

easily accuse me of neglecting his property. But I'll take care to inform him what a ticklish business it is to deal with a bad-tempered and unreasonable woman."

"Emily Holt is not that, Mr. Pulteney!" cried Mabel, unable to contain herself. "It is you—"

"Go into the house, child," said the vicar mildly, and Mabel, quite aware that she ought not to have spoken, disappeared forthwith.

"Mother, may I go to Aunt Billy's at Netley for Christmas?" she asked boldly.

Mrs. Clitheroe put down her pen and stared at this most unusual request. Mabel never wished to leave home, though she was specially devoted to the Netley cousins, with whom she had been at school.

"Whatever do you want to go there for, child?"

"Jack will be at home and I do want to go, mother, just for the week-end, and I'll come home a day before Christmas if Daddy and you would like me to, and I'll be ever so good after, and do needle-work for a week running; I'll finish the counterpane, and though it won't be done for Christmas, it'll be sweet when it is done. I've got a perfectly new idea for the centre."

Mrs. Clitheroe smiled a little vaguely.

"Mabel, you are hatching some plot; I shall write to your Aunt Billy and warn her."

"Then I may go. Thank you, darling mother; I'll be a model for the next six months."

She could hardly contain herself until the day when she was permitted to depart in charge of Martha, the old nurse and general factotum, to London, en route for Southampton.

Martha, who knew every mood and expression of the child she had nursed on her knee, was perfectly well aware that there was something hatching. She supposed some specially elaborate trick was going to be played on the Netley schoolroom, but she was too wise to ask any questions. Aunt Billy, otherwise Mrs. Vane Featherstone, was a sister of the Vicar of Gravelly, and much beloved of her niece Mabel. She was the widow of an officer in the Indian Army, and lived in a small but exquisite little house at Hamble Cliff, close by the great hospital in which her husband had died, one of the many victims of the great South African war. She had five children and it was Jack, the eldest son, a cadet at Sandhurst, upon whom Mabel was building her hopes.

To her intense delight Jack met them at the station; she had been so afraid lest something might have intervened to prevent his getting home for the Christmas holidays. It might so easily have happened that he had gone to spend them with a Sandhurst chum. He was driving the old pony carriage, and on the front seat beside him she revealed her whole story and plot.

They stopped at the shipping offices on the way across, and Jack got down to inquire regarding the expected arrival of the "Walmer Castle."

"To-morrow morning about eleven, Marjorie Daw," he said. "You and I will be down prompt."

"I hope that beast Pulteney won't get before me," she said soberly.

Jack grinned delightedly. He was awfully fond of his pretty cousin, and in mortal terror that she should develop into a proper young lady during the intervals of their separation.

"But he'd have to give place to a lady, Marjorie Daw," he said.

"Oh, Pulteney wouldn't; he's—he's on outsider, Jack," Mabel assured him. "He's capable of any crime. And he'll be sure to know what I'm up to. His eyes are like ferrets. I have a sketch of him here in my notebook. How lovely it will be if we can do him, won't it?"

"Ripping; and we shall, if I can manage it."

Mabel nestled up close to him and looked her sweetest.

"Jack, you're a dear, and I didn't mean what I wrote the last time, and—and I think you'll be awfully handsome when it grows."

Jack blushed furiously, though secretly flattered. But he quickly changed the subject. In the house facing Southampton Water, Mabel was able to get rid of her trouble for a time, and she implicitly trusted Jack. It was by no means unusual for them to disappear together when Mabel paid her visits to Netley, so nobody took any notice when they left on their bicycles for Southampton next morning after breakfast. Mabel had told Aunt Billy she was going to buy Christmas presents, which, indeed, was partly true.

At the steamship offices they were

told that the "Walmer Castle" would be in dock in about an hour, which they spent wandering about the shops. But Mabel was preoccupied, and remarked to Jack that she could only give her mind to one thing at a time. They reached the landing stage early, and were the first to board the great liner when the gangway was put up.

"That's him, Jack, I feel sure. That dreadful person in the slouch hat and the Inverness cloak, who looks like a bandit; and I'm sure he is one."

"Looks more like your grandfather, Marjorie Daw," replied Jack severely. "He can't be an old buffer like that. Pray, don't let your imagination run away with you."

"If we could only look out for Christopher Pegram on trunks and things, then we might arrive," said Mabel wisely. As she spoke the name, a man close by gave a little start. Mabel saw it, and looked at him keenly, at once dismissing the idea, however, that the owner of such a pleasant face could be her ogre, who was making such sorrow in Gravelly Hill. But the next moment her heart sank, for raising his cap, he said politely:

"My name happens to be Pegram. But I did not expect anyone to meet me."

"Oh indeed, yes, we've come to meet you," said Mabel blushing furiously. "My name is Mabel Clitheroe, and I come here from Gravelly Hill, where my father is the vicar. Perhaps you have heard his name."

Jack afterwards complimented her on her courage and dignity, but Mabel was conscious of nothing but the very keen, though quite kindly eyes bent on her face. She decided that he could not be more than thirty at the very most, and that he was quite a gentleman.

"Why, certainly; I am extremely glad to see you," he said holding out a frank hand, which Mabel took rather shyly.

"This is my cousin, Jack Featherstone. He lives just across the river at Netley, and I'm stopping there. He brought me down to meet you."

"Most kind, I'm sure, and it makes a lonely man feel better. Looking round on all these happy meetings, I was feeling a bit out of it. I shall always remember your kind thought, and it pleases me to think we shall often meet at Gravelly Hill."

"I am afraid my cousin did not come from a purely disinterested motive, Mr. Pegram. She really has something to say to you, or ask you about a matter at Gravelly Hill. And we thought the best way would be to come and meet you. Will you come back with us to luncheon, if you are not in a hurry; my mother would be pleased, I am sure."

Mabel almost gasped, and cast an adoring glance at her cousin, wondering at his tact and presumption. But he was certainly right, for the boat train was waiting, and there was little chance of a good talk on a railway platform. Besides you can always deal better with a man when you ask him to luncheon.

"Oh, do come; you'll simply love Aunt Billy, and Netley is so pretty."

Christopher Pegram looked as he felt, uncommonly pleased.

"I'll come with all the pleasure in life. An hour or two can't make any difference to me. If you'll wait till I see about my stuff, and despatch it to London, I'll come."

"But, Jack," cried Mabel desperately, "we've got

our bicycles. We can't tie him on behind."

"We'll leave 'em and hire a carriage," said Jack with a regal air. "I'm going to see you through."

So it came to pass that Mrs. Featherstone, faking a walk in the garden before luncheon was amazed to behold a carriage drive up to the front gate. Mabel jumped out almost before it stopped, and ran to acquaint her with the facts. Now Aunt Billy, unlike Mabel's own mother, was never put out by unexpected happenings; she had that fair, sunshiny nature which makes a sweet atmosphere of home everywhere, and she was quite ready to welcome the stranger from overseas, though she felt that she might have to apologise for the meagre luncheon.

"I must get the four-four, I am afraid, because I have to meet my agent in London this evening. In fact I'm afraid he's waiting for me now. So, Miss Mabel, perhaps you will ask me the questions before I go."

"You can go into the morning-room, dear," said Mrs. Featherstone, and led the way herself. When the door was closed upon them, Mabel felt rather dreadful, but summing up all her courage she stood quite straight by the table and told Pegram the story of the "Bun and Stoat," and the persecution of the Holts. She did not embroider the facts, but told them simply, and Pegram listened with the deepest interest.

"And, you see, I thought it was my only chance to speak to you before Mr. Pulteney could get at you," she said naively. "I hope you don't mind. Emily is such a dear, and poor old Mr. Holt is nearly blind."

"I'm infinitely obliged to you, and I assure you I shall make it my immediate business to inquire into this. I will not say anything to Pulteney until I go to Gravelly Hill, which will be to-morrow."

"And you won't let him persuade you! It's such a dear old place, but especially for Emily and Mr. Holt; you see he was born there, and he wants to die in it."

"Naturally, and he shall do so, though I hope he will live a long time. They are fortunate in having such a special pleader as you. You could have won their case, even if it had bristled with ten thousand difficulties."

Mabel laughed.

"They're my friends, and Emily is a dear," she repeated with dancing eyes. "Oh, she will be pleased! May I write to her to-night and tell her?"

"Yes, and I will see her to-morrow," said Pegram.

"You won't say anything at home? I am sure my mother wouldn't like it. She—she is rather strict. And when Aunt Billy knew it was quite all right I thought I might do it."

"I won't say a word. It shall be a secret between us."

"And you don't think I have been rude or anything?"

A curious softness gathered in his eyes, and Mabel found it better to avoid them.

"Then we shall meet again on Christmas Day," he said aloud. Inwardly he made another vow, of which Mabel was to hear before the year was out.

When Pulteney met his patron in London he thought him oddly cool, and when they began to talk, not at all enthusiastic about changes.

"Listen, Pulteney; I had better tell you at once and for all, that I'm not going to turn the old place upside down. It would be very ill-mannered for me to think of it for a moment. I've had a hard life of knocking about, and I've come home to rest."

"But these people at the 'Bun and Stoat,' Mr. Pegram, they're most undesirable, in every way, above their station; they give themselves airs; and they don't keep the place in good repair."

"Then we must do it. There's plenty of money for the purpose. Don't worry me, Pulteney, or you and I will have to part. If you could suggest a few directions in which we might labour for the benefit of the folk, instead of for our own, you would please me better."

Pulteney never knew, however, what hand Mabel Clitheroe had had in the affair, nor how completely she had stolen a march upon him. But one day, two years later, when he was asked to dine at her table after she became mistress of Gravelly Hall, he gathered from a chance and laughing remark she made to her husband, that they had met for the first time on board the "Walmer Castle" in Southampton Dock.



"My name happens to be Pegram."