the kitchen. "Fetch some milk; and there's some cold beef in the larder. Cut it into very small bits, or he may choke himself. Now a dish of water—perhaps he will like that better than milk."

The animal drank eagerly, and snapped up some pieces of meat; but all the while he uttered short impatient moans, and fidgeted as though he were eating under protest and longing to get away.

"How oddly he behaves!" exclaimed Isabel. "Do you hear any one calling to him? What makes him keep looking towards the door in that strange way?"

"I know," said Sylvia, in a tone of profound conviction; "he wants to go back to his master, who is probably lying out in the snow, and he wishes us to go with him. You see, his duty pulls him one way, and his hunger pulls him the other, and all those little cries mean, 'I know I am a selfish brute to stay here guzzling while my poor master is perishing; but I am starving, and I can't help it.' That's just what he is thinking."

"I think you are right, Sylvia," said Constance, "and we must follow him when he goes away. So your knight may come over the moor after all."

"Oh, good gracious!" cried Isabel, turning pale at the horrible thought that flashed through her mind. "What if the man should be dead when we find him? What should we do then?"

"Follow the dog's example," replied Constance calmly, "and do our duty. It would spoil our pleasure, of course. But we must

hope that we may find him alive. We should give him a share of all our good things with all our hearts. He is most likely some poor laboring man, whose wife is now anxiously looking out for him."

"No—that he is not," pronounced the oracular Sylvia. "Workingmen don't have their names engraved on silver plates on their dogs' collars, and here is—keep still one moment, doggie—yes, it is, 'Ormsby Grant.' Why, he is an artist; I know his name quite well. Oh, doggie, doggie, take us to him quickly! He can't be out on the moor either, for the dog's coat is quite dry, and it has a dusty earthy smell. Where can he have come from?"

"He will show us no doubt as soon as his first hunger is allayed," said Constance.

She had hitherto fed him with small scraps of meat, which he bolted, but she now offered him a large piece of bread. The dog snatched it up eagerly and ran off as fast as his trembling legs could carry him.

To the surprise of his new friends, however, he did not go towards the back premises, but entered a dark passage which led to the cellars. The door having been accidentally left open, the dog had gained easy access to the house. How he had got into the cellars remained a mystery.

"Run back and fetch the lantern," said Constance. "I will stay here and watch him; I have never been far into this dungeon; but Pengelley assured me there was nothing beyond it."

The two nimble-footed girls sped back and quickly returned with a lantern and two lighted candles.

"I thought we had better have plenty of light," observed Isabel, "and I have put a box of matches into my pocket as well. It would not do to be left in these awful regions without the means of lighting our candles, if they should be blown out."

"Look well where you go, dear," said Constance; "there may be dangerous holes in this rock floor."

They were evidently going in the direction of the sea, for they could smell the sea air, and the sound of the waves became louder and louder as they advanced. It was a strange hollow roar, as if echoing through a cavern.

"Well, here we are at the end!" said the eldest sister, as she turned the light of the lantern upon a blank damp-looking wall.

"But there must be some way out of it," exclaimed practical Isabel, "for where is the dog gone? And how does the smell of the sea get in?"

Even as she spoke the little dog reappeared, emerging from a dark corner. He was highly excited, and, seizing the corner of Miss Conroy's apron, drew her eagerly towards the corner.

There they discovered a small door, thickly studded with rusty nails and secured by a heavy bar of wood. The sill was worn away by the traffic of past years, and the bottom of the door, where the wood was rotten with age and damp, had been torn away, and the fragments were lying about. This had been done quite recently, and was no doubt the work of the little dog, who now slipped, though with some difficulty, through the gap, and then, poking his sharp little face through the opening, whined anxiously, inviting them to follow.

Constance removed the bar, and pushed the door open upon its groaning hinges. A blast of cold air rushed in, and they heard a voice from below shouting for help.

"Who is there?" cried Constance.

"Two gentlemen," replied the voice, "shut in by the waves, and nearly starved to death. Bring help quickly; my friend is almost gone!"

"We'll come—we'll come!" answered Constance. "Now, girls," she continued, turning to her sisters, "you must fly back. Take both candles, and leave one on the way to guide you on your return. Bring a large jug of milk, two glasses, and a bottle of whiskey. Draw the cork. Put the things in a basket, and bring some more candles. I'll find the way down to these poor fellows, and then I'll direct you how to come. Whistle as soon as you reach this door. Now hasten! Their lives may depend upon your speed!"