

"she is all right again now, and it would do her good to be out."

"She will be very fresh," said Georgie dubiously. "I would rather ride the chestnut."

"What does being fresh, matter? I have settled for you to ride her—don't let me hear any more nonsense about it. Have you written all those post-cards? Well, then, I want a stitch put into that thick white scarf; it works up at the back. Go and fetch it, there's a good girl, and I will show you what it wants."

And Georgie obeyed in silence.

The morning broke calm and mild and grey. Georgie sprang from her bed, and peeped out from behind her window-blind at a green wet world, patches of water lying in the grassy hollows, and drops of moisture clinging on to every leafless branch in the garden. No frost at all events.

When she was nearly dressed, she drew aside the curtains, threw up the sash, and leant out of the window.

There was a sort of grey distinctness over the face of the earth.

The hills on the further side of the valley looked near and green; every tree upon them stood out clearly against the sky; the leafless woods were purple blue; not a breath was stirring—not a sound was heard; only the chirrup of a robin, hopping about on the garden path beneath the window, and the distant tinkle of a sheep bell from the penned-up flock in the field below.

There was something depressing, almost solemn, in the leaden sky and chill green earth.

A heap of fresh turned mould lay in the flower-bed beneath. The gardeners had been uprooting an evergreen killed by the frost; the brown earth lay wet and heavy by the side of the gaping trench, and the robin, lured there probably by hopes of fresh worms turned up with the soil, hopped lustily down into the dark-looking hole.

Georgie watched the bird idly, and then, with a little shudder, the thought flashed across her—

"How horrible it must be to be buried! how wet and cold the earth looks!"

And she turned hastily from the window.

"A letter for you, miss," said the little housemaid who waited upon her, standing behind her as she turned round.

Georgie flushed crimson, for the letter was in Wattie Ellison's handwriting.

She tore open the envelope nervously, and read—

My dearest Georgie,—You know very well that no ordinary cause would make me risk your father's displeasure, by writing to you against his orders; but what I have to say concerns him as well as yourself, and if you see fit you will no doubt show him this letter. It is about your brown mare. I have just seen a man who knew all about her down in Warwickshire. He says she is a runaway, and not safe for any lady to ride. She killed the man who last had her, by bolting with him into a wood, where his head was smashed against the branch of a tree, and that is why your father got her so cheap. Do tell him this, and I am sure he will agree with me that you must not ride her. I *entreat* you not to do so; if anything happened he would never forgive himself. I must not write more to you—much as I long to.

Yours always devotedly,  
WATTIE ELLISON.

Dressed in her habit, and holding this letter in her hand, Georgie came into the room where her father was already at breakfast.

"Papa, I have had a letter from Wattie."

"What!" thundered the squire, and the piece of bacon half-way to his mouth dropped off his fork back upon his plate. "Georgie, how dare you?" and his face turned as red as his hunting-coat.

"Well, papa, here is the letter; he wishes you to read it, and so do I—you will see that it is not a love-letter!" she added, with a little smile.

Her father took the letter from her hand and walked to the window with it, turning his back upon her as he read it.

And then he came back, crushed it up between both his hands, and flung it angrily upon the fire.

"It's all a d—d lie!" he said furiously.

"Papa!" cried the girl in dismay, "what can you mean? You don't suppose that Wattie—"

"Hold your tongue with your Wattie!" he answered savagely; "don't you suppose I know what my daughter ought or ought not to ride, without being dictated to by an infernal young scoundrel who only wants to set her against her father?"

"O papa! that's not true—he never would do that; and if the mare isn't safe—"

"The mare *is* safe, I tell you!" shouted the old man; "and if you don't ride her, you shall not ride at all—there!"