

indignation meeting on our own account, and discuss our grievances. Women always have grievances nowadays, it's the fashionable thing—and I like to be in the fashion. Three charming and beauteous maidens shut up in the depths of the country in the very flower of their youth, with nothing to do—I mean with far too much to do, and no amusement, no friends, no variety. We are like the princesses shut up in the moated tower, in the fairy tales; only then there were always fairy god-mothers to come to the rescue, and beautiful princes in golden chariots. We shall have to wait a long time before any such visitors come tramping along the Kendal high-road. I am sure it sounds melancholy enough to make anyone sorry for us."

"Father is the dearest man in the world, but he doesn't understand how a girl of seventeen feels. I was seventeen on my last birthday, so it's worse for me than for you, for I am really grown up." Hilary sighed, and rested her sleek little head upon her hand in a pensive, elderly fashion. "I believe he thinks that if we have a comfortable home and enough to eat, and moderately decent clothes, we ought to be content; but I want ever so much more than that. If mother had lived—"

There was a short silence, and then Norah took up the strain in her crisp, decided accents. "I am fifteen and a half, I look very nearly as old as you do, Hilary, and I'm an inch taller. I don't see why I need go on with these stupid old classes. If I could go to a good school it would be another thing, for I simply adore music and painting, and should love to work hard, and become really celebrated, but I don't believe Miss Briggs can teach me any more than I know myself; and there is no better teacher for miles around. If father would only let me go abroad for a year, but he is afraid of trusting me out of his sight. If I had seven children I'd be glad to get rid of some of them, if only to get a little peace and quietness at home."

"Mother liked the idea of girls being educated at home, that is the reason why father objects to sending us away. The boys must go to boarding schools, of course, because there is no one here who can take them in hand. As for peace and quietness, father enjoys having the house full. He grumbles at the noise sometimes, but I believe he likes it at the bottom of his heart. If we do happen to be quiet for a change in the evening, he peers over his book and says, 'What is the matter; has something gone wrong? Why are you all so quiet?' He loves to see us frisking about."

"Yes, but I can't frisk any longer—I'm too dull—I want something to happen," repeated Norah, obstinately. "Other people have parties on New Year's day, or a grand Christmas-tree, or have crowds of visitors coming to call. We have been sitting here sewing from ten o'clock this morning—nasty, uninteresting mending—which isn't half done yet, though it is nearly four o'clock. And you never think of me! I'm fifteen, and I feel it more than either of

you. You see it is like this. Sometimes I feel quite young—like a child—and then you two are too proper to run about and play with me, so I am all alone; and then I feel quite old and grown up, and am just as badly off as you, and worse, because I'm the youngest, and have to take third turn of everything, and wear your old washed-out ribbons! If only something would happen that was really startling and exciting—!"

"I sink it's very naughty to wish like that!" A tiny, reed-like voice burst into the conversation with an unexpectedness which made the three sisters start in their seats; a small figure in a white pinafore crept forward into the firelight, and throwing back a tangle of curls raised a pair of reproachful eyes to Norah's face. "I sink it's very naughty to wish like that, 'cause it's discontented, and you don't know what it might be like. P'r'aps the house might be burned, or the walls fall down, or you might all be ill and dead yourselves, and then you wouldn't like it!"

The three girls looked at each other, undecided between laughter and remorse.

"Mouse!" said Hilary, severely, "what are you doing here? Little girls have no business to listen to what big people are saying. You must never sit here again without letting us know, or that will be naughty too. We don't mean to be discontented, Mouse. We felt rather low in our spirits, and were relieving ourselves by a little grumble, that's all. Of course we know that we have really many, many things to be thankful for—a nice house, and—ah—garden, and such beautiful country all round, and—ah—good health, and—"

"And the bunnies, and the pigeons, and the new carpet in the dining-room, and because the puppy didn't die—and—and—me!" said the Mouse, severely; and when her sisters burst into a roar of laughter, she proceeded to justify herself with indignant protest. "Well, it's the truth! The bunnies are pretty, and you said, 'Thank goodness! we've got a respectable carpet at last!' And Lettice cried when the little pup rolled its eyes and squealed, and you said to Miss Briggs that I was only five, and if I was spoiled, she couldn't wonder, 'cause I was the littlest of seven, and no one could help it! And it's 'Happy New Year' and plum pudding for dinner, so I don't sink you ought to be discontented!"

"You are quite right, dear, it's very naughty of us. Just run upstairs to the school-room, and get nice and tidy for tea, there's a good little Mouse. Shut the door behind you, there's a fearful draught." Hilary nodded to the child over her shoulder, and then turned to her sisters with an expressive shrug. "What a funny little mite she is! We really must be careful how we speak before her. She understands far too well, and she has such stern ideas of her own. Well, perhaps we are wrong to be discontented. I hated coming to live in this quiet place, but I have been ever so much stronger; I never have that wretched, breathless feeling now

that I had in town, and I can run upstairs to the very top without stopping. You can't enjoy anything without health, so I ought to be—I am!—very thankful indeed that I am so much better."

"I am thankful that I have my two dear hobbies, and can forget everything in playing and drawing. The hours fly when I can sit out of doors and sketch, and my precious old violin knows all my secrets. It cries with me, and sings with me, and shrieks aloud just as I would do if I dared to make all the noise I want, when I am in a temper. I do believe I could be one of the best players in the world if I had the chance. I feel it in me! It is aggravating to know that I make mistakes from want of proper lessons, but it is glorious to feel power over an instrument as I do, when I am properly worked up! I would not change places with any girl who was not musical!"

Lettice said nothing, but she lifted her eyes to the oval mirror which hung above the mantel-piece, and in her heart she thought, "And I am glad that I am so pretty. If one is pretty, everyone is kind, and polite, and attentive; and I do like people to be kind, and make a fuss! When we were at the station the other day, the people nudged each other and bent out of the windows of the train as I passed. I saw them, though I pretended I didn't. And I should look far nicer if I had proper clothes. If I could only have had that fur boa, and the feather for my hat! But what does it matter what I wear in this wretched place? There is no one to see me."

The firelight played on three thoughtful faces as the girls sat in silence, each occupied with her special train of thought. The room looked grey and colourless in the waning light, and the glimpse of wintry landscape seen through the window did not add to the general cheeriness. Hilary shivered, and picking up a log from the corner of the grate, dropped it into the fire.

"Well, there is no use repining. We have had our grumble, and we might as well make the best of our circumstances. It's New Year's day. I shall make a resolution to try to like my work. I know I do it well, because I am naturally a good housekeeper, but I ought to take more interest in it. That's the way the good people do in books, and in the end they dote upon the very things they used to hate. There's no saying, I may come to adore darning stockings and mending linen before the year is out. At any rate I shall have the satisfaction of having done my best."

"Well, if you try to like your work, I'll try to remember mine—that's a bargain," said Lettice solemnly. "There always seems to be something I want particularly to do for myself, just when I ought to be at my 'avocations,' as Miss Briggs has it. It's a bad plan, because I have to exert myself to finish in time, and I get a scolding into the bargain. So here's for punctuality and reform!"

Norah held her left hand high in the air, and began checking off the fingers