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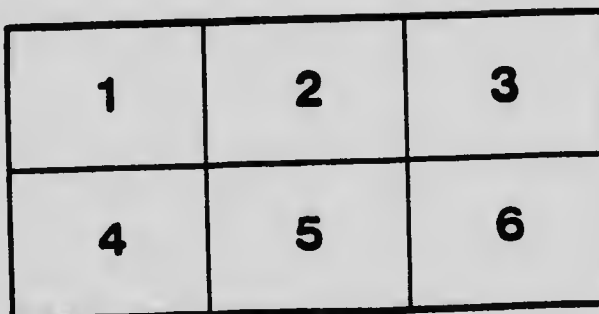
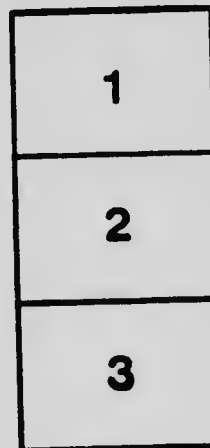
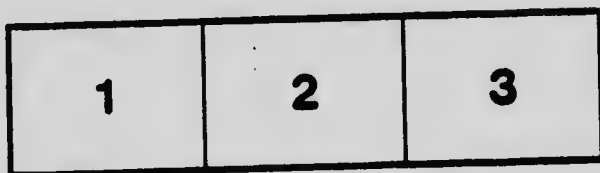
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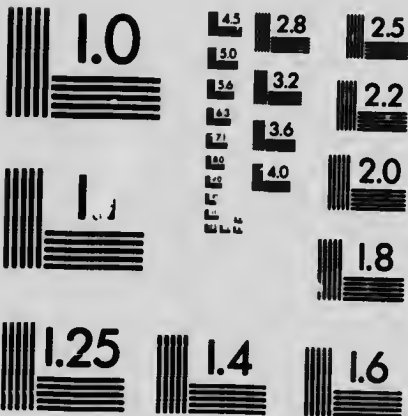
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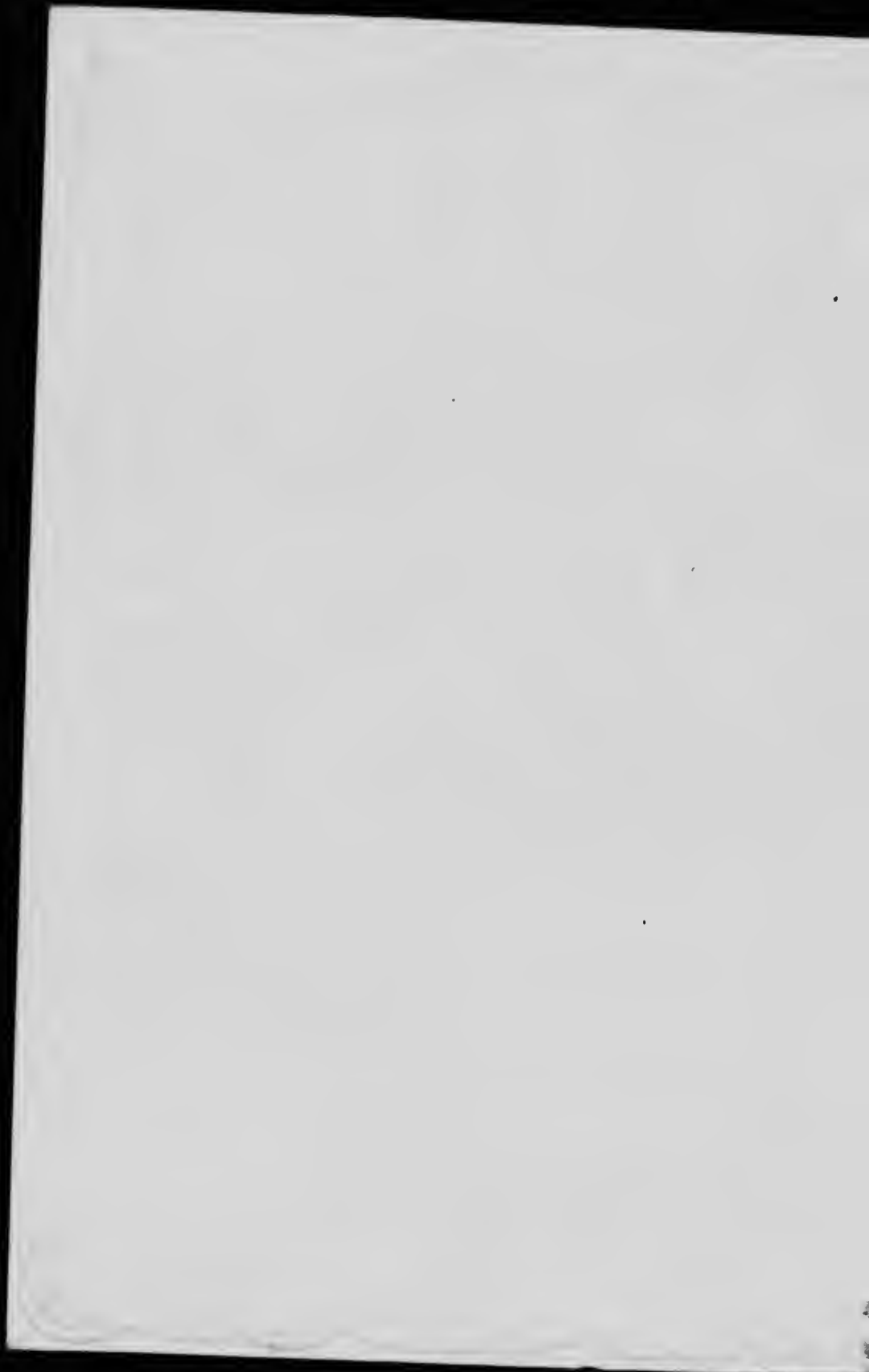
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“IT WAS TEN TIMES NICER TO MOUNT THE LADDER AND GET INTO
THAT SAME TOWER THROUGH A SLIT IN THE WALL.”

Frontispiece.]

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TRIXY AND HER TRIO

BY

L. E. TIDDEMAN

Author of

"THE ADVENTURES OF JASMIN," "THE COMING OF CARLINA,"
ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY BERTRAM GILBERT

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Trixy and Her Trio

CHAPTER I

TRAVELLERS TWAIN

"THERE are four of them," said Beatrix Farleigh slowly.

She spoke to her sister, but she did not look at her ; she was gazing from out the window of a railway carriage, and found the flyin landscape extremely interesting.

"I suppose you mean four of the Guests," Grace answered quickly.

"But," she added, "it takes a clever person to guess what you *do* mean, you are so—so unexpected."

"Unexpected ! Fiddle - de - dee and fiddlesticks ! Of course I mean the Guests, and of course you know that

I mean them, and of course you'd be very silly if you didn't."

A bright, laughing face was turned to the tall, dark girl, who at sixteen years of age looked two years older than she was. Grace Farleigh was a handsome girl already, and would be a beauty by and by. Now what Beatrix was going to be no one could guess yet. What was she at present? A plump, round-faced, cheery-looking little creature of fourteen, with glad grey eyes of the most wide-awake description, red-gold hair that curled at its own sweet will, a smile that made friends for its possessor, and a clear, rosy complexion. Grace said that Trixy always looked as if she had just been washing her face. This was not a bad description. Both girls were dressed well and becomingly, in pretty light frocks and hats suitable to the hot summer day.

They were travelling from Southsea to a little place in Hampshire called Cloverfield. For a year past they had been living with Mrs. Pelham, widow of a general in the army, at Southsea. This was because their parents were in India.

They had been treated very kindly, but for many reasons, some of which will make themselves clear by and by, it was deemed expedient to make a change for them. So here they were on their way to the Vicarage at Cloverfield, and the mind of each was occupied, naturally enough, with the same subject.

"I am awfully glad that the Reverend Herbert Guest and Mrs. Guest have a son and a daughter," Beatrix remarked with gravity.

"Why?"

"It will give us a choice, won't it? If we don't like the girl Guest we may like the boy Guest, or the other way about."

"We mayn't like either."

The child's smile disappeared, to break out again a moment later.

"Why, what nonsense! I expect we shall like both of them ever so much," she exclaimed, "and I expect they will have a lot of friends and that we shall like them too. And perhaps"—here she beamed—"there may be animals; oh, I do so hope that there will!"

Grace, who had been looking rather listless, became suddenly animated.

"Now look here, Trixy," she cried, "you've got to remember what Mrs. Pelham said that you were not to do."

Trixy's eyebrows were dark and strongly marked. She lifted them high.

"Now how could I?" she questioned. "Mrs. Pelham did say such a lot, and I am such a one for forgetting."

"I don't mean everything, of course. Don't be a goose! I mean what she said about your making friends with—with Tom, Dick, and Harry. She warned you that——"

"Tom, Dick, and Harry. Fiddle-de-dee and fee-fo-fum, and all the rest of it. Who is to know whether there are any Toms and Dicks and Harrys at Cloverfield?"

Grace looked vexed, which perhaps was natural; one likes to be allowed to finish one's sentences.

"I wish you would let me speak," she said; "you ought to listen to me, and it is extremely rude to interrupt. What Mrs.

Pelham said was that you made friends much too quickly. And she was quite right. You ought to remember that father is a gentleman, and that he is a colonel, and that mother is very highly connected, and not be so——”

“ So what ? ”

“ So dreadfully free and easy.”

For a moment Trixy's face was full of fun and mischief, then it sobered down. This was because she was thinking hard. She had a turn for verse-making, or rhyme-stringing, as her sister called it. The present occasion deserved, so at least she considered, a special effort. Her smooth brow had puckers and lines upon it while she was in the throes of composition. These had gone before she favoured her sister with her inspiration—

“ Do be careful, my dear Trixy,
Mrs. General said,
In Society don't be mixy,
That is underbred.
Keep your nose well in the air,
Smile and look quite scornful.
That's the way to keep select,
Though it's rather mournful.”

" I've got the right idea, haven't I, now ?
And the right expression ? "

Miss Beatrix Farleigh posed ; she did it well ; she managed to assume a haughty expression suited to her rhyme ; she held her head high and tilted a nose already just a wee bit upturned. Grace had to laugh, but she did not do it willingly.

" I don't think you ought to make fun of Mrs. Pelham," she said in her sternest voice.

" I wouldn't if I had been fond of her, Gracie. No, I declare that I wouldn't. But I never could get fond of her, though I tried hard. I kept on trying all the twelve months that we were with her. Now, when we were at school in London, I liked Mrs. Walton and I loved some of the teachers. I was awfully sorry that mother and father thought it better for us to leave town."

" They wanted us to have country air ; they did not think we were as strong as we should be."

" They didn't think *you* were, Grace ; you are not, either. But *I* am as strong as a lion. And Southsea isn't the country,

though there is lovely sea air there. And it is going to be the country for us now, anyway. So that is settled, and what is the use of kicking?"

Grace intimated that she was not doing so, and that she would not consider it ladylike. There was, for the moment, a glint of fun in her eyes.

"Anyway," Beatrix went on, "I am not sorry to part from Mrs. Pelham. I don't believe that *you* are either, not really. I know what I *am* sorry to leave, though, those military bands on the pier. I do love bands. Mrs. Pelham was always willing to take us there, I own that. She says she is so fond of music, but I think she liked looking at the audience better and meeting her friends. And she could crochet all the while; what horrid niggly work crochet is, to be sure."

"And you had to leave off chattering while the music was going on, that must have given poor Mrs. Pelham a nice rest."

"Don't be so elder-sisterly, Grace. You are not a bit nice when you talk that way. And there is no one here to hear you, so what is the use of showing off?"

" I *am* your elder sister, Trixy, so why shouldn't I talk like one? And as for being fond of bands, it is a pity that we are. There won't be any music or any amusements at Cloverfield, I can tell you. You had better make up your mind to that, my dear."

" That's a pity, but I dare say it will be great fun living in the country for all that. Don't you think so? "

" I am sure I don't know ; we've never tried it, have we? We've got to learn by experience."

Beatrix nodded approval of this remark before she said, " Experience is a hard taskmaster. I've read that somewhere. But it can't always be true, for sometimes experiences are very pleasant."

Her spirits were not to be damped. She was, however, quiet again for a few moments, and once more absorbed in looking out of the window at the landscape. The train was not going at any great rate, and there was a good deal to see and admire. The child's voice, with a little bubble of laughter rendering it uncertain, broke out again—

" Please, dear Mrs. General,
I should like to know
All those pretty cows and pigs,
Standing in a row.

" I should like to speak to them,
But I quite expect,
You will tell me sternly,
They are not select."

She chanted the words that had worked themselves into her queer little rhyming brain, very gaily.

" You see," she explained, " it really will be a puzzle. Whenever I see any one I shall be asking myself whether Mrs. General Pelham would consider him or her fit for us to associate with. How is one to tell if it is a stranger? You can't ask a person right off whether she (it will most likely be a she) is well connected. You can't say that you have been told that, being Colonel Farleigh's daughter, you mustn't be friends with tradespeople. Girls and boys ought to be labelled. And the cows and pigs and sheep, how is one to know about them? "

Beatrix began to laugh again. When she did this she looked so very good-natured that it was hard to be angry with her. But her sister said—

“ I think you are extremely silly, and not at all polite.” This was all the reward the poetess got for her achievement. But she did not worry. No, not she! She just smiled in her saucy way, tossed her head, and rattled on.

Whether Grace listened or no was uncertain. She was not very strong, and the journey, though it was not a very long one, tired her. The two girls had been placed under the care of a lady who was travelling their way, but her destination having been reached about a quarter of an hour since, they were ending their journey alone. Of course they were to be met at Cloverfield Station ; they began to wonder by whom.

Grace was of opinion that the correct thing would be for the Reverend Herbert Guest and his wife to be there to greet them ; they would naturally come in a carriage. Trixy was not concerned about how they came, but full of curiosity as

to what a clergyman was like when you came close to him.

"I never saw one except in the pulpit," she said, her bright eyes twinkling, "and I don't know how I shall like one out of his gown; it won't seem natural."

After this remark she left off chattering, and was a trifle subdued. Trixy Farleigh was capable of feeling shy and nervous now and then.

She explained her reason in this fashion.

"Of course Mrs. and the Reverend Guest won't bite, I am quite aware of that, but I feel just as frightened as if they would. I say, Grace, we are slowing up, the train is going to stop. I believe this next station is Cloverfield."

So it proved to be. First the girls saw what seemed like a wood, but it was not. The trees they looked at were those that filled Squire Winterbourne's fine park: by and by they became familiar with the grand avenue that led up to Winterbourne House, and took a keen delight in wandering there. Then they caught sight of Sir John Fitz-William's magnificent estate,

with the lake shimmering golden in the sunshine, overhung by gracefully drooping weeping-willows, and the lodge all covered with roses, while between the foliage there was the old white house, stately and beautiful.

All this was fair to see and extremely imposing, giving a sense of perfect peace and plenty. But it was not until they drew near the station and saw the little village green that Trixy clapped her hands for joy. There had been rain recently, and the grass looked wonderfully fresh, while the paths were white and clean. As they drew into the station they could see the children at play, and the small toy-like houses and the little inn with its archway; this was dignified by the title of hotel, but no one was deceived by such a high-sounding name, depend upon that. The wagoners drew up outside the "Wheat-sheaf" and gave their horses water to drink while they themselves had something stronger, but for the most part there was not much over-drinking in Cloverfield, the one policeman had a quiet and easy time there. There was a bench out-

side the "Wheatsheaf," and the landlord and his wife sat there in the afternoon sunshine; he was smoking, she was knitting, their children were playing near them. A party of excursionists had come in from a neighbouring place; one of them was playing the concertina while lads and lasses danced to the simple music. The girls could see all this from the window of the railway carriage. Then the train stopped at a pretty countrified station. On the railway bank the word "Cloverfield" was planned out with lumps of white chalk, very regular in size. The station-master's garden was well in view, arranged on a slope and full of nice, old-fashioned flowers—cabbage-roses, poppies, and fragrant mignonette. It was really very pretty.

But the girls could not take in all its beauty, because they were sending their quick glances all along the platform, looking for a lady and gentleman.

"I don't believe the Guests are here!" exclaimed Trixy as she jumped out. "What are we to do? We shan't know where to go."

Her voice, clear and loud, reached the ears of a girl and boy who stood side by side on the platform, scanning the incoming train. These were Robin and Phoebe Guest, and both came forward quickly. The boy was smiling broadly, the girl looked rather grave and more than rather shy.

From this complaint her brother did not suffer.

“ Oh, yes, the Guests *are* here ! ” he shouted at the top of his voice ; “ don’t make any mistake about that. This is Phoebe Guest, and this ”—tapping himself on the chest vigorously—“ is Robin Guest. They have come to meet two girls called Grace and Beatrix Farleigh. You are the girls. That is right, isn’t it ? ”

Grace looked at him in her most dignified fashion. He was rather older than herself ; she came to that conclusion at once. He was tall for his age, he wore stout boots and stockings and knickerbockers of rough tweed. His shirt had a soft, comfortable collar to it, there was no cap on his head. You had a full view of an unshadowed, sunburnt face, of a head of

thick, curly brown hair, the outer strands of which were bleached by the sun. For the rest he had good-natured eyes and a good-natured mouth, and looked full of fun and mischief. Phoebe, on the contrary, was quiet and demure in appearance ; she, like her brother, was hatless and gloveless—they had both come out of the house without making any addition whatever to their attire. And what a plain, shabby linen frock Phoebe's was, to be sure ! and how brown her hands were, and, indeed, her arms also, for her sleeves were short enough to show two-thirds of them. And how badly she did her hair ! This was of a light brown colour and parted in the middle. It was plaited very tightly, and made a poor show. She looked and was about a year older than Trixy ; but Trixy's sister thought that any comparison between the two was bad for Phoebe Guest.

The girls shook hands, feeling awkward and embarrassed. At that moment Trixy looked at Robin and Robin looked back at her. The twinkle in the eyes of the former had a good effect. Those of the

latter twinkled also, one electric spark had lighted another.

"Have you brought the carriage?" said Trixy; "we want to get to the Vicarage as quickly as we can. We are rather tired and very hungry. It is ever so much past tea-time, isn't it? I do like my tea, don't you?"

"I like all my meals," responded Robin; "I've got no end of an appetite. I've had my tea, though. But yours is waiting for you; don't look anxious."

He laughed merrily.

"We can oblige you with tea, but we can't oblige you with a carriage," he went on; "we haven't got such a thing. We are not millionaires, or billionaires, or multi-millionaires, or anything of the kind."

"We have always been used to driving," said Grace quickly; "I am not a good walker."

"Sorry," replied Robin, "but it is only a very little way to the Vicarage; you just have to walk to the top of Steep Hill, and there you are."

"Steep Hill!" Grace frowned.

"Which isn't very steep, though it is

called so ; at least, I don't think so. You'll soon get used to it."

" It is so very short that you are at the top of it before you know that you have begun to climb."

Phoebe made this encouraging remark. Robin was giving orders to a red-faced porter as to the luggage, chaffing him and making him laugh. Grace was just thinking that to be familiar with a porter showed that Robin Guest was no gentleman, when the boy quietly took the little bag she carried from her hand, and relieved Trixy of the umbrellas and sunshades of which she had taken charge. Thus the little procession filed out of Cloverfield Station into the sweet-scented country air.

" I wonder whether you are Grace or Beatrix? " Robin said to his companion. The two elder girls were walking in front of them.

" Which do you think? "

" I am bothered if I know."

" I'm Beatrix, but they call me Trixy ; at least most people do."

" I'd like to call you Trixy, too, it suits

you. Only I should spell it differently from the way it is usually spelt."

"How would you spell it?"

"I should spell it T-r-i-c-k-s-y, for you look as if you were full of tricks and mischief."

They both laughed together.

"Aren't you, now?" quizzed the boy.

"Wait and see," replied the girl. They laughed again, and the couple ahead of them wondered how they managed to find anything amusing to talk about, and wished they could do the same; one of them at least had the desire. This was Phoebe. Grace thought that it was silly and undignified to make friends in five minutes, or even less. She did hope that Trixy was behaving properly, but she was not at all sure of the point. You never knew what the child would do next, she reflected.

CHAPTER II

AT THE VICARAGE

THE first thing that struck Grace Farleigh with regard to the Vicarage was its extreme shabbiness. The carpets were worn, in some cases almost threadbare; in the bedrooms the floor was covered with linoleum with a strip of carpeting at the bedside and a rug or so here and there. Grace had seldom seen a house of this description, and she was not at all pleased.

Now what struck Trixy was something quite different. She was immensely impressed by the view from the windows, and at once caught sight of the garden with its wealth of trees and flowering bushes, its tangled rose-trees rich with blossom, its flaunting sunflowers, its encroaching marigolds, its purple heliotropes, its scarlet geraniums. The Vicar-

age garden was large enough to require the daily attendance of an expert gardener, if one wished to do it justice. But labour is expensive, and so it had to rely for the most part on the exertions of the vicar himself assisted by Robin. Mrs. Guest and Phoebe lent a hand when they could, but they were intermittent labourers though willing ones. It is, however, probable that Trixy would not have been so delighted if she had seen ribbon-beds, trimmed trees, and everything in the best order. What caught her fancy was the luxuriant foliage, the free growth of everything. It was Nature left to have her own way that pleased her, though she would not have been able to put her thought into words.

They had tea in the dining-room, and Mrs. Guest poured it out. She was a quiet-looking lady, rather thin and tired-looking, but very active. Nothing could have been much simpler than her style of dress, nevertheless even Grace acknowledged that she was a lady. This when the two sisters had an opportunity of talking the matter over together. The Reverend

Herbert Guest made his appearance before long. Trixy fairly gasped when she saw him coming across the lawn; she could not believe her eyes. He looked like a farmer, he was so big and burly, so tanned and rosy, so jolly and laughter-loving. His voice was strong and full enough to fill a cathedral; he raised it to speak to the little company, addressing them through the open French window in this fashion.

"Sorry to be so late, wife; sorry not to be able to meet you, my dears, at the station, had to send the youngsters instead. Poor old soul ill up Four Corners way. You don't know where that is, but you will before long. Glad you haven't finished your tea, for I haven't had bite or sup since the bit of lunch I got at twelve o'clock, and I have got an appetite like—oh, there is nothing big enough to compare it to."

He was in the room now, beaming good-naturedly upon every one, and talking in his quick way. He said a good deal in a short time because he had a trick of missing words that he considered unnecessary. He shook the girls by the

hand, his own feeling to them very large and strong. That he was hungry was quite clear, but he found time to press his guests to eat more and to twit them on their "ridiculous little appetites." After the meal was over and the table cleared he chanced to catch Trixy with her eyes fixed on his face. His own lighted up with amusement.

"Now I wonder what you think of me?" he said.

Trixy coloured, and Mrs. Guest whispered, "Don't, Herbert!" for she was afraid of upsetting the new arrival, who was not yet accustomed to her husband's ways. But Beatrix rose to the occasion, having observed the whimsical smile with which Mr. Guest accompanied his question. She scented fun, and that set her at ease. She could be funny herself if she liked. Her eyes sparkled as she said—

"I think you are a—a very unexpected sort of gentleman?"

He was not in the least offended, only amused.

"Now I wonder what you mean?" he said; "it sounds like a puzzle. You don't

want me to work it out, do you? You are going to be good enough to give me the key. Why does Miss——”

He lifted his eyebrows and waited for her to supply the missing name.

“Miss Beatrix Farleigh.”

“Right you are; you see, I didn’t know which from which. Why does Miss Beatrix Farleigh find me an unexpected sort of gentleman?”

She explained that she had never seen a clergyman before out of the pulpit, and she had always thought that they would be quite different from the one who was now before her.

“Good, my dear,” replied the Reverend Herbert. “That’s a straight answer to a straight question, and it does you credit. But you may take it from me that clergymen are of all sorts, just like soldiers and sailors and all the rest. There are no two human beings alike anywhere in this wonderful world of ours, there are no two faces alike, there are no two hands alike. It is marvellous, but it is true.”

He seemed to be talking half to himself, half to his attentive hearer. She nodded

her head and smiled ; she was pleased that he should converse with her in this grown-up fashion, it made her feel quite tall and dignified.

“ We are all going to be the best of friends, are we not ? ” Mr. Guest turned to Grace to make this remark. She bowed politely, but she did not say anything. Phoebe told her mother, a few days later, that Grace Farleigh did not like them the least little bit, but was assured that it was too soon to tell how things were going to turn out ; all they had to do, as a family, was to try to make their visitors feel quite at home, to be as kind and hospitable as ever they could. So Phoebe suggested that they should go for a walk together. It was a bright morning and the three girls started. On this occasion Phoebe wore a hat. “ But such a hat ! ” Grace whispered to her sister, “ almost better to go without one than to wear such a thing.” It was white, or had been ; the sun had baked it to a queer colour now, and taken the colour out of the plain ribbon round the crown of it.

“ Are you ready—really ready ? ” Grace

asked as Phoebe joined them in the porch.

"Why, yes, of course I am. What makes you think I am not?"

The question was quite a natural one, for Grace's remark had been accented very strongly.

"You haven't got your gloves on."

"I never wear gloves except on Sunday. That is the blessing of living in the country, you haven't got to dress up. What is the use of gloves? And I do hate them, they are so uncomfortable."

"The use of gloves is that if you do not wear them your hands are not fit to be seen. Mrs. Pelham says that ladies never go out without gloves."

"Who is Mrs. Pelham?"

"Mrs. Pelham is the lady with whom we have lived for the last year."

"Well, she doesn't know much, I can tell her, for mother often goes out without gloves, and so do other ladies in Cloverfield. I am afraid that Mrs. Pelham must be rather silly."

Now Grace Farleigh had a temper, and it was very easily roused. Phoebe also

was inclined to be passionate, so they glared at one another, and were both ready to speak at once. It was most fortunate that they caught sight of Robin at the moment. He was coming towards them at a swinging pace. He had a lot to say, in which, as indeed in some other respects, he resembled his father. He had been playing cricket and one or two amusing incidents with regard to the game had to be told and laughed at. He was going home, but now that he had met the girls he changed his mind. Why shouldn't he go with them wherever they were going?

"Oh, do come!" Trixy cried in her hearty way. That settled the matter, and turned the attention of Grace and Phoebe from what seemed likely to prove a dangerous topic. They chatted more pleasantly together, and the former tried to show a little interest in what was pointed out for her observation.

Meanwhile Robin and Trixy walked together, and there was no lack of talk or laughter.

"You've been with us for three days

now," said the boy; "how do you like Cloverfield?"

Beatrice was enthusiastic. She announced herself as delighted with the country—indeed, with everything. The Vicarage was a dear old house with a dear old garden; she had seen the river and she loved it. Mrs. Guest was ever so nice and so good. What a lot of poor people she did help, to be sure! And Phoebe, too. She had not known that girls of Phoebe's age could do much, but had found out that she was mistaken. Phoebe's father said that she was going to be his right hand, and that then he would have two right hands, for his wife was the other.

"I shall be better than ambidextrous," he had pronounced with his jolly laugh.

"I'm awfully glad you like the place, and awfully glad that you don't dislike us," said Robin. "It's a pity Grace doesn't think the same as you. She is the other way about. She despises Cloverfield and Cloverfield folk, and she thinks us common. It isn't a bit of good saying that she doesn't, because she does."

Trixy looked rather pained and held her peace.

"And who is this Mrs. Pelham that she is always quoting," Robin grumbled on, "I should like to know? Why are we all to go by what she says?"

"I'm sure I don't know. Who said you were to do that?"

"Nobody in so many words, but Grace was talking yesterday to me and Phoebe, and it was Mrs. Pelham, Mrs. Pelham all the while. Mrs. Pelham said that it was not ladylike to do this or to say that, and Mrs. Pelham would not allow you to associate with any one who was not—oh, I really don't remember all the rubbish Grace talked! And it was common to say this and common to do that, and not high class to wear that or not to wear the other. Such twaddle. Your sister Grace is uncommonly silly."

Robin was waxing warm; the angry look in his eyes kindled a twin light in Trixy's.

"You mustn't call my sister silly, not even if she is," she said. "You wouldn't like me to call yours silly."

"I would if she were, but she isn't."

" Well, I won't let you talk like that about Grace, anyway ; I wouldn't let you if she were an idiot. And she is very clever. You don't know what a lot she knows. Mrs. Pelham says that she never met a girl with so much—so much brain power."

" Now, look here, Trixy, if you are going to quote Mrs. Pelham too, I'm off."

" Good riddance to bad rubbish ! "

" Did the aristocratic Mrs. Pelham teach you to say that ? "

Trixy had to laugh ; she did it so heartily that immediately they were friends again. So they walked on chatting and laughing, and nothing very particular happened until they passed a low-roofed cottage with a front garden that was a mere riot of flowers. You could not see the earth in which they were planted they grew so luxuriantly. It was a thatched cottage, and a wonderful purple clematis grew over it ; this was in full bloom. The porch was covered with roses ; there was a dovecot, and one had a good view of two pretty birds who curtsied to one

another, bowing their little heads and cooing softly. The cottage had a green door and a brass knocker—a lion's head, by the way. Robin said this was Woodbine Cottage, and that it belonged to a Mrs. Snuggs.

As they neared it a boy and a girl rushed out, got on to the gate and sat there, swinging their legs. They were as simply dressed as was possible and looked in keeping with the cottage. Both of them had short hair of a reddish colour—let us call it auburn—both of them had freckled faces, both of them had blue eyes, and noses rather turned upwards, but not disagreeably so. The girl was hatless, so was the boy; they were ridiculously like each other, and you did not need to be told that they were twins. Robin did, however, give his companion this quite unnecessary piece of information, furthermore he informed her that their name was Pontifex. This was why she said directly—

“But the woman who owns the cottage is called Snuggs; you told me so yourself, didn't you?”

“But they are not Mrs. Snuggs's

children, bless you, they are lodging with her. They come all the way from London. She used to be their nurse, and a little while ago the two of them had influenza very badly, so they were sent down here because the air of Cloverfield is considered so healthy."

"Their nurse; why they look——"

"What do they look?"

Robin spoke fiercely, but Trixy held her own.

"They don't look as if their mother and father would have kept a nurse for them, they look——"

"Oh, say 'common' while you are about it. Say Mrs. Pelham would not have liked you to speak to them. Fire away, I don't care!"

But Trixy did not say anything of the kind, she merely remarked that Robin was extremely rude and not at all good-tempered, and that she did not want to walk with him any more. He made a grimace and left her; she looked over her shoulder and saw him talking nineteen to the dozen to the Pontifexes. Phoebe spoke to them also. Grace and Beatrix walked on.

"I should have liked to speak to those twins," the latter said, speaking rather sadly, "but Robin lost his temper. I shall try to make a piece of poetry about boys losing their temper and put a moral to it if I can. I call it silly to be so touchy, don't you?" But Grace did not reply; she was touchy herself, and had the good taste not to blame others for a failing she could not as yet resist.

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CHAPTER III

WHERE OPINIONS DIFFER

THAT afternoon Trixy and Robin were at variance. He told her that she was "about the most hoity-toity, nose-in-the-air girl" he had ever met. Trixy bore this accusation silently at first; when it was repeated she faced her accuser. She had a good deal to say to him, and her command of language was excellent; her words came tumbling one over the other, no need to wait and think, there they were ready to her tongue.

"I haven't done anything wrong, and I liked the look of those twins," she said by way of conclusion.

"Oh, I see!" he cried; "you wanted to be introduced to the Pontifexes, though you sneered at them."

Now this speech made his hearer very angry; she was not a sneerer and she had not sneered. She would have him understand that. She had just said that the Pontifexes did not look as if their mother and father would have kept a nurse for them; there was no harm in that. Then Robin had gone off like a firework; he had said she meant all sorts of things that she did not mean. And she would not put up with it. She looked very severe for a moment, then the corners of her mouth went down and her whole expression changed. For she was hurt as well as angry. That softened Robin's heart. He began to eat humble pie very quickly, and very gracefully too. He admitted that he had been a bit hasty, but he thought that Beatrix was like her sister, that Mrs. Pelham had stuffed the same silly ideas into her head. Beatrix denied this. Mrs. Pelham had tried to stuff, she explained, but nothing had gone in. And she would be obliged if Robin would not think at all if he could not think anything wiser than that.

Robin grumbled something about

having apologized, and wasn't that enough? It appeared that it was; they shook hands, and somewhere or other they buried the hatchet. Out in the garden, perhaps, for there they betook themselves; and Robin having routed his father out of his study and Phoebe from her room, the four of them played a capital game of tennis. Grace was in a lazy mood, or maybe rather tired from her morning's walk, so she watched them from a deck-chair and criticized Robin and Phoebe. She could not say that they were not excellent tennis players, but she gave it as her opinion that they were "most awkward in their movements." When she made this remark to Trixy, however, the latter only said, "Fiddlesticks! What does it signify if they are? Besides, when I come to think of it, they are not." This did not encourage further carping.

But though Trixy had quite forgiven Robin, she was still a trifle haughty with him. When he said that he would take her up to Woodbine Cottage if she liked, for the Pontifexes were awfully jolly and

she ought to make their acquaintance, she tossed her head and said—

“Oh, it is of no consequence whatever,” and poor Robin merely grunted.

However they were friends again. He was glad of that, and if she were still a bit inclined to “the nose-in-the-air” manner, well, what could you expect of a girl? “Girls,” he reflected, “are so odd, you can’t understand them.”

Beatrix slipped away from them when the game of tennis was over; she had a fancy for being by herself now and then. Of this Grace was well aware. The vicar asked her whether she knew what had become of her sister.

“My sister likes to be alone sometimes because she writes poetry,” she said in her grandest tone. “She has a great talent for it. Mrs. Pelham thinks that she will be a celebrated poetess when she grows up.”

“Oh, indeed,” said Mr. Guest; “you don’t say so. That is a grand future for her, I am sure.”

He spoke gravely, but Grace was not sure that there was not a twinkle of

amusement in his eyes. She could not see that there was anything to be amused at.

"We haven't had many women poets," the good gentleman remarked; "there was Mrs. Browning and Christina Rossetti, to be sure. They hold a high place in the realm of verse. Now, what style of poetry is your sister's likely to be?"

Grace wished she could see the vicar's mouth, but he had covered it with his hand. She continued speaking with dignity.

"Trixy's style is humorous up to the present; at least, she only reads me her humorous verses. Mrs. Pelham did tell me that her sad and sentimental verses are also very good, but she is shy about showing them."

"Ah, yes, I see. Do you think Trixy is composing a poem now? And have you the least idea where one would be likely to find her? One never wishes to break in upon 'the divine afflatus' or upset it in any way. But there goes the bell for tea, and the wife" (he always spoke of Mrs. Guest in this way) "has to go out directly afterwards, so we must

unearth our poetess and bring her back to the common but rather pleasant things of daily life. I understand that there are to be strawberries and cream."

Grace did not know where Trixy was likely to be, so Mr. Guest called to Robin to go and find the wanderer, and off he went. A fence separated the garden from a field that belonged to the Vicarage. Robin, walking very softly, drew near to this same fence, for he discovered that Trixy was sitting upon it, swinging her legs and singing gaily. He had heard what Grace said to his father—in fact, he was chuckling in the background listening to the conversation, though neither of them knew this. And it occurred to him that Miss Beatrix Farleigh was perhaps singing something of her own composition.

Trixy had a nice fresh voice ; powerful, too, for her age. This is what Robin Guest heard—

"Robin Guest is the funniest boy—
Ah, me! The Pontifexes!
One can't even mention them
Lest his tender soul it vexes.

“But one day I'll know a twin,
Boy or girl, and which the sex is,
I don't care a little bit—
Ah, me! The Pontifexes!”

Robin's laugh rang out so heartily and startled his hearer so much that she nearly fell off the fence. She got down directly when she found who the interrupter was, and asked him why he had not called out to let her know he was coming. But Robin replied that that would have spoilt the fun. Were there any other verses, that was what he wished to know? Trixy said there might have been if he had not come upon her so suddenly, but that now the rest had slipped out of her head. When she heard that tea was ready she was, however, quite willing to go indoors.

The family were already at the table. They all looked very bright and cheerful; even Grace was thawing as she listened to the vicar's funny stories; he always had some of these on hand. Yet he could be serious enough when he chose, sad, too, when there was trouble in the village; and where is there not trouble to be

found? As soon as tea was over he and his wife were going as far as the Four Corners to visit a sick woman. It was a lovely evening, and while they announced their intention they both detected a look of wistful inquiry in the eyes of one of their two guests. The fact was that Trixy, fresh to the country and delighting in it, was envying these two their proposed walk in the evening stillness. The Reverend Herbert smiled and said—

“Now, what is it, my dear? What do you want? Just say the word.”

He had a talent for reading faces ; this was because his sympathies were so quick and keen. Trixy blushed and confessed that she was longing to go out again, that she had not yet been to the Four Corners ; furthermore, that she had not seen the church. She knew that it was on Red Hill, and that you went to Red Hill by way of Four Corners. Robin had mentioned that fact to her. She waited with a smiling face for what Mr. and Mrs. Guest would say to this. They both felt that the only thing to be done was to suggest that she should accompany them.

While they were visiting the poor woman Trixy could walk on to St. Stephen's, and go in and see all that there was to be seen. Then she could wait there until they rejoined her. How would that suit?

It suited admirably. And Trixy said so. It was clear that Mr. Guest was very proud of his church; he spoke of its beautiful painted windows and its white marble font.

"St. Stephen's is a very old church," said he, "and folk come from quite a distance to have a look at it, especially in the summer-time, when there are visitors at some of the neighbouring places."

"I am glad that it isn't a large church," replied Beatrix; "I like little ones ever so much better."

She put on her hat directly and was ready to start, full of pleasant anticipation. Some persons can be pleased without showing it in their faces; she could not, therefore it was good to look into her contented grey eyes and at her smiling mouth.

"Where are your gloves?" asked Grace sternly.

"Oh, bother, I needn't put gloves on," replied Trixy.

"You *must* put them on. Go and fetch them directly!"

Grace spoke so crossly that Trixy felt rebellious.

She looked appealingly at Mrs. Guest.

"Need I really?" she asked.

"No, dear, I don't think it is at all necessary this evening."

Mrs. Guest answered her gravely.

Grace's temper was roused; it was an imperious one, and Mrs. Pelham had encouraged it by spoiling her and allowing her to domineer over her sister.

"I told you to change your gloves, and you've got to do it, Trixy," she said angrily. "You know how unladylike it is ever to go out without gloves, and how ugly and brown and rough your hands will get if you don't wear them constantly. And you know how vexed Mrs. Pelham would be if you went out not dressed properly. Besides, she always said that you were to do what I told you."

Trixy shrugged her shoulders and made

for the door, ready to fetch the missing articles.

“ Stay ! ” said Mrs. Guest quietly. “ I have already given you permission to go out with me without gloves, Trixy. That settles the matter.”

“ But,” began Grace, her usually pale face red with anger, “ I told Trixy she must put them on, and Mrs. Pelham says—”

“ One moment, my dear. I want you to understand that your mother and father have placed you here with us, and given me the right to take your mother’s place for a while. If there are any orders to be given to your sister—and I hope there will be very few ; we don’t manage things that way at the Vicarage—I alone must give them. And there must be no talking about Mrs. Pelham ; at all events, no referring to her. You must let me judge for you both, and you may rely upon it that I will give you as much liberty as I possibly can, for we believe in liberty here. But when I speak it must be final.”

How much it cost this gentle lady to

make her little speech the girls never knew. She got through it with a quiet dignity that did her credit. She said her say and there was an end of it—at least, so she hoped. Trixy was standing in perplexed silence when the vicar's cheery voice roused her.

"We must be off now," he said. "Come, wife; come, Trixy!"

And the three went forth into the quiet and calm of the early evening. For quite three minutes Trixy was silent; she was wondering whatever Grace must be thinking, and how soon she would recover her temper after being rebuked.

CHAPTER IV

TRIXY MAKES NEW FRIENDS

THE walk was a delightful one, and when Trixy left her friends at the gate of Mrs. Pratt's cottage there came upon her a pleasant, unaccustomed sense of independence that was quite new to her. She waved her hand to them and trotted off gaily; when she was alone she talked to herself.

"This is most awfully jolly," she said; "in London when we were at school we all walked together like a flock of sheep, and the teachers were the sheep-dogs. At Southsea there was always Mrs. Pelham, with her gold-rimmed glasses and her Roman nose, and the plume of feathers in her bonnet nod, nod, nodding. But how different this is, and how much more pleasant! Here I am, all alone, on the

king's highway. It is ever so much better to trust a girl of fourteen ; she ought not to be treated as if she were a mere baby. Oh, I do like Cloverfield ! "

She quickened her pace, for she could see the church at the top of the hill. What a hilly place Cloverfield was, to be sure ! St. Stephen's Church was a small one, as she had been told, with a square tower to it, a wonderful peal of bells, and a quaint old clock. It stood in the midst of a churchyard in which were many grave-stones. None of these were white and fresh, and some were covered with moss or ivy. There were no burials here now ; those who died in Cloverfield were laid to rest in the little cemetery on the hill.

The view was really a lovely one. What masses of trees there were everywhere, and there was the river, winding in and out in a silver line. The cattle on the hills were mere specks. Cloverfield houses, of all shapes and sizes, with their red roofs and the blue smoke from their chimneys wreathing upwards, were improved by distance and looked very picturesque.

"Yes, I do like Cloverfield," said Trixy emphatically. It was so still here that the sound of her own voice was strange to her. She waited for a moment and listened; the birds were twittering a good-night song, to their little ones perhaps. It was all very peaceful. She walked quietly on, pausing from time to time to try and decipher a worn inscription on a headstone. Here was a grave where years and years ago a little child had been buried. A bush of white roses grew upon it; loving hands had planted and tended this, loving hearts had mourned, loving eyes had filled with tears, loving lips had prayed.

Trixy Farleigh, young and gay and full of life though she was, felt a pang of sadness. How could she help it? She was so happy and the world seemed so beautiful that she could not imagine that any one would leave it willingly. How fine the trees were, to be sure, and what a variety of them! Here were chestnuts, there weeping-willows, farther on holly-bushes that would be covered with red berries before long. Ivy clung to the grey stone

walls of the church, mounting boldly to the belfry and even higher.

Mr. Guest had said that the church would be open; he was quite right, Trixy had but to turn the handle of the door and enter. She did so very quietly, and having accustomed her eyes to the dimness of the building stood still and looked around her.

"I like St. Stephen's Church," she said, "and I like those beautifully painted windows. Now, what do they all mean?"

She passed from one to the other and discovered that each illustrated an event in the life of Christ. She lingered longest at that which showed Him when He was smiling on the little child who had been "set in the midst." The face of the Saviour was so gentle, so beautiful, so divine. Trixy continued to make her remarks aloud. She would have been shy had she known that she was being watched. But of this she was perfectly unconscious. Yet two pairs of eyes were fixed upon her blue ones—the property of Kit and Polly Pontifex. They were sitting demurely in a pew waiting for some one. Let them

speak for themselves later on and say who that some one was. When the heavy door was opened gently and they saw Beatrix enter, Kit whispered—

“Let's lie low and see what she is up to.”

Polly nodded assent ; she nearly always agreed with her twin, and was invariably ready to scent fun in the air, also to enter into it with considerable spirit if she got the chance. So at a signal she followed her brother's example and ducked down in the pew as long as the newcomer's face was turned their way ; as soon as her back was towards them up they popped again. They watched her move from window to window, talking all the while, heard her observations and were interested in them, nudged one another and giggled. It was not until she sat down, examined a hymn-book, and said—

“Ah, I see, they use the Ancient and Modern hymn-book here,” that Kit squeaked out—

“Yes, they do, my dear.”

Polly echoed his words. It amused them both immensely to see Trixy stand

with her head on one side, and her eyes wide open, listening. They thought she looked like an eager bird. Kit whispered to his sister—

“She isn’t a bit frightened, and I like the look of her.”

Nor was she. It took a good deal to scare Beatrix Farleigh.

“Who is there?” she said quickly.

No answer. She began to make her search then; she peeped into the vestry first, looked behind the red curtains that protected the pew of the great man of the place—Squire Winterbourne—and even ran up the pulpit steps and looked in there. The children who watched her nearly laughed aloud when they saw her do that. Afterwards she investigated each pew in the most methodical fashion. As she neared that in which the twins were concealed she heard a faint giggle, it guided her to the right place and saved time. She laughed her merry laugh and said—

“Well, I never! If it isn’t the Pontifexes.”

They bobbed up like two jacks-in-the-box.

"How ever did you know our names?" asked one.

"And whoever are you?" asked the other.

"One at a time," replied Beatrix, "and please don't talk so loud, you two; we are in church, you know."

"Rather," replied Kit; "we know that well enough, but there isn't any service going on; don't be so mighty particular."

"I know there isn't any service going on, but church is church anyway, and you ought to talk low."

"I don't see why," said Polly; "tell us why."

But Trixy did not feel disposed to oblige them by giving reasons.

"I am Beatrix Farleigh, from South-sea," she said, "and my sister Grace and I are staying at the vicar's; he and Mrs. Guest are calling at Mrs. Pratt's. I hadn't seen St. Stephen's, so I came on here; they will come after me soon. That's all about me. You are Kit and Polly Pontifex."

"Polly and Kit, ladies first," said the girl.

"Kit and Polly; men are superior to women," corrected her brother. "But how do you come to know such a jolly lot about us?"

"I don't know a jolly lot about you, I only know your names, and where you live, and that Mrs. Snuggs used to be your nurse. But I should like to know more."

She explained how she had come by the knowledge she already possessed, finishing by saying that she and Robin had disagreed, but having too much delicacy to mention the reason.

"So Robin Guest said he would introduce you to us and you said you could introduce yourself to us," said Polly, summing up the situation, "and you've done it. So now we are friends, and there needn't be any more fuss or bother about it. We *are* friends, and there's an end of it. We *are*, aren't we?"

She looked into Trixy's grey eyes and Trixy looked back into her blue ones. Twinkle met twinkle, smile answered smile. Kit's turn came next.

"And *we* are friends too?"

"Yes," replied Trixy promptly, beaming on them both.

They proceeded to explain that they were waiting here in the church till Mrs. Snuggs turned up. She had some work to do, and they were in the habit of accompanying her. But a neighbour had called in upon her—"Mrs. Dent," Polly explained; "we don't like her; we can't stand her."

"So we cleared out," added Kit, "and whatever Snuggsy is about I am sure I don't know. Wasting her time on that sour old creature. Bah!"

He tried to look contemptuous, but when you have a *retroussé* nose it is difficult to assume the correct expression.

"Snuggsy is going to sweep out the vestry; she says it wants it," Polly said, "but I don't believe it does. She is most dreadfully particular. But sweeping is great fun; I can sweep beautifully. I love sweeping."

Kit put in a remark to the effect that if there were any reaching up to be done, or any lifting of weights, he, Christopher Pontifex, was Mrs. Snuggs's man; he

further gave her to understand that Mrs. Snuggs was an old dear and capital fun, that she had the best of tempers, and that he was afraid that he and Polly tried it a good deal sometimes.

"Especially Polly," this was how he put it. "Especially Kit," she amended. The three sat and talked with animation, and were exchanging all kinds of confidences when Polly, who sat near a window, whispered to her brother to "just look there." He and Beatrix both looked and became aware of a lady and gentleman getting out of a motor-car, followed by a little girl. All three were dressed very handsomely, and it was clear that they were going to have a look at the church. It was at this moment that Polly Pontifex said to Beatrix—

"Mrs. Snuggs shows the church to people, and she gets tips for doing it, and if she isn't here she will miss one. Say a word if you dare, Beatrix Farleigh. And laugh if you dare. I'm going to earn Snuggsy's tip and take it to her; she shan't lose it. Snuggsy is poor, mind that."

"If you let on, I'll—I'll choke you, my

dear," added Kit, shaking his fist at Trixy.

She stared at him and wondered whether they had both suddenly gone out of their minds. Then a quick thought darted into her own; she believed that she understood the situation. But how could Polly Pontifex dare to do such a thing? And of course she would be found out directly, silly girl. "I must clear out," said Kit; "if I stay here I shall be sure to give the show away. You had better come with me."

"I shan't, so there," said Beatrix firmly.

She was determined to stay and see what would happen, so she kept her place and watched developments, very curious, but a trifle alarmed. What had become of Polly she could not say, she just waited. What did she see? The gentleman and lady entered the church, the latter holding her little daughter by the hand and peering about her in rather a short-sighted fashion.

"Now this is a church that contains a great deal that is of historical interest," the lady said in a rather high-pitched

voice ; " there should be some one who can act as guide. That is always the way in the country, you never can get anything you want."

She spoke in a querulous tone ; her husband endeavoured to soothe her, he was evidently of a more cheery nature.

" But there *ought* to be some one to show us round," grumbled the lady.

At this moment there appeared before her a quaint figure. For the first moment Beatrix failed to recognize it, the next found her trying her hardest not to laugh, and remembering Kit's warning. For the person in a sunbonnet with a big coarse apron tied round her waist, and a pair of spectacles on her nose, was surely none other than Polly Pontifex, disguised in the pew-opener's working attire, which she had unearthed for the purpose, knowing exactly where to look for it. Now what was she going to do ? "

" If you please, mum," she was saying, " I'm the person as can show you round, it bein' my dooty."

Beatrix turned away and stuffed her handkerchief into her mouth to prevent



DISGUISED IN THE PEW-OPENER'S WORKING ATTIRE.



laughing. Polly looked sternly at her, and added—

“I take it, mum, that the young lady there is not along of you. But I shall be happy to show you all what there is to be seen here, and I can tell you that, from the ancient 'istorical point, there isn't a church for miles around as can compare with St. Stephen's; no, that there isn't.”

The lady and gentleman looked at the girl and seemed impressed by her earnestness.

“She looks intelligent,” whispered the former to her husband. He nodded assent.

“You will come with us,” he said to Beatrix, so she had no choice but to accompany them. She was getting nervous, though. How far would mad-cap Polly carry this joke? Trixy was afraid that she would betray herself by knowing nothing about the business she undertook so readily. She wished she was well out of a foolish affair. She did not like it being carried on in a church; church was a place for serious conduct, not idle joking. But as she followed in the wake

of the tourists and listened to Polly Pontifex pointing out this and that object of interest, and reeling off her explanations, she realized that the girl understood and enjoyed her subject thoroughly. She described each painted window, and gave the name of the artist or designer, also the period at which it was placed there. She gave the history of the church, dwelt on injury it had sustained by fire, on restorations that had been effected.

"You see, I am sure," said Polly gravely, "that every effort has been made not to spoil the beautiful edifice."

The sentence was so well put together that, at this moment, Trixy trembled lest suspicion should arise as to the speaker; she was forgetting the style of language she had at first adopted. This was not the remark of an uneducated person. But it passed unheeded, and the next moment Polly Pontifex was on her guard again. From time to time as they went on their way listening to the girl's rapid talk Trixy caught sight of Kit's face at a window; if he felt himself to be unobserved except by her he frowned, with a hint of terrible

things that would happen to her if she betrayed his sister. As if she would give a new friend away, even although she might think she was not behaving properly. Though by now Beatrix had begun to think that, as she knew Mrs. Snuggs's work so well, Polly Pontifex was almost justified in undertaking it, and earning an honest penny for the good woman. Polly really was a clever girl; she knew a lot of history. But oh, how funny she looked! Her apron was too long for her, her skirt was rather short; she was certainly extremely tall for her age, no wonder that she grew out of her clothes. She showed a good deal of a pair of long, thin legs clothed in black stockings. She had pushed her hair well back, probably that it should not be noticed that it was cut short; this gave her a bald appearance. Her sleeves were rolled up to the elbow, and her arms were a contrast in whiteness to the sunburn of her hands. Altogether she looked a strange specimen.

Just as Trixy was wondering whether the vicar would arrive upon the scene, and,

as Kit would have phrased it, "spoil all the fun," the husband and wife grew tired of looking over the church and were ready to depart. Now what was going to happen? The onlooker was full of curiosity. The gentleman was telling his guide that he was a great traveller and had visited any number of churches at home and abroad, but that he had never until now been favoured with so much information given so intelligently. It had really been quite a treat.

Polly Pontifex dropped him a curtsy.

"Thank you kindly, sir," she said; "I've just done my 'umble best."

There was a fumbling in pockets and Polly got her tip. But not one alone. Sixpence from the gentleman, sixpence from the lady. Another curtsy, deeper than the first. Trixy was afraid that her new friend would slip on the tessellated floor and stretch her length ignominiously. Nothing of the kind happened. Was there the sound of a faint chuckle without? Yes. It came from Kit, who had managed to see the end of the performance from a chosen vantage ground. The girls went

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out and watched the motor disappear round a corner. Whizz, whizz! Now it was out of sight. Kit clapped his sister so vigorously on the back that she declared he was making her feel sick. When she had retired to make herself herself again, Kit and Trixy sat down side by side on a bench under a tree and laughed until they could laugh no longer.

This is a true account of how Trixy Farleigh made friends with the twins. Of course she put it into verse. Here is her poetical rendering of the all-important incident.

"Lo! within St. Stephen's Church,
Craning of their *neckses*,
Once more do I happen on
Those queer Pontifexes.

They are making game of me,
Beatrix perplexes,
By much talking to herself,
Those poor Pontifexes.

As on Sunday Mr. Guest
May ask what the *tex'* is,
My attention must not stray
To those Pontifexes."

CHAPTER V

A PROTEST

WHEN Robin heard that Trixy had made friends with *his* friends on her own account, he was at first rather annoyed.

"There you go," he said. "Just like a girl; ready to make friends with——"

"Don't say Tom, Dick, or Harry!" exclaimed Beatrix; "I am so sick of being told that, and it *is* so silly."

"Silly or not, my dear girl, that is what it comes to. Never mind; of course I shall be out of it, but I don't care."

He glared at her. Trixy began to laugh, then checked herself and went up to him.

"You are a cross, jealous boy, and I am ashamed of you," she said; "as for doing nasty fickle things being like a girl, much you know about girls, I expect. There

is Phoebe, of course. But, then, I don't believe that she is fickle—no, I am sure that she is not."

"I was not thinking of Phoebe; she is my sister."

"And having the honour of being your sister means that she must be perfect, eh, Master Robin?"

"I didn't say so."

"I didn't say that you said so. Oh, what are we quarrelling about?"

Trixy allowed herself to laugh this time. A moment afterwards her hand rested on Robin's arm, and she was saying cheerfully—

"Now let us talk sense. You and I *are* friends, aren't we?"

"Well, I thought we were."

"No, you didn't. You knew it, and you still know it, sulky thing! Now just listen to me. I am going to be friends with the Pontifexes, because I promised them that I would, and because they are awfully jolly, and because we mean to have no end of fun together. We have arranged all that."

"There you are; there you go again.

A nice little plan that, and you made it up between you just to keep me out."

"I wish you weren't a great big boy, if you weren't I would shake you," Beatrix cried. "You are so rude, you lose your temper, and you interrupt your visitor when she is in the middle of explaining something. I was just going to tell you that——"

"That you and the blessed Pontifexes were to go about together everywhere, a sweet trio, and that I, who was their first friend and your first friend, was to be left to kick my heels alone."

"Now you've interrupted me again. Do be quiet for a moment. What I was going to say was that we settled that we three and you would make a nice little party. The Pontifexes say that their mother and father sent them to Woodbine Cottage 'to run wild'; that was their expression.

"Well, they are doing it, no mistake about that."

"Interrupting again, Robin; where *are* your manners? No one would ever imagine that you were the son of a clergyman, I am sure."

Robin smiled.

"Well, what do you say to it?" questioned Trixy; "shan't we make a nice quartette?"

Robin was himself again, the coaxing tone and coaxing eyes of his friend had conquered his ill-temper.

"We'll have no end of fun. I am glad it is holiday time," he cried; "we shall make a jolly party, the *four* of us, but I shan't call it a quartette, I shall call it Trixy and the trio."

"How queer you are. Why do you say that?"

"Because you are such a masterful sort of girl; no, not exactly masterful either. That is not the right word. What I mean is that you are the sort of girl who will always have her own way, somehow or the other you are bound to get it. Yes, Trixy and the trio, or Trixy and her trio, that would be better still. And if we are to be called anything, that is the name of us."

This was the end of their discussion and the beginning of a pleasant friendship and comradeship, sometimes dis-

turbed by slight differences of opinion, but never seriously so.

Trixy had tried hard to get her sister to make one of their small company, but failed. Grace told her plainly that she was not going to have anything to do with such shabbily dressed creatures. They were not fit to associate with; they were red-haired and snub-nosed and vulgar, and they lived in a mere hut with a low-class pew-opener.

"In fact," concluded Grace, "they are perfectly impossible persons."

"They are awfully jolly, and I don't care what you say."

"You will have to care. I shall speak to the vicar about it."

"Oh, Gracie, please don't interfere."

"I must. What would Mrs. Pelham say if she knew?"

The mention of Mrs. Pelham caused Beatrix to indulge in unbecoming grimaces. But she scented danger. The vicar might agree with her sister. Yet he allowed his boy to be intimate with the Pontifexes, so it would be all right.

It was that same evening that Grace

took her opportunity ; it really seemed made for her. The vicar happened to come into the dining-room where the two sisters were seated alone. He would have returned to his study, but Grace stopped him by saying that she had something very particular to say to him. She spoke rather nervously.

" I'm not at all in a hurry," said he as he sat down opposite her. Grace explained rather stammeringly that it was about Trixy and the friendship she had struck up " with those Pontifexes." She was quite sure that, if Mrs. Pelham knew— (here the Reverend Herbert winced, the name of Mrs. Pelham was becoming a weariness to all who lived at the Vicarage). Grace urged all she knew against her sister's new acquaintances, saying what she had said in the morning to Trixy over again. She made a great deal of her father being an officer and her mother being so well connected. Most of what she said was an echo of Mrs. General Pelham ; Mr. Guest knew that as well as Trixy did. It made him feel inclined to laugh, yet he felt rather sad too.

"Now, my dear, you've had your say and I must have mine," he answered; "fair is fair. It can all be put in a nutshell. You know, don't you, that my wife and I are old friends of your parents? That being so, you can imagine that your father and mother have great confidence in us. Nothing left to say, then, is there? Conclusion to be arrived at very simple, eh?"

He looked from one girl to the other and smiled. Both were rather puzzled.

"Not so clear to you, it appears," he went on. "Then here you are. Father and mother of two girls place them with their old friends; that means that they trust their judgment, and all the rest of it. That is the situation at the present moment with regard to you and your sister, my dear. So you just want an answer to your question, don't you?"

Grace was not aware that she had put a question—nor had she in a direct form. The vicar went on.

"You are anxious as to your sister's new friends. I admit that appearances are against them. They have been sent

down here to run wild, and they are doing it in a somewhat thorough-paced fashion. I don't know that I should go quite so far with my children, but——"

"But Phoebe and Robin are allowed to——"

"My ideas with regard to Phoebe's and Robin's style of dress, etc., are not yours, I see. But we won't go into that matter, eh? It isn't one that could possibly be under discussion between us. Now, could it?"

Grace did not make any reply. She knew that she was being put in her place, and felt reproved.

"But this affair of Trixy's concerns you, as the elder sister; you have that idea."

Grace took courage and assured him emphatically that she had.

"Hum, well, I really think that you must dismiss it. My wife and I take the responsibility. It is ours entirely. You need have no misgivings, my dear child. I assure you that these twins are perfectly fit companions for your sister; don't you worry your little mind about that. Now, what have you against them?"

Grace burst into sudden and passionate speech. She was bitter and contemptuous ; she was full of scorn ; nothing escaped her ridicule ; the appearance of the twins, the clothes they wore, the house in which they lived, all came under the lash of her tongue. Mr. Guest sighed as he listened.

" My poor, dear child," he said, " what can I say to you? Nothing but that it grieves me to hear you talk like that. Don't you know that fine clothes and fine features and a fine home are a mere accident of life ; that they do not count ; that you may find friends worth having who have none of these? "

His eyes sought hers, but she did not answer his question.

" They are common, and Trixy will get common too," she said in a sulky voice.

The vicar rose.

" I think we have said enough about all this," he said. " Here the matter ends. I have nothing against either of those children. But"—he turned to Beatrix—" I have just one word of warning to give you, my dear."

Beatrix was all attention.

"Nothing very serious," said the vicar; "it is just this. The Pontifexes are nice children, but they are always full of fun and mischief, therefore, every now and then they go too far; they have such high spirits that they forget, then they get into trouble. Now what you will have to do when you are out with them is to hold your own. You must be able to say 'No' when you know that you ought. You must not be carried off your feet by Kit and Polly. Nice children both of them, bless their hearts. But—well, I've warned you, haven't I?"

"Oh, yes, you have," replied Beatrix, "and I'll try to remember."

He pinched her cheek. Grace was sitting in gloomy silence, her head lowered. He stroked her hair as he passed.

"Remember that God made us all," he said, "brothers and sisters, belonging to one great family. Remember how it hurt the dear Christ when He found folk scorning others. Don't forget the Pharisees, and what He thought of them."

Grace rose to her feet; she was not afraid of the vicar, but yet, somehow or other, she did not dare to say anything rude to him. Yet she would not have him think that he had conquered her.

"If you please," she said, "I don't think that I shall be making any friends here. There is no one I should care to associate with, at least no one I have seen as yet, except perhaps Phoebe. As for Trixy, if she has common tastes it is not my fault and it is not Mrs. Pelham's fault; she tried her hardest, but Mrs. Pelham always did say——"

She did not finish her sentence, for Mr. Guest had escaped. If Grace had been at all observant she would have found out by this time that the mention of Mrs. Pelham's name was calculated to send folk off in double-quick time.

Directly the two girls were alone together again, the elder said—

"If the vicar thinks the matter is done with he is very much mistaken. If Mr. Guest refuses to listen to reason, others may be wiser."

"Oh, bother, don't let's talk about it

any more. Robin and Phoebe are in the garden ; they are beckoning to me. I'm off."

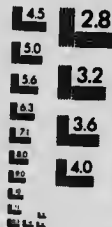
The sound of gay young laughter reached Grace as she sat writing to her mother, laying her case before her, the mark of Mrs. General Pelham on each sentence. She did not know that this very fact, revealed in her former letters, had led to her removal from an influence that quite clearly worked for ill.

" I know of no house where less of this nonsense goes on than yours, my dear old friend," the colonel wrote to the vicar ; " I know of no home where religion is less talked about and more lived out. Have my little girls with you, and ask your dear wife to be a mother to them till their own mother can be with them. Do it for pity's sake and for friendship's sake. Let them gain health of soul and health of body. I am not worrying about their education for a little while ; they are both of them quick enough ; they will soon pick up anything they may miss. Let them understand that the world is full of good, kind folk ; let them realize that ' kind



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hearts are more than coronets.' Let them know that we are worth—well, just what we are, nothing more and nothing less. I would never have placed them with Mrs. Pelham if I had known what that good lady's craze was. I hate those foolish notions more than I can say. If you can get them out of my little Grace's head you will do me a lasting service."

Knowing nothing of all this, Grace went on—

"The Pontifexes are quite impossible," she said; "please write to Mr. Guest at once and say that you cannot allow Trixy to make them her friends."

CHAPTER VI

POLLY DECIDES

AFTER this affairs at the Vicarage settled themselves more comfortably. Grace Farleigh told her sister that it was no use trying to induce her to have anything to do with the Pontifexes ; she had quite made up her mind that they were not fit company for her, and there was an end of it. Trixy had learnt by experience that it was not in her power to make Grace alter her mind when once she had made it up. Yet when Robin said, " Your sister is as obstinate as a pig, and that is the long and short of it," she was very angry with him.

" Grace is determined," she protested, " but you have no right to call her anything else, and I shall not allow you to do so."

One good thing was that Grace had taken a fancy to Phoebe. The former had her small whims and caprices, and the fact of the matter was that she enjoyed going with her new friend on errands of mercy to the poor folk round about. Phoebe was quite useful in the parish already. She was devotedly attached to her father and mother; she knew both of them had more than enough to do, and her great idea was to help them. Then she knew most of the cottagers and was intensely interested in them, so that she quite enjoyed carrying them little dainties if they were ill, or doing anything that added to their comfort. Therefore the two girls were often seen about together. Sometimes Grace condescended to enter a cottage with Phoebe, but not very often. The vicar's daughter did not particularly wish for her company, would rather leave her outside. She was keenly observant, and she was sure that Grace Farleigh was taking a rather contemptuous view of her surroundings when she found herself either in a tiny kitchen or an equally tiny and still more overcrowded

"best parlour." She was quite right. Grace proved this to her by carping remarks made afterwards. These generally took the form of questions. They were of a vague nature.

"Why are poor persons always so untidy?"

"Why are poor women never inclined to wash their children's faces?"

"Why is there such a horrible smell in cottages?"

Here are a few specimens of her style of talk, but none to convey an idea of the expression of the speaker. It was full of scorn. On one occasion this so exasperated Phoebe that, though she was very gentle and meek by nature, she became rebellious.

"If you had five children, and a sick husband, and lived in a wee house, and had only just enough, or perhaps not really enough money to buy food, you might not be quite as high and mighty as you are now, Grace Farleigh," she burst out, to the other's great astonishment, "and you might be able to understand how hard it is to be poor, and how

you don't get time for doing half that you want to do or that you know you ought to do! If *you* got up at five every morning and slaved all day you might not be quite as neat in your person as you are! And if *you* had to cook your dinner in the room that serves for kitchen, dining-room, and drawing-room, well, perhaps your house would be likely to smell of bacon and greens!"

This speech came so unexpectedly from the lips of quiet Phoebe that Grace was too astonished to reply to it. Indeed, it looked as if she were really considering whether there were not some truth in Phoebe's excuses for her poor friends.

After a little time had passed, however, she remarked that Mrs. Pelham was constantly saying that the poor were very thriftless and untidy.

Here, again, she was met by the unexpected.

"Did Mrs. Pelham visit a great deal amongst the poor? Had Mrs. Pelham many poor friends?"

The question was put in an excited manner.

"Poor *friends!* What a queer way to talk!"

"Never mind that, just answer me."

Grace had to acknowledge that Mrs. General Pelham was not in the habit of visiting any poor folk in Southsea.

"Then she does not know anything about poor folk, and she had better not talk about what she does not understand."

Once more Grace Farleigh was too taken aback to protest. She was sure she ought to say something in defence of Mrs. Pelham, but what was it to be? She made a start.

"Mrs. Pelham said——" she began.

The placid Phoebe retorted quickly.

"Sometimes I think that it was a pity that Mrs. Pelham was not dumb," said she.

Grace had her own little indignant say after that; she accused her friend of rudeness. Phoebe blushed at that.

"I am sorry," she admitted, for she was of a magnanimous disposition, "but Mrs. Pelham does seem to have talked such a lot of silly nonsense. And father says that if you haven't anything sensible to

say you had better keep silent. Oh, it is no good scolding me, Grace Farleigh. I am sick of Mrs. Pelham; there, it is out! And I'm glad I've told you. I *am* sick of Mrs. Pelham, and so is everybody else. We all want to run away when you begin talking about her. That's a fact."

This was undoubtedly a fact. After a while Grace became so keenly aware of it that she very seldom mentioned the lady's name. As sure as she began to quote her did she find herself talking to the empty air. On some excuse or the other her hearer had escaped her.

Meanwhile Trixy, the Pontifexes, and Robin were constant companions. Sometimes two went one way, two the other, but more oftener than not the four were together. Trixy positively loved calling at Woodbine Cottage to fetch her friends when they were to go on an excursion.

"They needn't call for us; it will be out of their way; let us go for them."

This was a suggestion that Robin always greeted with a smile. It amused him because he knew Trixy's reason for speaking in this fashion.

"It is just because you want to see the cat and her kittens," he would remark; "you might just as well say so outright."

This is exactly what Trixy would have done only Robin did tease her so about being so "foolishly fond" of animals. He was remarkably fond of them himself, by the way. But his point was that girls talked such nonsense to them that it quite annoyed him. Why, Trixy herself talked about *kitsy witsys* and used all sorts of babyish expressions; he really could not stand it. Trixy laughed and acknowledged that perhaps it was a bit foolish. Sometimes she would make the heroic resolve to talk sensibly to Mary Anne and her kittens; but as sure as she found herself cuddling a soft fluffy little creature did she forget all about her determination and indulge in the use of every kind of endearing term, quite regardless of whether it were appropriate or no.

On a certain late August afternoon history repeated itself.

"Well, come along," said Robin this time. "I am sure that Mary Anne and

her children will be delighted to see you."

"Yes," replied Trixy; "and Samuel will be pleased, too." Samuel was Mrs. Snuggs' name for her favourite dog. "Oh, Robin, how I do wish I had a dog of my own."

"Fiddle-de-dee," replied Robin, who was not in his best humour; "we don't want a dog here. We feel as if we couldn't have anything to do with one yet. We were so fond of Lion, and he died."

"Oh, I am sorry," replied Trixy. "I remember what you told me about poor Lion. But, you see, I did not know him. And so——"

She did not finish her sentence. She had been going to say, "And so I can't feel the same as you do about him." But she was afraid of hurting Robin's feelings.

They popped their heads into the door of the vicar's study. There he was at his writing-table as busy as a bee. Writing his sermon for Sunday, no doubt. His genial, rosy face was graver than usual, his brow was puckered, not in a

disagreeable frown but with thought. Robin explained that he and Trixy were going out with the Pontifexes. They would very likely not be back in time for tea, as they were to make quite a long excursion. Mother had said that did not signify, and proposed that they should get some milk and bread and butter at Mr. Tubb's farm, as they would pass it on the road they intended to take. Mother was out; would not be home till quite late. Did father know that?

Of course he did. Though Mr. and Mrs. Guest had been married for so long, each always knew where the other was. They were as much interested in and concerned about each other as if they were two young lovers. Mr. Guest always said that the longer you had a wife the fonder you grew of her if you had the right sort of wife, and Mrs. Guest declared that she was invariably uneasy if she did not know exactly where Herbert was. Robin believed that his mother thought such a lot of his father that she was half afraid that some one would carry him off. This was a great joke to all

the family, for the vicar was so big and heavy that he would have taken a great deal of carrying.

He looked up from his manuscript now to say in his cheery way—

“That’s all right, Robin. But be sure to see that Trixy has plenty of bread and butter; don’t let her starve or you will get me into terrible trouble with her mother and father, I can tell you.”

Then he bade Trixy “not get into any mischief,” and pinched her cheek as was his wont and smiled on them both. The vicar’s smile was so broad and kind that one felt that his blessing went with it. This was the truth.

Once outside, Trixy linked her arm through Robin’s. She looked different from the Trixy who had travelled up from Southsea on that eventful day when he was sent to meet her and her sister at Cloverfield Station. Her frock was of the simplest, fresh and clean now, though it was doubtful whether it would remain so for long, since its owner was of the tomboy order. Her white hat had suffered from the sun, and was burnt

so much that it had changed its complexion; her hands were very brown, so were her cheeks. These were considerably rounder than they had been, and bright with a healthy colour. Trixy walked with a brave swing, setting her feet firmly. These same feet were in sensible, strong brown shoes, through the soles of which one did not feel every little stone. Mrs. General Pelham would not have thought that Beatrix Farleigh looked at all stylish; she would have been much distressed to see Colonel Farleigh's daughter so simply clad. And her gloveless hands, oh, dear! and her gay, unchecked laugh, and her speech not softened because she was out of doors, but loud enough at the moment to astonish the sleepy cows and the shy sheep. But since they were her only listeners, if we except the boy who walked beside her, it really did not signify. One may walk and talk at one's ease when one is in the country surely, that is one of its great advantages.

Trixy even sang; she had a pretty voice, and Robin liked to hear her. The

words of her song were her own, she was improvising as they went.

“Hurry, Robin, hurry!
At the little gate
Kit and Polly watch for us,
And we won't be late.”

“Next, please!” cried Trixy, addressing her companion.

“I can't, really. I don't profess to be a poet.”

But Trixy would have her way; he must do his best. Wouldn't he try? He was silent for a while, thinking hard. Then he burst out with this—

“Hurry, Trixy, hurry!
See who'll get there first;
You bet I shall do it,
For you run the worst.”

“That's not true; and besides, it is not poetry.”

This was Trixy's criticism. She slipped her arm from Robin's, got a start of him, took to her heels, and arrived at the little green gate of Woodbine Cottage first, out

of breath, and with Robin just behind her. There were Kit and Polly Pontifex, swinging their long legs much as she had seen them on the first occasion of her passing by. They were dressed in their usual fashion, and if you judged by appearances, they might have been sitting there ever since. They both talked at once, and accused the newcomers of being late.

"Only ten minutes," protested Robin.

They disputed the point; there did not seem any immediate probability of settling the question. Mrs. Snuggs came out, stood in the flower-covered porch, and laughed as she listened.

She was a little round-faced woman with black eyes, and hair that had once been black also but was now of a fine iron-grey. It set in tight crinkles. She looked the picture of health and good nature.

"Say we are right, Snuggsy!" cried the Pontifexes in a breath. She was too wise for that. She merely suggested that if they meant to get any distance at all they had better start at once. Then while three of them were discussing where they

would go she talked to the fourth. This was Beatrix Farleigh, who was tired of disputing, and left the route to be decided by those who knew the neighbourhood better than she did. Mrs. Snuggs was asking her why her sister did not go with them. Trixy tried to dodge the question. But Robin spoke out.

"Miss Grace Farleigh doesn't think any one of us good enough for her," he said.

Trixy's face changed colour, her cheeks were scarlet; she was angry with Robin; he was really in a very tiresome mood this afternoon. Why did he try to make her feel uncomfortable? What was worse still was that he succeeded. She looked at Mrs. Snuggs and from her to the Pontifexes in a distressed fashion that should have made him repent. But Robin was in what may be called one of his "ugly moods"; they did not come upon him often, when they did he could make himself very unpleasant. Mrs. Snuggs came to the rescue.

"Doesn't she, now?" she said, answering him; "well, that's queer. A bit amusing, too. But I suppose the young

lady is one that judges folk by the way they look. And my young folk"—she glanced at them in what she intended to be a reproving fashion—"don't take the interest in their personal appearance that they ought; no, nor not the interest that I should like them to have, though I say so. But since their dear, kind parents have said to me that their wish is that Master Christopher and Miss Mary should 'run wild,' what can I do but allow them to do it?"

She made her speech with a quick decision and in excellent English. The twins interrupted it by casting themselves upon her and making believe to shake her. This appeared to be their form of taking vengeance when she called them other than Kit and Polly. That she refused to do so was a daily source of complaint to them. She persisted that she knew her place. They persisted that she was their dear old Snuggsy, and that there was no need for any formalities between them. Now this was perhaps the only point on which Mrs. Snuggs and her lodgers differed, or, as the good woman

put it, agreed to differ. At the moment the agreement was not very evident. The little party started, but more than once the twins turned back to shout to Mrs. Snuggs that they were Kit and Polly, and she had better not forget it. As long as her face was visible at the window of the cottage this small pantomime went on. When she withdrew it, in her wisdom, Trixy remarked—

“Well, now I suppose we really are off.”

Kit Pontifex walked beside her, and spoke to her in a low voice; he was announcing the already rather patent fact that old Robin was a bit out of temper. He wanted to know why. Trixy could not supply him with this information, nor, indeed, could Robin himself have done so.

“Where are we going?” Kit questioned.

Robin called back that they were going to the woods; he supposed that no one had anything to say against that. He spoke as if he expected to be contradicted, and was quite ready to take the conse-

quences. Polly was walking with him, but he did not talk much to her or listen to what she said to him; the fact was that he wanted to hear what the others were saying. Kit and Trixy were talking with a great deal of animation. What was he saying to her? Why were they both so immensely interested? Perhaps it was nothing important after all. Trixy and the Pontifexes were alike in one respect, the whole lot of them got excited about trifles. But what was this about a dog? Ah! Kit was telling Beatrix Farleigh that he would give her one. Would she like a puppy? Then a puppy it should be. Pups were delightful creatures; he had had one once; he was awfully sorry when it grew into a dog. But these things had to be put up with. How was it Trixy had not been to see Mary Anne's kittens? She was always so keen on them.

Robin turned a cross face round, and said that he had told Trixy there was no time for her to do that.

Good-natured Kit did not irritate him still further by a reply, but he informed

Trixy that he considered it "like old Robin's cheek to interfere," after which he ignored him and went on chatting about the prospective pup, not suspecting that he was making matters worse by this innocent proceeding. For he was not aware of his friend's weakness, his inclination to be jealous. Meanwhile Robin Guest was telling himself that Kit had no business to be offering Trixy Farleigh a pup for a present. *Trixy* was *his* friend, if she wanted a dog he supposed that *he* could give her one. He knew a man whose dog had a beautiful little family of beautiful little pups; she could have any of them; he had only to ask for one. It was his friend; he ought not to make such a fuss about Trixy. Trixy was his friend; she ought to be walking with him.

"What is the matter with you, Robin Guest; you are most awfully dull?" remarked Polly Pontifex; "and I believe you are getting deaf. I have spoken to you three times, and you did not even answer me. I shall go and walk with the others."

"Polly Pontifex was always plain spoken, and went straight to her point. She also had a way of suiting the action to the word. In a moment she had dropped behind and taken possession of Beatrix Farleigh.

"Kit," she whispered in her brother's ear, "what you've got to do is to tackle Robin Guest and see what you can make of him. He is as cross as two sticks, and I've had enough of him."

"Isn't it a bit rough on me, Polly?" questioned Kit.

"I suppose it is, poor boy; but boys can manage other boys better than girls can. At least, they ought to be able to."

Robin stumped on ahead, quickening his pace.

"Oh, catch him up and put some sense into his silly head, for mercy's sake!" pleaded Polly Pontifex. "I'm awfully sorry for you, Kit. But I needn't be, because you are such a good-natured boy that you will bring him round in a moment. Now, I should quarrel with him in less time than that; I feel that I should. And that would spoil our whole

afternoon. Robin has such a queer temper."

Kit nodded, broke into a run, and caught his friend up without further parleying. Polly directed her attention to Trixy.

"I don't suppose there ever was such a sweet-tempered fellow as my Kit," she explained; "he never gets into a rage. *I* do sometimes."

Trixy hinted that she should doubt whether this occurred often, for, indeed, Polly appeared to her to be the soul of amiability. Polly admitted that her outbreaks were rare.

"There are certain persons, though," she said, "who put my monkey up; they——"

"Put your monkey up?" queried her companion, pretending that she did not understand the expression. She did, but she had certainly never heard it used before. Polly and Kit's vocabulary often astonished her.

"Don't make believe that you don't understand, and don't come sister Grace or Mrs. Pelham over me; I am not to

be taken in so easily. Robin Guest is one of those who put my monkey up. I like him immensely generally, but when he goes off into a tantrum about nothing whatever I want to shake him; don't you?"

Polly admitted that this desire had seized her a short while since, but she said that Robin was a particular friend of hers all the same.

"We all have our weak points," she said, quoting a favourite observation of Mrs. Snuggs.

"Yes, so we have, and as I tell Snuggsy, we all get wild with other person's weak points. When the green-eyed monster visits Robin Guest I don't like him a little bit. It is no good pretending that I do. It is no fun being with him then."

Trixy made no reply. Her silence meant consent, though.

"Now, look here, Beatrix Farleigh"—Polly came to a standstill and became very emphatic—"I've made up my mind. If Kit can't bring Robin Guest to—"

"He hasn't fainted yet."

"You know what I mean. If Robin Guest continues in an ill-temper and can't behave civilly to us girls, I'll tell you what we will do."

"Tell away."

"We will give him a lesson. We will just explain that we do not care to spend a whole afternoon with a boy in a bad temper, that we can do very well without his distinguished company. We will walk off on our own account, and leave him to old Kit."

"But what will Kit do?"

"Kit won't worry; Robin will be all right with Kit."

"Are you sure?"

"Look at them now, can't you see that they are getting on finely. I assure you, Trixy"—Polly was impressive—"that Kit has a way with him that would soothe a ramping, roaring, rapacious lion, that would make a tiger amiable. There, didn't I tell you?"

Polly made a dramatic halt and held up her finger. There came to them on the soft summer wind a sound of laughter. It came from the open mouth of Robin Guest.

" Goodness me ! " cried Trixy ; " I never could have believed it if I had not heard it myself."

After this she agreed to her friend's plan. There could be no injustice to Kit Pontifex in leaving him with such a cheerful companion. And there was no fun at all in going about with a boy who scolded you.

So the matter was settled and the two girls, both of one mind about it, awaited developments.

CHAPTER VII

TRIXY SUGGESTS

IT seemed for a while as if there would be no necessity for the girls and boys to part, for when they rejoined one another Robin was certainly in a better temper. They walked four abreast along the white path between the hedgerows. Nay, they even took arms and were quite merry, singing together, Trixy leading, for her voice was the truest and strongest. They reached the woods before very long, and the three, who had seen it many times before, were pleased and amused at Trixy's delight. She clapped her hands as she had at first sight of the quaint village and its green, when she espied them from the window of a railway carriage. That seemed more than a month ago, though, as a matter of fact, it was not a day longer. There were all kinds of trees in this wood, and no

wonder that Cloverfield folk were proud of it.

"I could imagine fairies here," said Beatrix; "I could believe that I heard their voices. Hush! what is that?"

"That's the brook, nothing more nor less, my dear," said Robin.

He was right; the silvery musical sound was caused by the water as it ran gently along over the mossy stones.

"And what is that?"

Trixy stood with her head on one side still, as she had stood when listening. But now she was looking, for something had scuttled across the path just in front of her. It was a little rabbit, and up in the branches of that great oak-tree was a bright-eyed squirrel with the bushiest of tails. But there were not oak-trees alone to be seen here, there were also beeches and limes, birches and elms, and my lady of the woods, tall, slender, stately, and graceful. The sunlight flickered on the narrow pathway in which these young folk stood, and there was a scented sweetness in the still air. It came from the pine-trees and from the bracken that had been

crushed underfoot. How pretty it was! Some of it was fresh and very green, some of it was turning to a golden colour; there, where the sun had stared too hard at it, it had turned quite brown. They wandered about, threading the mossy pathways; Trixy could have stayed there for ever. But Robin had been elected leader of the little party, and he was careful to keep up his authority. It was not long before he said that they had remained long enough in the wood, and must be off again.

“But if Trixy wants to stay a little longer, and as she has not been here scores of times already, as the rest of us have, hadn't we better—”

It was Kit who spoke, but he was nipped in the bud by Robin Guest. He supposed that as Trixy was *his* friend, and staying at his father and mother's house, and as he knew her ever so much earlier than Kit Pontifex did, and as he had brought her out, and as they said he was to settle where they were to go, and as he *had* settled, he might be allowed to carry out his plan.

The others looked at him in astonish-

ment. He had not recovered his temper, then, after all. What an unaccountable boy he was ; you never knew where you were with him when he had one of his moods upon him. They looked at one another, and decided to humour him this time at least.

" We will give him one more chance," Polly confided to Trixy, " but only one. I won't be treated like a baby or made a simpleton of."

She marched along with her head in the air, and you could hear by the very sound of her footsteps that she was going to show how determined she could be. Kit always said that Polly would not stand any nonsense ; she was about to make his words good.

" I am hungry and thirsty, Robin," she called out to him. " I want my tea, and it is past tea-time. We will go into that cottage where they will give us some tea."

" They won't give you any tea ; what makes you think so?"

" They *will* give me tea ; where are your eyes, Robin Guest? Don't you see their card in the window, ' Teas provided '?"

It was certainly a plain announcement, and there was no contradicting it. Robin did not try that plan. He merely declared in a lordly way that no one was to have tea yet; they were going a good deal farther over Merryfield way, and they could not afford to waste any time yet. It was then that bold Polly Pontifex took her stand, there in the middle of the dusty road, with her shabby straw hat at the back of her head and her blue eyes darting fire; there that she made her memorable speech.

"Robin Guest," said she, "it is high time that you made up your mind that you are not everybody. Why, you are not even a good-tempered boy; you must have got out of bed on the wrong side this morning. And—and—and—" she was getting excited; when she did this she always ruffled her short hair until it stood on end—"and Trixy and I have had quite enough of you for one afternoon. We are not enjoying ourselves a bit, and we came out to enjoy ourselves; we are not slaves to be ordered about. And—and we won't stand it, will we, Trixy?"

Beatrice Farleigh stared at her friend, for the first moment in silent admiration, then with words rushing into her mind, and a resolve to utter them and show that she also had some spirit.

"No, we shall not stand it!" she cried, raising her voice and gesticulating. "We two girls will leave you two boys to yourself. I don't think that I like boys now I come to think of it."

Poor Kit protested that he had done no harm.

"Now, have I?" he pleaded, surprised at being attacked so suddenly.

Justice demanded another speech. Trixy explained that she meant boys in general. Kit was all right, she had nothing to complain of with regard to his behaviour. "Then," said Kit, in an unexpected fashion, "why shouldn't I go with you? I'm a bit sick of Robin, too, he is getting on my nerves."

It was such a new thing to be told that Kit Pontinex had nerves that his sister began to laugh. Kit and Trixy joined in, but poor Robin, who had got himself into such a bad temper by this time that he

positively could not get out of it again, did not even smile.

On the contrary, he became more angry than he had been hitherto. He declared that the three of them were in a conspiracy against him. Kit and Polly wanted to set Trixy against him; all his friends had deserted him. But he did not care. There were as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it. He did not care, not he! He could have as many other friends as he liked; he would, too, let them remember that. He got red in the face, his eyes looked larger than usual; he glared at them. Now if you have a hot temper, and if you let it run away with you, it will make you say more things that you really don't mean in a few minutes than you would have thought possible. Robin Guest, who was the son of a gentleman, and as a rule behaved like one himself, was so abominably rude that Kit went so far as to call him a cad. There is no knowing what might have happened, for he wanted to fight Kit, if he had not suddenly pulled himself up. His pride helped him here.

"Well," he said, and his face was white now, not crimson as it had been a moment since, "I told you I didn't care, and I don't. The whole lot of you may go where you jolly well like. There's an end of it! I'm not going a step farther with you. Either you come straight on with me or back I go."

"The girls want their tea, and there isn't any reason why they shouldn't have it," cried Kit, who was roused by now, though it took a good time to make him angry. "Father always says that a boy ought to give way to a girl—that is, in reason."

"It isn't in reason to be greedy and spoil a whole excursion because you must have your blessed tea at a blessed hour."

Christopher Pontifex did not condescend to argue this point. He just squared his shoulders, and squared his jaws, and looked so manly and determined, that Polly was quite proud of him. Then he said, "Now, girls," in an important manner, pointed to the cottage door, added "Ladies first," and followed them in. Robin stood for a moment watching the

three disappear, felt as near crying as a manly boy can feel—that is sometimes nearer than folk imagine—ground his teeth, and walked rapidly homewards. He was still so angry that he had no sense of justice in him. By and by he would come to himself, he always did, but not yet. No, the time had not come for him to see two sides to a question. His passion made him slow of sight, dull of comprehension.

The good woman who thus offered refreshment to travellers led them into a small arbour and sat them down on a rude bench beside a rustic table. They had a good view of the garden from where they sat. It was not, however, to compare with that at Woodbine Cottage, and the cocks and hens that wandered here and there seemed inclined to regard it as their property. Kit drummed on the wooden table with his fingers and looked graver than usual. The girls were sure that he was thinking of Robin tramping homewards in a bad temper and losing an afternoon's enjoyment. It was Trixy who startled him from his reverie.

“ Oh, Kit! oh, Polly!” she cried, “ I

shan't be able to have any tea. I didn't bring any money with me because I haven't got a pocket in this frock, and because Robin had the money and was to pay for our tea himself."

Kit and Polly laughed. The former said that he had got plenty of cash; he jingled the loose coins in his pocket and seemed pleased to think that he was in charge of the two girls. Yet had Robin been there he would have let him do the honours of the table without a murmur. Kit Pontifex certainly was a kind-hearted, good-tempered fellow. Robin was the first but unfortunately not the second.

They were all glad when the little old woman came out of her cottage and spread a white cloth, rather a limp one, not guiltless of holes, on the deal table, for they were getting tired of reading the texts that were pinned to the trellis-work of the arbour, and of watching the fowls strut about, besides which they had walked far, and were so thirsty that they did not know quite how hungry they were till they had drunk some of the tea. This was weak, but what of that? All the better for their

nerves, Kit said. Trust him for making the best of everything, and trust Polly for backing him up. They made a joke of the bread-and-butter because it was cut so thick, they extolled the jam freshly made and excellent. Trixy declared that she had never been so hungry in her life before, and made the others laugh by asking whether it would not be very expensive if she ate any more. Had she really better have this other slice that they were both pressing upon her? Why, yes, it would make no difference; there was a fixed charge for their meal, so much a head. Kit was too much of a gentleman to mention the sum, he contented himself with assuring his guest that he had plenty of money. This seemed, indeed, to be the case. He turned out quite a number of silver pieces to find the right one when they had finished their tea. Trixy gazed at them in astonishment. It seemed odd that he should have so much money since he and his sister were dressed so shabbily and nobody seemed to mind about their appearance. Polly had once told her that father and mother only

wanted them to enjoy themselves, and would not mind a bit about their being so shabby even if they were there to see. "Only, of course," she added, "they like us to keep ourselves as clean as possible."

Kit saw Trixy glance at him and knew she was observing the money he had turned out of his pocket. He explained that it was the day that he had his pocket-money given him, that was why he was so rich.

"But it won't last long," said he. "I'm such a beggar to spend. You can't eat your cake and have it though, can you? And I would rather have one good treat than a lot of little trumpery ones."

Master Christopher Pontifex was not mean; he paid the old woman with the best will in the world, giving her a tip into the bargain; she told her neighbours afterwards that he was a real little gentleman. "Little" must have meant young, for Kit was tall, so was Polly. "The Pontifexes are all tall," they explained to Trixy that same afternoon, when she spoke of the matter.

"The Pontifex women are tall as well as the Pontifex men," Kit remarked. "You must have noticed that Pollykins is as tall for her age as I am. Height runs in the Pontifex family. Father is tall and mother is tall."

He spoke in rather a grand way. Perhaps that was why Polly said—

"Snub noses don't run in our family though. Why Kit and I have them goodness only knows."

"You forget Aunt Henrietta," Kit reminded her.

"What was Aunt Henrietta got to do with it?" queried his sister. "Aunt Henrietta is not a Pontifex except by marriage, she was a—what in the name of all that is wonderful was Aunt Henrietta?"

"Sakes alive, I don't know," replied Kit. "What is more, I really don't care."

They left the matter and began to talk of something that interested them more. Where were they going? That was the question.

"Trixy must choose," said Christopher politely. Polly agreed.

At first Trixy could not do this. What

did she know of the neighbourhood? But she tried to think of some place she would like to see, for she realized that it was out of politeness that they allowed her to select, and felt important.

"Isn't there a very old church somewhere about?" she asked.

Kit was of opinion that there was no neighbourhood more rich in old churches than that surrounding Cloverfield, and said so. But neither of them knew which church Trixy had in her head. They stood in the middle of the road and tried to think.

"Can't you recollect any more about it?" they asked.

Yes, Trixy could. It was all in ruins except the tower, that was very high and quite safe. She was not sure that you could not go up into the tower and get a good view round. Why, yes, of course you could. But not always, only at certain times in the day. Then an old man let you go up, rather a cross old man, poor Robin had told her about it. Why did she call him poor Robin? Because they were enjoying themselves and ten to one

he was sulking, and when a person sulks he must feel miserable.

"He won't be sulky. Robin never sulks," Kit said in defence of his friend. "He gets into a temper now and then for no reason in particular, and he does it quicker than any other fellow I ever saw. But he gets out of it as quickly and he doesn't owe any one a grudge. Robin is sorry by now, you bet. When we meet him he will be just as nice as if nothing whatever had happened."

"That is all very well," retorted his twin, "but whether he forgets or not, something *has* happened; he has upset us all a good bit."

"Let bygones be bygones," hinted Kit.

"We always do with Robin, because when he is in a good temper he is so nice," answered Polly; "but I'm still just a little weeny bit angry with him."

Appearances were against the speaker, for she was smiling broadly. Trixy reminded them both that they were wandering from the subject, this was the question of the church. What church was it that she had been told about? Now then.

The twins replied in a breath that it could be none other than St. Faith's. Well, was it anywhere near, could they go to it?

"About a mile and a half from here as the crow flies." This was Kit's conclusion. Did she really wish to see it? Of course she did. He bowed low.

"The lady's will is my law," he said. They laughed at him as he meant that they should.

"Your devoted servant will lead you on the right path," he added, with another bow. How they joked and sang and chattered those three as they went on their way! What queer rhymes Trixy strung, and how short the road seemed! In next to no time they caught sight of a tall tower, covered with ivy, and Trixy was informed that this was St. Faith's. They quickened their pace to a run, and there they were at the foot of a slope. This they breasted bravely, reaching their goal rather out of breath.

"Jimmy Roberts is the cross old man who lets you go up," said Polly. "At least, most people call him cross. Kit

and I get on rather nicely with him, though."

It was a fine old ruin and the tower was well preserved, but the body of the church had gone; there was little left standing save its outer walls. The country around was very beautiful, and looked particularly so this evening, for the sun was beginning to set, and the whole landscape seemed transfigured by its departing rays. Trixy had an eye for Nature and her beauties; the twins watched her expression change, kindle into a reverent admiration of what she saw, become sweet and dreamy. They were glad that they had brought her here.

"If it had not been for that Robin's nonsense, he did waste our time quarrelling with us," Polly said, "we should have got up into the tower."

"Oh, can't we get up there?"

Trixy's face fell, there was a disappointment in her voice. "There must be such a fine view from the top. I should like to see it," she added.

"But the door is closed after five, and it is nearly six," Kit explained. "That

is the pity of it. I wonder where old Jimmy is; he might open the door for us if we gave him a shilling."

Polly thought he might do it for six-pence; her brother contested the point. While they were trying to settle it between them, Beatrix Farleigh walked round the tower. They heard her call to them from the farther side of it. She had made a discovery.

"Come here, come here quickly!" she cried.

They ran to her.

"Bravo!" Kit exclaimed. "Christopher Columbus, what a find you are!"

He addressed not a person but a ladder leaning against the tower. Why it was there they did not know. As a matter of fact a man had been using it to nail up a trail of ivy that a recent storm had torn down. But what did these young folk care for the purpose to which it might have been put, it was its present use that concerned them. This was sufficiently obvious to all three. Kit was the first to put it into words.

"We can get in if we climb the ladder,

then Trixy will see all that there is to be seen and be satisfied ; we are not going to be done after all. You two stop behind, like good little girls, and I'll see if it is safe for you to follow me."

Up went Kit, no need for alarm, the ladder was safely fixed. Yet they watched him breathlessly as he passed through the window-like opening in the solid wall of the tower. He disappeared from sight for a moment, then his head reappeared again.

"It's as easy as winking," he called out. "Here I am, safe on the staircase or steps or whatever you call the queer, crumbling old things. You two girls can follow me. All you have to do is to remember not to look down, if you do you may tumble dddy. This *is* a bit of luck and no mistake."

The girls gazed up at him with as much admiration as ever filled the hearts of damsels rescued by a knight errant of olden times. It would have been nice to enter the tower by the legitimate doorway, but it was ten times nicer to mount a ladder and get into that same tower

through a slit in the wall. Look at the delightful novelty of such a proceeding! Beatrix went first, Polly giving her directions from below, Kit admonishing her from above. There was a spice of danger that made the adventure terribly exciting; both girls felt that even while they trembled a little.

Polly followed Trixy. And now here were the three of them standing together on the winding staircase that led to the summit of the tower. They were delighted, but one regret troubled them. They wished that Robin were with them, he would have enjoyed the fun so much. Kit led the way. The girls followed him. The staircase was narrow and some of the steps were very worn; there was only room for one to climb at a time, and Trixy felt quite weary by the time they halted. Here there was more space. They stood looking at the great rusty bell above them, then they gazed out on the landscape. What miles they could see and how beautiful it all was. There in the distance were the hills wrapped in a bluish haze, there the wide fields still

touched by the dying sun, at the right the wood they had visited, a mere mass of trees, varying in tint, their size and shape no longer distinguishable. The white pathways looked narrow as threads, smoke curled upwards from cottage chimneys, the cattle on the slopes were mere coloured dots. It was a wonderful panorama.

"Oh, how glad I am that we came!" cried Trixy. "I wouldn't have missed this for the world."

Her quick, observant eyes noted everything. Kit and Polly were pleased, too, but not in such a rapture as was their friend.

"It won't do to stop here for ever," said Kit. "More another day, Miss Beatrix Farleigh."

CHAPTER VIII

AN ADVENTURE

No, there was no time for gossiping ; as Kit assured the girls, they had their work before them, it was a long way to the top of the tower. He sent them before him, and followed in their wake, laughing at them and declaring that they were slow-coaches. It really was a tiring business, there were so many stairs, and they were so uneven and worn. But here they were at last, out of the darkness, standing in the belfry and looking from a height on to a great extent of country. Kit said that two counties were to be seen from where they found themselves. But Trixy did not heed him, she was gazing at hill and dale, at the soft clouds in the sky, some opal-coloured, some tinged with crimson, at the veil of mist that was

gathering and making the high land dim and mysterious, at the birds skimming along, at the wonderful landscape that was stretched out before her astonished, admiring eyes.

"It is a beautiful world."

The child breathed rather than spoke the words; she was in a day-dream. Kit and Polly were not given that way themselves, but they were good-natured enough not to disturb her until she had looked her fill. How soon that would have been it was not easy to say. It was the hooting of an owl that brought her back with a start to everyday life.

"What is that?" she asked, looking quite frightened.

They laughed and explained.

"It did sound weird," said Trixy, laughing too. She was herself again now, and put a number of questions that had to be answered promptly.

"What was that building in the distance. Was that silvery line the river? Which side did Cloverfield lie? Why, of course that was the church, little St. Stephen's, with the trees about it, only it

looked different from a distance. It seemed that Trixy Farleigh would never get tired of looking. Polly and her twin had to be firm with her before long; this was because she did not pay any attention to their hints as to going down again, or as to the lateness of the hour.

"Oh, bother," cried Trixy, "I am not ready yet. Look at those fir-trees, how black they are all huddled together, aren't they?"

Kit and Polly, however, refused to look at anything else, they shook their friend by the shoulder and told her that she must just make up her mind to go home. On this occasion Kit went first, calling to the girls to step carefully. Though, to be sure, they would have something soft to fall upon, namely himself, if fall they must.

It was when he reached the opening by which they had entered that he uttered an exclamation so startled as to be almost terrified.

"In the name of goodness, whatever is the matter?" asked Polly. "Do you think you are going to frighten us girls,

because I may as well tell you that you are not."

Polly knew that her brother was, as she would have said, "always up to his tricks"—so did Mrs. Snuggs, so did all Christopher Pontifex's friends and acquaintances.

"Girls--girls, the ladder has gone!"

"A likely story that."

Polly flung her answer back at him; a moment later she stood behind him, her hand on his shoulder, her glance following his. The healthy colour faded out of her face as it had faded out of his; she was quite white. Trixy gazed too, wide-eyed and panic-stricken. There was no mistake about it, the ladder had disappeared.

"They have taken it away," gasped Polly.

"Here's a pretty go!"

Kit was craning his head out and taking stock of the situation. Trixy was too scared to speak; when she did, it was to cry aloud—

"Oh! what shall we do? Whatever shall we do?"

Kit turned his gaze on her. It had not occurred to him before that he had done a foolish thing. He had not reflected that he was wrong in taking a risk when he had two girls under his care. It was just a harmless adventure that there was no possible danger in. If he had thought at all, this was what his idea had been. But now—now things seemed quite different to the poor boy. He was calling himself names, he was telling himself that any one with half an ounce of sense should have foreseen that this might happen. Why hadn't he? What an idiot he was! He turned and stared at Beatrix Farleigh.

"Father said I was always to be sure and take care of girls," he said, and all the while his eyes were on her white, alarmed face.

"It wasn't any more your fault than ours."

Beatrix spoke slowly.

"No, of course it was not."

Polly made this remark. Kit decided that whatever might be said by other boys about girls, he for one was perfectly sure that two of them could "play the game."

He liked Polly and Trixy for speaking out directly and not putting the blame on him. If they had, he would not have felt nearly so inclined to blame himself. They were "a couple of trumps." This thought passed through his mind like a flash, he felt particularly wide-awake, not stunned, as might have been expected. His mind was uncommonly active. He was thinking what could be done to get them out of this terrible dilemma, and all the while he thought a voice seemed to be saying to him—

"There is not a single thing you can do. You and the girls will have to spend the long, weary night here in the darkness."

"Shout for all you are worth," said Polly's voice.

"What is the good of that?"

Kit looked out again, his face graver than ever. The ruins of the church stood, as has been said, high above the surrounding ground on a grassy hill. There was little reason for any one to pass them, nor, indeed, for any one to approach them, unless, like the trio, they went for purposes

of inspection. This visitors often did, but not at so late an hour, since the belfry-tower was then closed to the public. And this was the attraction to tourists, who knew that the fatigue of mounting to the top was well worth while on account of the fine view to be gained thereby.

The hill-top was surrounded with fir-trees. Looking over these you saw a roadway at the foot of the hill, but too far off for one to imagine that voices from the belfry would reach so far. People might pass and repass, and you might call your loudest without a sound reaching them. Kit knew that, so did Polly; they looked into each other's eyes. Beatrix Farleigh saw them do it, and read their thoughts because her own moved so rapidly.

"It is dreadful," she said in a quavering voice; "but of course they will guess where we are, and then——"

She paused, unable to finish her sentence. She was talking for talking's sake, and she knew it; there was no sense in what she was saying. How could any one guess where they were? There had been no talk of their visiting these ruins

before Robin left them. No one would know where they were; no one could know.

"We shall have to stay here all night long," said Polly with a tremor in her voice, "and by and by it will get darker and darker. Oh, Kit! Oh, Trixy!"

She began to cry in a miserable way. Kit was very sorry for her, but her tears made him angry.

"There isn't a bit of use in crying," said he; "you girls seem to think it is a cure for everything. You *are* silly."

"I am not going to cry," Trixy declared; "no, I won't do it. I shan't waste my time that way. I shall shout and scream my loudest. Some one must hear me; some one shall."

She was as good as her word; she made more noise than would have seemed possible for one girl, halloing and calling perseveringly.

"You'll lose your voice, and you won't do a scrap of good," said Kit; "you had better be thinking.' "

"I am thinking all the while," replied Trixy gravely. "Of course I am."

"I don't believe it; if you were you would see that you are only tiring yourself and breaking our ear-drums for nothing," Kit replied. "When there is no one within half a mile of you, what sense is there in shrieking till you nearly burst a blood-vessel?"

Polly dried her eyes and answered for her friend.

"Anyway, we won't give up hope," said she; "we will keep watching. Someone may pass by; then we'll all call out together; we will make him hear. We will stay by this opening and keep on looking."

Kit acquiesced in this idea. Of course, they would not lose a chance, however slight it might be. But who was likely to come up here? That was what he wanted to know. Polly and Trixy thought that the man who had fetched the ladder away might have left something else behind and come up again and fetch it. Kit shook his head.

Well, then, Jimmy Roberts might come. What had Kit to say to that? Kit said, "Oh, yes, of course he might want to

know whether the tower was still in the same place." He was not inclined to cheer his companions or to offer them any encouragement; but his eyes kept as faithful watch as theirs. Poor Kit! He was very much perturbed in his mind, and he had a sense of responsibility that was not theirs. Why did it not come into his mind at the time that the ladder might be removed at any moment and they three within the tower none the wiser? Now it was all clear to him: some one had been fixing up the ivy; his job over, there was no need to linger. How should he suspect that three young folk were within? Oh, how silly he, Christopher Pontifex, had been, and how heedless! His father was always telling him that he acted first and thought afterwards; good Mrs. Snuggs was always bidding him look before he leapt. He smiled in a grim way. It was not a case of leaping this time, though; it was a case of climbing.

Suddenly the girls clung to him, one on either side of him, and both looking extremely frightened. What was the matter now? That dreadful noise! They both

spoke together. He laughed, but it did not sound natural, and woke echoes. It was only another owl hooting, he explained. Polly had heard one often before, and should have known. Beatrix had not; she was to be excused.

"How cold it is getting."

Trixy spoke; she was shivering. The sun had sunk behind the distant hills and the air was suddenly chilly, while the landscape became dull and colourless. The three stood straining their eyes to pierce the gloom. Once they caught sight of a cart going along the road in the hollow. In spite of what Kit had said about the impossibility of making any one hear down there, they all shouted at the top of their voices. If only their cries could reach the waggoner! But no, no; it was out of the question. On he went. Had they but known it, he was whistling gaily to himself in a musical fashion. Little did he imagine that he was so much in request. The light faded, and still the three stood there. It was nearly dark now. Polly and Trixy held each other by the hand. They were so

tired that they could hardly stand. Kit's face gleamed white as he turned it to them. It was a long while since either of the three had spoken.

"I say, girls," the boy said at last, "it isn't a bit of good standing here any longer. It is nearly dark now. We had better go and sit on the steps, hadn't we?"

Polly and Trixy both said "Yes," speaking together, their voices uncertain. But what of that? Kit's had shaken also. And, indeed, there was good excuse for him and for them if they felt a dull terror creep into their young hearts. A night to be spent in this fashion was enough to frighten any one, young or old.

Kit crept down a few steps, found one that seemed less worn than the rest, and suggested that the two should sit there; he placed himself just below them.

"You see," he said, "we've got to make the best of it till the morning. There isn't the ghost of a chance of our being let out of this hateful old tower till then."

"Oh, Kit!"

Both the girls gasped his name out together.

There was silence for a moment. Then Trixy's hand was laid on the boy's shoulder.

"I want to say something," she said.

"Well, then, why don't you?"

"I'll say it if you promise not to—not to snap."

"I promise."

"What I want to say is that if we stay here, we three, all night long"—he felt her shudder at the prospect, and was not astonished—"I think we had all better try not to be crosser than we can help; what do you think, Polly?"

Kit laughed in spite of himself. Then he explained that he had not meant to be cross, but this sort of thing was really enough to try any fellow's patience.

"If only we could do something," said he.

But what was there to be done, there in the darkness? And, oh, how cold it was getting! The two girls leant against each other; both of them were lightly clad. It was warmer when you squeezed close to one another, but it was a tight fit even for two, and for three impossible.

Every now and then they crept up and looked through the slit in the wall through which they had made their unlucky entry. The wind sighed amongst the branches of the fir-trees, making a curious wailing sound; the moon was bright at times, sometimes obscured by a cloud. The stars shone in a cold, glittering way.

"I feel as if there would be a frost," sighed Polly.

A frost in the month of August! At any other time the others would have laughed at such a suggestion, but there was no laugh in either of them just now. They gazed at the twinkling lights, shining glow-worm-like in the windows of distant houses, and wished with all their hearts that they could creep into the humblest cottage and ask for shelter.

"Wouldn't it be lovely to sit by a fire?" suggested Trixy.

"I wonder what they are all doing and saying. Oh, how frightened they must be about us!" sighed Trixy.

"We mustn't wish and we mustn't wonder," said Kit; "if we do, we shan't be able to get through the night—and

we've got to get through it somehow or the other."

He spoke sternly, but the girls knew that he did not feel stern; they were sure that he wanted to cry and would not, just as they did themselves. He gulped something down before he said—

"Let's tell each other stories; Trixy can start."

They sat down again, and Trixy did her best. She tried to make her story cheerful, but she could not manage to do so. Kit told a boy's yarn, but it had a murder in it, and his companions would not let him finish it. Then they tried to make a rhyme between them, each of them speaking a line in turn. Polly began; Kit capped her rhyme; but, wonder of wonders, Trixy could not cap his.

"There isn't any poetry in me," she said, and broke down. Kit begged her not to cry; he said she would start Polly if she did. However, she could not prevent it, and there was an end of it. Polly joined in: when they had had their cry out they said they felt ever so much better. They could not see what Kit was doing

meanwhile, it was so dark. Once or twice he put out his hand and gave his sister and her friend a kindly pat on the back. When they had recovered themselves he said—

“If I were you girls, I would keep on thinking how nice it will be to have some breakfast to-morrow morning.”

“I don’t think we had better think about eating,” said Trixy; “it does make you feel so hungry when you do.”

“Besides, if I thought about anything, it would be about supper,” said Polly with a groan.

“I wonder what time old Jimmy Roberts gets here in the morning?” Kit made this remark.

The moon was shining more brightly than ever. It lighted up the faces of the three children. How pale they were! Kit saw Trixy’s lips were moving, and asked her what she was saying to herself.

She answered shyly that she was only just saying her prayers.

“One can’t kneel down,” she whispered to Polly, “but that does not really signify,

does it? And up here we do seem so near to God"—she glanced out at the starry sky—"and I want to be brave," she added.

Polly kissed her then, and she kissed Polly.

"Keep up your heart, girls," cried Kit; "you've got a lot of pluck in you, you two. I shall always say that."

CHAPTER IX

SET FREE

“ IT is all my fault.”

Poor Robin kept repeating this remark, through the miserable hours of waiting, through the dreary, futile searchings that marked that terrible night. Yet no one was reproaching him. What would that have served ; what use would it have been at such a time? He was suffering from an agony of remorse ; he took all the blame on his own shoulders, until his father spoke to him in his quick, decided way.

“ Come, my boy,” he said ; “ you are going too far. It is true that Trixy was, so to speak, under your charge. It is true that you had no right to leave her. And, according to your own account, you had not any real reason to quarrel with

either of your friends, and somehow or other you seem to have managed to quarrel with them all. When we have said that we have said everything that can be justly said against you. But you are not directly responsible for this. And to go back on things now is not a bit of good. What we have to do is not to talk but to act."

To act, yes. But how? After the most obvious methods had been adopted, they found themselves at a loss as to what was the best course to pursue. In the minds of all were dark thoughts that none dared utter. Cloverfield and its neighbourhood held no dangers, and yet—well, when three persons disappear suddenly, anything may have happened to them; there is room enough in loving hearts for fears of every description. Reason is silenced by strong emotion.

Another day had begun. It was nearly one o'clock on the following morning when good Mrs. Guest faced her husband with a determined expression in her eyes. They had returned to the house after a long search to inquire as to whether there

were any news of the absent ones, and were looking terribly weary.

"Herbert," said his pale-faced wife, "one thing is certain: whatever you and Robin do next, you must have some food before you attempt to do it. If you do not, you will both be ill. That is common sense. Don't shake your heads; you really must."

The gentle lady spoke with so much determination that it seemed impossible to dispute her decision. She had hot coffee ready for them, with sandwiches that Grace had helped her cut. The latter looked quite unlike her usual languid self as she handed them to the vicar and his son. Both of them observed this in spite of their preoccupation. Grace waiting on any one was a matter for surprise; but this new Grace with the bright light in her eyes bordered on a miracle. It was evident that she had something that she wished to say to them; but for some reason or other she was keeping it back. Robin, at all events, was convinced of this, and he told her so.

"Yes," she admitted, "that is quite

true. I am only waiting till you have finished eating ; you must be so tired and hungry. Another sandwich, Mr. Guest, and you, too, Robin? Oh, please do ! ”

Her care for them was new, so was her voice. Mrs. Guest noticed this and was grateful. Anxiety had awakened feeling in this girl--roused her ; she was more alive than she had shown herself since her arrival in Cloverfield. She was absolutely forgetting herself. The vicar and Robin accepted another sandwich, but soon disposed of it. Had any idea come to Grace? If so, they were as ready to clutch at it as the drowning man at the proverbial straw.

“ What is it, Grace? ”

Robin spoke with his mouth still half full ; but no one criticized him, even mentally, for his lack of manners. All eyes were fixed on Grace Farleigh.

“ I believe,” she said solemnly, “ that they must have gone to the ruins of that old church that stands on a hill and has only its tower left.”

“ Whatever makes you think so? ”

Robin was all eagerness.

"I feel that they have."

The vicar smiled, but very sadly.

"Oh, if that is your reason, if you only just feel it," he said in a disappointed tone, "I really don't think, my dear, that is much to go by, or that we are any forwarder."

The girl's face fell; she was checked, but not silenced. Robin could see her lips moving; so could his father. The latter spoke again.

"Perhaps there is something that makes you think they may have gone in that direction," he said. "Now, don't you think that there may be?"

"Yes," replied Grace, "that was what I was going to say. Trixy said this morning"—she looked at the clock—"I mean yesterday morning, of course, that she did not know where Robin was going to take them, and that he was leader of the party. She wanted to ask him, but she did not like to do it because—"

"Go on," clamoured Robin, "don't mind me; tell us what she said."

"She said that she did not like to ask you because you were in one of

your high-and-mighty, do-as-you-are-told humours. That is what she said, and she said that it was not safe to speak to you when you were like that."

Robin winced and looked down. Grace came to a standstill.

"Yes, yes, my child. But what next? What has that remark of your sister's got to do with the subject?" Mr. Guest spoke quickly. "Was there any question of Trixy wanting to go to any special place? Is that what you are driving at, Grace?"

"Why, yes, of course, that was what I was going to tell you. She was longing to see those old ruins; I couldn't think why. Ruins are so dull and uninteresting. I've been doing nothing but think all night long; but I did not remember that till a little while ago. It just jumped into my mind. But I do feel as if they were there; indeed I do. Trixy almost always gets her own way with people."

"Yes, of course she does. I've noticed that," said Robin.

Grace's voice was trembling as if she were ready to cry. But Mrs. Guest had told her that neither of them must shed

a tear. That would only make the others more unhappy. And because of her advice Grace Farleigh had assisted in the sandwich-making ; because of it she gulped down a lump in her throat now, and tried to be brave. ✓

The vicar questioned her again ; she answered clearly and sensibly. Robin's face changed while he listened to her ; a new expression leapt into his dull, tired eyes, an animation inspired by hope.

"We haven't tried that way yet ; none of us have. Good old Grace !" he cried. "I'm so glad you remembered."

He looked at her more kindly than he was wont to look, and she met his glance. His father, however, was deep in thought.

"Glyn has offered me his dogcart, wife," he said, "to scour the country round. I'll go and see if it is ready. Then Robin and I will go to the tower. As well go that way as another ; anything is better than sitting still."

He rose and left the room hurriedly. Mrs. Guest followed him. Grace and Robin were alone. The boy looked at the girl, saw how full her eyes were and

how her lips quivered. His own followed suit as he said, in a low voice—

“How you must hate me for losing my temper and leaving Trixy. It couldn't have happened except for that. *I* know how to look after girls and keep them out of mischief; of course I do.”

“I don't hate you,” she said quickly. “I'm awfully sorry for you.”

“Why are you sorry for me when I've behaved like a beast?” he blurted out.

“Because—because it was through your temper; and when you have got a temper, and when you are sorry that you have, of course you are sorry for another person who has a temper and is sorry that *he* has.”

This is what she said—rather a tautological speech certainly, and perhaps a trifle difficult to unravel on account of that. Nevertheless, Robin Guest knew exactly what she meant in a moment.

“I understand,” said he. Then a moment later, “Thank you, Grace; I didn't know that you could be so nice.”

They looked straight into one another's eyes. Grace's were dry now, but they

looked particularly bright. Robin's were so wet that he had to pass his hand across them in a tremendous hurry.

"I wish," the girl said, "oh, how I do wish I hadn't been nasty to Trixy so many times lately!"

"And I wish I hadn't behaved like I did when I was out with her. We are in the same boat."

Why he held out his hand and shook Grace's at this particular moment Robin Guest did not quite know; but it seemed to be the right and natural thing to do, so he did it. His father's voice calling to him from without, they fell apart, and he flew to him, full of excitement.

"We'll find them, father, you bet!" he cried.

He sprang up beside the vicar. His mother and Grace, linked arm in arm, watched them start. Mr. Guest, generally so ready to hope for the best, did not answer. His heart was heavy within him. It was as much as he could do to prevent speaking out the thoughts that were torturing him. While he drove along through the silent night, in the cold

moonlight, he could not help thinking how that same beautiful moon was shining on the river—that river to which the young folk might have found their way; for though it was farther off than they should have ventured in the time they had at their disposal, yet— Well, they were full of fun and the spirit of adventure. And the vicar, having been young himself, knew that at their age distances do not seem long if you have a great desire to undertake them, and time, under like circumstances, becomes elastic.

The river! He remembered that there was a crazy boat at the boathouse, the property of an old man of scant sense, who would let any one have it who liked, for a consideration. A boy of Christopher Pontifex's daring disposition would be sure to want it. He might have taken the girls out for a row. Then what would happen? Anything! God help the children! Anything! For the river had a strong current, and there were certain parts where it was very deep. No, no; he dared not think of the moon shining on the river.

The drive to the tower seemed well-nigh interminable. However, here they were at last. They had come to a standstill at the foot of the hill.

"Now what are we to do?" said Mr. Guest. "In the name of common sense, what is there to do?"

"Please, father," said Robin, "I think you had better stop down here in the trap while I go up the hill. I'll be back as quickly as ever I can."

He spoke eagerly.

"But, my dear boy, there isn't any sense in going up there. As far as that goes I am beginning to think that there wasn't any sense in our coming here, after all."

"Oh, father, do let me go!"

Robin was curiously excited. He hardly knew why himself. The fact was that Grace had succeeded so well in imbuing him with the idea that filled her own mind that it had by now taken entire possession of his. He would have been terribly disappointed if his father had continued to oppose him.

He did not do this.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "there is as much sense or as little sense in doing one thing as there is in doing another. It is like looking for a needle in a bottle of hay."

Without a moment's hesitation Robin sprang to the ground, and the waiting gentleman in the dogcart watched him climb the hill, and began to wish he had not given him permission to do so. What was the good of it? Was it not a mere waste of time? What could it serve? Well, just this, he supposed. Though all means were being tried by others, though every possible inquiry was being made, every reasonable method being pursued, he and his boy must do something on their own account. They could not sit still and wait. Yet at his age he should be able to do it patiently. He must try and practise what he preached.

Robin climbed the hill so quickly that he was very much out of breath by the time he reached the summit. He had to stand still and pant. When he had recovered himself he stood within the ruined walls, looking from right to left.

What did he expect to find? Bah! What a foolish fellow he was! He was possessed by a sense of fear that was quite new to him. He had hoped that he was as brave as a boy should be, and he was trembling. Was he a coward after all? His father's son a coward! Impossible! Not to be dreamt of for a moment. Yet it was eerie up here quite alone. What was that sound? Only an owl hooting, there in yonder tree. He stood still and tried to think reasonably. Hark! What was that? The patter of feet! Absurd, ridiculous! Was he going out of his mind? No, nor were his ears playing him false; he did distinguish the patter of feet, though the wind sighed among the trees and the sound tended to drown all others.

Robin was a country boy, quick-eared and quick-sighted. What was he staring at? There at a little distance from him he saw some animal. What was it? A dog, by all that was wonderful. A dog, yes; but not a strange one. In a trice Robin Guest recognized Mrs. Snuggs's Samuel, "yellow dog Sam," as he was

went to call him. What did he do here? Had not Mrs. Snuggs herself said that she could not keep Samuel indoors, he was so restless?

Why, yes, of course she had, and the vicar had advised her to let her dog go where he would, and had said something about the chance that he might find the boy and girl whose constant playfellow and companion he was. It was by a bit of ill-luck that he had not accompanied them on their excursion.

"Sam! Sam! Sam!" Robin called to him. But he did not seem to hear; he trotted out of sight directly, round the east corner of the tower. Robin, getting more and more excited each moment, followed him. There he was, standing with his ears cocked, listening for all he was worth. He looked like a fox, with his sharp nose and his narrow face. What breed Samuel was no one would have ventured to surmise. The Pontifexes were of opinion that he belonged to a family with whom Mrs. General Pelham would not have permitted her charges to associate. They had confided this con-

viction of theirs to Robin Guest. He said, "Bother Mrs. General Pelham," in just the tone of voice and with just the expression of countenance they had expected of him.

Now, what did Samuel do here? What was he up to? What was his little game? The dog stood rigid, as if he were carved out of stone. He was clearly intent on listening. Robin listened too, standing at a short distance from him now. His heart beat so loudly that he could hear it. His senses appeared to be at their keenest; he was aware of everything, and full of an expectation that was half delight and half dread.

Presently a sound resembling a faint shout reached him. Was it really a human voice?

In reply to it the dog barked his loudest. He was closer to the tower now; he was looking up at it. The moon showed him clearly. Robin looked up too. His glance swept the tower, stayed at that window in the side of it, and saw—what? Something that caused him to cry aloud in his joy, something that made

his heart beat till he thought it was going to burst—the face of a lad, the face of Christopher Pontifex ! How white it was—whiter than he had ever seen it—and the short red hair was so silvered by the moonbeams that it looked as if it had turned white too. Robin made a shelter of his hands and halloed to him—

“Where are the girls?”

He had a less distinct vision of two other faces, white also, like the faces of ghosts, he said afterwards. They showed above Kit's shoulder. Robin called his loudest. They could not hear every word he said, but they knew that help was coming to them, that they would soon be rescued, and they thanked God with their hearts and “yellow dog Samuel” and Robin Guest with their lips.

“Oh, Kit! Oh, Polly Oh, Trixy, Trixy!”

They hardly knew what they said or how they said it; they stood there at the window watching Robin run away at the top of his speed; they clung to one another and tried not to sob for joy, but were not sure whether they succeeded.

Sam barked at them, and they called him by name, "Good Sam! Good old dog!" and all the rest of it. They were so cold that their very lips felt stiff. They were so glad that their wits went wandering, and they laughed and cried together. "Kit," said Trixy, "didn't I tell you that when I went to sleep I dreamt that God sent an angel to let us out?"

"Yes," replied the twins in a breath. Afterwards they added—

"But it was only Robin Guest who came, and he is not an angel, nor is yellow Sam."

"It is all the same," said Beatrix between her chattering teeth. "Don't contradict me; I couldn't stand it. I am so cold and so hungry."

They did not want to contradict her; they were both very kind to her. The Pontifexes said then, and say still, that this affair was worse for Beatrix Farleigh than it was for them.

"You see," Kit explained to the vicar, "we twins are different from Trixy. All the while we were shut up in that beastly tower with that beastly bell at the top,

after the silly man had taken away his silly ladder——”

“That silly children went up by.” The vicar had to interrupt in this fashion; he considered it his duty.

“Well, perhaps so,” Kit grinned good-naturedly. “Anyway, all the while we were up there Polly and I were able to say to ourselves, ‘It can’t last longer than until to-morrow morning when old Jimmy Roberts opens the door.’ But Trixy has an imagination, that is what is the matter with her. And it works, and no mistake. Trixy kept imagining all night long. She thought that her sister Grace would do something dreadful through fright about her; go out of her mind or something of the sort. She thought that Mrs. Snuggs might have a fit, or if she didn’t Mrs. Guest would; she imagined that something would prevent Jimmy Roberts opening the belfry tower for visitors to-day. Trixy is not as strong as we twins are; but the worst thing for her was her imagination.”

Whether Kit was right or no in his idea of the evil effects of this valuable

possession, it is certain that Beatrix Farleigh was in a condition to cause anxiety to those who loved her after this adventure in which she had taken part. She seemed well enough that morning when she was driven back to the Vicarage, very tired and white, but able to eat and drink after she had thrown herself into the arms of Mrs. Guest, then out of them in order to hug Grace. She was rather incoherent in her talk, to be sure, but considering the excitement of the occasion no one was surprised at that.

"Get her to bed, my dear; get her to bed."

This was the vicar's advice, and he never gave better. Mrs. Guest followed it as soon as ever she could. Robin, who had scarcely had a word with Trixy, for the twins had so much to tell that there was not room for any one else to talk much, begged to speak to her before she went upstairs.

"Well, only just speak to her; don't keep her a moment, sonny," she said kindly.

It did not surprise Robin that his

mother should leave him with Trixy. No, it did not surprise him in the least. He was accustomed to expect his mother always to do the kind, tactful thing.

He went straight up to Trixy in her crumpled frock, with her pale face, her tired eyes so dark underneath, and her pretty hair in disorder.

"I expect you hate me," he said; "I jolly well hate myself, I can tell you."

"I *was* rather cross with you, Robin," she said, "but it didn't last long. If you were hours and hours in a tower, in the darkness and the cold, right up high near the sky, you wouldn't be angry either."

"Why not?"

"I don't quite know, Robin. But I am sure that you would think and think until you made up your mind that it was silly to be angry about little things, when—when there are so many great things that really signify. Little things don't signify really, do they?"

She seemed to expect an answer, so he said—

"I don't understand."

" I'm not sure that *I* do quite. But when I was up in the tower I loved everybody so much that I thought I would never say anything unkind to a friend again ; no, not so long as I lived. And I wanted to tell you that I was sorry you were cross, and that I wished I had run after you and coaxed you back, and—oh, Robin ! I cried because I was afraid that I should never see you again, for I knew that you would not like to feel that your last word to me was a cross one. And—oh, dear ! I am crying now."

Robin asked her to forgive him in a broken voice, and she said that there was not anything to forgive, or if there had been she had quite forgotten it. And would it not be better to make up their minds that there should not be " any more fusses—fusses did so spoil every one's enjoyment."

At that moment in came the vicar ; he had been " sent to fetch Beatrix," he said. " There was a hot bath ready for her, and she would not be allowed to talk any more, even to a friend. He supposed that Robin and Trixy *were* the best of friends again.

So God bless them both and good night. No, good morning."

He was his own cheery self; he preached no sermon; he just whispered to the boy and girl that he hoped they would thank God for the joyful morning that had followed a sad night.

"As the wife and I shall; as we have already," he said, turning his genial face to the young folk. "I dare not think of how it would have been if I had had bad news to send to your father and mother; indeed I don't."

He hustled them off, one this way, the other that. Afterwards he stood a while looking out at the sky, greeting the new-born day; and his big, kind soul was full of the deepest gratitude. Meanwhile Mrs. Snuggs was also thanking God in her simple way. Her charges were already fast asleep, so was the trusty Samuel, who had been duly petted and praised for his intelligence. And Grace, what of her? She said very little that night; but Trixy had never known her sister so affectionate.

"Good old Grace," she said to herself;

"she must have had a bad time while we were up in the tower."

She was feverish before long, and Grace got out of her bed and went to her; she was very kind and gentle, and crept in beside her sister, holding her hand and soothing her. She was extremely sleepy herself, but that did not seem to signify. The one thing of importance was to comfort Trixy. For many days the poor child lay in bed, hot and cold by turns, talking a good deal of nonsense, mixing up angels and dogs and hooting owls in her ceaseless talk, and tossing from side to side. The doctor had to be called in, and said that his patient must be kept perfectly quiet. Grace and Mrs. Guest managed the nursing between them.

"Grace is such a help," the vicar's wife confided to him. "It is wonderful how much good there is in every one; it only wants something to bring it out and there it is."

He looked lovingly at her.

"Or some *one* to bring it out, eh?" said he in his quick way. "But it is not often that you find such a some one as

my wife. I believe she would find gold everywhere, and draw sweet music from a stone."

"The parson learns a lot from his wife," he added a moment later. But Mrs. Guest had the last word.

"Whatever she knows she learnt from the parson," she said.

CHAPTER X

AFTERWARDS

WHEN Trixy was herself again she found that she and her sister were closer together than they had been before. It was as though the silver chain that linked them were drawn tighter. A sort of shyness that made a barrier between them was broken down; they talked more freely with one another. One evening when Mrs. Guest had left Grace in charge of the convalescent, Trixy plucked up courage and said—

“To-morrow Kit and Polly are to come and see me. I’ve been wanting to see them so much, but Mrs. Guest said it would be too exciting for me. I don’t believe it would have been, but she is such a dear, and I have given her so much

trouble that I wouldn't bother her for all the world. I just waited."

"I don't see why you are in such a hurry to see the Pontifexes." Grace's tone was unlike that to which she had accustomed her sister lately; it was stiff and distant.

"Don't see why I want to see the Pontifexes! Why, they are my friends. I am very fond of them."

"Now look here, Trixy, don't be silly. They've got you into mischief and they ought to be ashamed of themselves. They would have known better if they had not been such common——"

"It wasn't common to go and look at ruins; besides, it was my fault, not theirs."

"It was common to climb a ladder."

"Fiddle-de-dee! but we won't quarrel about it."

"No, of course not; you will soon find that mother will put an end to this ridiculous friendship. I told her exactly what sort the Pontifexes were and I know what she will say."

Beatrix was quiet for quite a minute.

She lay back in her easy-chair, staring at Grace, and thinking hard.

"No, we won't quarrel," she said at last, "I don't want to quarrel. I might have died up there in the tower and never have seen you again. I said to myself, 'If ever I get back to Grace I will try to be nice to her, and I believe she will try to be nice to me.'"

"I *have* tried to be nice to you."

Grace spoke in rather an uncertain voice. She was sitting close to her sister, therefore it was easy for the latter to give her a hug.

"Of course you have, you've been a perfect dear!" she cried. "Now I want you to go on being a perfect dear. When the twins come to see me to-morrow, just stay with us and be polite and agreeable to them. Don't look at them with your nose in the air, and say 'Good afternoon!' as if they were dirt under your feet. When you do that, they don't know what to say to you, or how to be easy and natural like they are with Robin and me. You'd like them awfully if you came to know them."

But Grace Farleigh's nose was already

in the air; the mere mention of the Pontifexes had caused this elevation.

"I am extremely sorry that I should have so bad an effect on your friends. I have noticed that their manners leave a good deal to desire," she retorted; "but under the circumstances there is only one thing that I can do, and I shall certainly do it."

"What is that?"

"I shall not trouble the children with my presence."

"Oh, bother!" replied Trixy, growing exasperated. "I do wish you wouldn't talk like—like Mrs. Pelham."

Grace made no reply. Trixy made another effort.

"We might make such a nice little party," she said, "if you would only be nice."

"No, we shouldn't." Grace's cheeks were red. "I don't mind being friends with Robin and Phoebe, but I won't have anything to do with the Pontifexes, remember that."

"Don't say anything nasty about them, or I shall lose my temper," pleaded Trixy;

"and I don't want to do that. Don't, please don't!"

"I don't want to say anything nasty about them, I don't want to say anything at all about them. I wish they had never been born, there, that I do. But, never mind, when mother's letter comes——"

"I say, Grace, if mother were to say that I might go on being friends with them, and I do believe she will, won't you—won't you be one of us?"

"No," replied her sister.

"But mother must know best. Mother is so wise. Oh, I do wish she were here! Two whole years since we saw mother and father. Horrid old India that keeps them away from us!"

"Whatever mother says won't make any difference to me," declared Grace, with her mouth very straight and prim. "Because, of course, I know that if mother were here and saw the twins—they do look such terrors!—she would agree with me. If she does not interfere and stop your being with them, it will be because, being so far away, she can't realize what they are like. I——"

"I always thought you were obstinate," cried Trixy, "but I never knew till now that you were an obstinate pig."

Her voice was fierce, so were her eyes. By this it will be seen that Beatrix Farleigh had not turned into a saint all of a sudden any more than her sister had. But there was a change in both of them nevertheless. This is how it showed itself.

Grace did not fly at her in a rage as might have been expected from one of her disposition under such provocation, while Trixy jerked out the single word, "Sorry!"

No reply came.

"Beg your pardon, Grace, I didn't mean to say that, at least not quite."

"Granted!"

Grace beat a retreat; there are cases when it is not in the least cowardly to do that. She felt sure that if she stayed in the room she would say something more, and that that something would give offence.

On the following afternoon Polly and Kit Pontifex were allowed to see their

friend. They came in shyly, and were relieved to find that "the haughty one"—this was their name for Grace—was not present. Trixy occupied the vicar's arm-chair, but she did not fill it, as may be imagined. The vicar was at the piano. Phoebe and Robin were also present. Now what was Mr. Guest doing? The twins thought that he was probably singing a hymn, but then a hymn does not leave its hearers all broadly smiling.

"Convalescents require a lot of cheering up. I'm glad you've come, children," said Mr. Guest, turning to them. "I've been singing a comic song, doing my little best, you see. But I'm old and work presses. You two youngsters can liven Trixy here better than I can."

The vicar singing a comic song! They ought to have been surprised, but they were not. He was quite an unexpected gentleman; the only thing that would have surprised the folk at Cloverfield would have been for him to do something unkind. For the rest, his good nature took on all sorts of forms. So here he was rattling off a gay ditty and making

the newcomers join in the merry chorus before he took himself off to visit a sick parishioner. After he had left, Robin took his place. He was musical like his father.

"Listen, Kit! Listen, Polly!" he cried. "Words by the talented poetess, Miss Beatrix Farleigh, late of Southsea, now of Cloverfield. You grasp that?"

The astonished twins gave him to understand that they did.

"Music by the rising musician, Robin Guest, of the same place. You grasp that also?"

"We do! we do!"

"Two seats to let in the stalls."

Phoebe pointed to the sofa, on which the twins seated themselves with due ceremony. Kit fanned his sister with a deftly folded newspaper. Polly languished gracefully.

"Attention, please!"

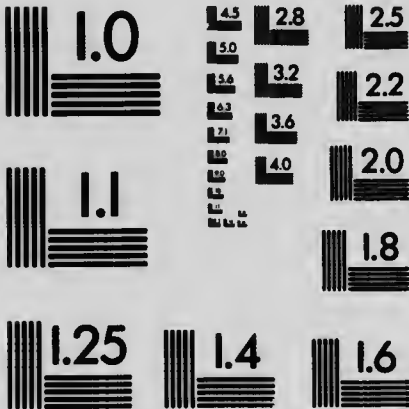
Phoebe recalled them to the business in hand.

Robin rolled his head, flourished his hands, and played a showy prelude to the song they were to hear.



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“Three of us were shut in a tower,
Oh, the weary, weary hour!
Kit and Polly and Beatrix,
Weren't they all in a terrible fix?
Alas! and alack!
Yellow dog Samuel ran to see
Where the dickens his friends could be,
And bring them back.”

A voice from the armchair said, with considerable firmness—

“‘Dickens’ is not my word. It is Robin’s. I said something different. I don’t like ‘dickens’!”

This remark was not attended to by the singer; he went on as if nothing had happened.

“Three of us were shut in a tower,
Till our hearts were sad and our tempers sour,
And never a deed we did was madder
Than when we climbed up that tempting ladder.
Ding-dong! Ding-dong!
Oh, how we wished that the bell would ring,
But there wasn’t a rope to pull the thing—
Here ends my song.”

“Bravo! bravo! bravo!” clamoured the twins.

Trixy smiled, Robin tried to look modest and failed.

"Author! author!" cried Kit.

Beatrix rose and bowed.

"Good old singer! Robin Guest, Robin Guest!"

Robin turned from the piano, laid his hand on the place where he believed his heart to be, and bowed lower still.

By this it will be seen that the spirits of the adventurers, which had been considerably affected for some days, were now rising to their normal level.

"How ever did you do it?"

The Pontifexes, full of friendly admiration, put this question first to the poetess then to the musician.

"Genius!" cried Kit.

"Well, perhaps not quite that," amended Robin. "Say a little touch of talent. We won't go farther than that."

But the Pontifexes, who had a loyal admiration for all their friends, would go farther than that, and still clamoured—

"Genius, we tell you 'genius,' that is the word."

It had to be left at that.

Kit and Polly sat one on each side of Trixy. How they did talk, to be sure! The twins wanted to go over the adventures of the night spent in the tower of St. Faith's Church, and could not make out why Beatrix kept turning the subject. But they were quick to see that she did, and Polly nudged her brother and whispered—

“Drop the tower, Christopher, drop it like a hot potato.”

“You bet I will,” he whispered back. They talked about almost everything else, talked gaily and at a great pace. The vicar had told them to cheer up the convalescent, and they did it. Trixy followed their lead, but with less of animation, for she had been ill and they had not.

“Nothing seems to hurt *us*,” exclaimed Kit; “we are most awfully strong.”

“All the Pontifexes have always been strong,” added his sister. “Snuggsy says they have.”

“To hear Snuggsy,” said Kit, “you might think that none of the Pontifexes had ever died, but they have.”

At this moment Phoebe left them. Her

mother was in the garden, and she passed out through the French window to join her there.

"Mother mustn't garden all alone," said she, "she'll tire herself."

Robin followed her. Trixy turned to the others directly he had left.

"You see," she explained, "poor old Robin still feels bad about leaving us, so I didn't like to talk about that dreadful night. That's why I turned the subject."

"Oh, was it? I thought it was because of your own nerves. I shouldn't have bothered so much about Robin," said Kit.

Then Polly said—

"How about your sister, what did she say?"

Trixy had to turn the subject a second time. If she had repeated any of Grace's observations on their escapade, she would have expected the twins to take a hasty departure. As she refrained from doing so, they remained with her for a long while, leaving her in the best of spirits.

CHAPTER XI

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

GRACE was very much surprised and disappointed when she received a reply to her letter to her mother. Beatrix was elated, for Mrs. Farleigh made no objection to her girl's intimacy with the Pontifexes. She wrote wisely and kindly, pointing out that she had entire confidence in her friends, the vicar and his wife, and depended on them entirely; that she also hoped that Grace and Beatrix would regard them as taking the place of their parents until what she hoped was a not-far-distant time, when the latter would return to England and take up their own responsibilities. Mrs. Farleigh added that she was afraid Grace had got some foolish notions into her head.

"Now, my dear child," wrote her

mother, "what a person has, or how a person looks, or who his or her father and mother may be, is of very little consequence. I do want my girls to realize this. All that you say in your letter, Gracie, makes me think that your head has become filled with upside-down notions that are contrary to any that your father and I have. I am satisfied that these twins are truthful, honourable, fair-dealing children. There seems to be nothing at all against them; they are merely full of fun and spirits. My love to Trixy, and tell her to be careful not to let hers run away with her. But I feel that she will be more careful in the future, for she has had a sharp lesson. I am writing to her by the same post."

Mother's letter to Trixy was as wise as her letter to Grace. She reminded her that, though there was nothing really wrong in the little escapade she had taken part in with the Pontifexes, it was rash and foolish. "It would not signify so much if you three had been the only sufferers," she said, "but you have realized, I am sure, how much anxiety

and misery you brought on others. For my own part, little Trixy, I would rather have been one of the three who were cold and miserable and hungry, shut up in a tower all night long, than one of those who waited and watched and feared all sorts of terrible things. Remember that we are all so bound up in the bundle of life that we can't make a mistake without others paying for it as well as ourselves."

"It's a bit like reading a sermon," Trixy remarked, "because there isn't mother's voice behind her words to make them sound less preachy. But what she says is quite true. And I'm going to think about it a lot."

A little while afterwards she said to Grace—

"You'll be nice to the Pontifexes won't you?"

"I shall always be polite to the Pontifexes, Trixy, of course, but I shall not be intimate with them. You know I *have* seen them, and I know that they are quite impossible children. Mother has not."

"Look there!" she exclaimed a moment

afterwards. "What do you think of that?"

Both girls ran to the window to see Kit and Polly pass by. They were not walking this time; they rode two shaggy ponies, and rode them well. Kit was in his old blue serge suit, knickerbockered, and with strong stockings and shoes; Polly was also in blue serge. Both of them were hatless and gloveless, both of them were flushed with exercise and in the best of spirits.

They waved their hands to the Vicarage folk, and some one must have waved back to them, for they stopped at the gate. The girls then caught sight of the Reverend Herbert Guest, who joined them there, and stood patting a pony's mane and making friends with him as he did with all animals.

"Yellow dog Sam is out of breath, he is following us," said Kit, his gay voice reaching the listeners. Trixy was off like a shot; she was scolding Kit, telling him that Sam ought not to run too fast. It was a warm day; she insisted on his waiting till the panting dog appeared upon the

scene, then she declared that he should go no farther.

"You will stay with me, Samuel; you must not go a step farther with those heedless Pontifexes. Take Sam indoors, Robin. Do it directly."

She gave her orders in a most business-like manner.

"You ought not to order Robin about," said Phoebe, who was near enough to hear everything, "he is older than you are."

"She doesn't mean any harm," Robin observed good-naturedly as he seized Sam by the collar; "do you, Trix?"

"Why, of course I don't. I ought to have said 'please,' though. I'll say it now. Please, Robin, will you take Sam indoors, and please will you put him where he can't get out and follow the twins."

"But," Phoebe went on perseveringly, "why shouldn't the twins have Sam with them if they choose?"

"Oh, I couldn't allow it; it is too much for a dog to rush along at such a rate on such a day," replied Trixy naively.

They all laughed together.

"I don't see what you are laughing at," said Trixy; "I did ask Robin properly this time."

"It is wonderful," said the vicar to his wife when they were alone, "how that child gets her way. She is younger than the others, but she is often the leader."

"It is because of that that Grace so often feels out of things, I dare say," said Mrs. Guest. "She is the elder sister, and it vexes her when Trixy is before her. I don't say that it ought, but I am certain that it does."

"Now where is Grace?" she added a moment later. She was always a trifle anxious about this rather uncomfortable inmate of her home.

Grace had started to the village with Phoebe to help her do a little shopping there; the Pontifexes were still in her mind, but she was trying to drive them out. She decided that she was sick of thinking of them. However, here at the door of Woodbine Cottage was Mrs. Snuggs, and she must needs hail the girls and discuss her charges. She was full of pride as to their achievements.

"Those dear children can do well-nigh everything," she said, "they are just as clever as they can be. It's because of their brains being so active-like that their parents sent 'em down here; the doctor, he said, 'Just let them have a rest.' 'Tis the same with the brains as with the soil. Let 'em both lie fallow from time to time, and they'll be all the richer by and by, depend upon that. The doctor spoke sense."

"Kit and Polly are very quick," replied Phoebe; "they know a lot more than I do."

"Oh, Phoebe! I am sure they don't."

Grace felt compelled to make this remark, though she might have known it would annoy Mrs. Snuggs. She was not, however, prepared for her making a long speech. Who was Mrs. Snuggs that she should presume to preach to her? And it really was a good deal like preaching.

"Missie," said she, shaking her forefinger, "'tis a pity to talk of what you know nothing about, and though I'm a poor woman, I take the liberty of telling you so. You can't judge of the goodness

of a fruit by its outside. Appearances are deceptive. That's the first thing I have to say. Furthermore"—she shook her head solemnly—"furthermore, I make so bold as to remind you that you can't give an opinion, anyway an opinion that's worth having, on persons that you don't keep company with. Miss Phoebe here she knows that Master Christopher and Miss Mary have had or are having the best of educations. She knows what a first-rate education means, and she knows that a good lot has come of it with Master Christopher and Miss Mary already. So you see, my dear, what she says is worth listening to."

There was no reply. Nevertheless she continued her remarks.

"There's other things that I could tell you about those two dear children that might surprise you, since you know so little of them and think so little of them, Miss Phoebe—you with your head in the air. But I'm not at liberty to do it. My tongue is tied, so to speak. So good afternoon to you both. Good afternoon, Miss Phoebe dear, and tell your good mother

that I'd like to send her a few of my flowers, if she should be willing to accept them. I've got some dahlias coming on fine."

The silent Grace still surveyed the landscape with a critical eye.

"You know," she explained to her companion as they continued their walk, "I don't believe for a moment that those Pontifexes can be properly educated, or that their parents can be persons who know anything about education. It is not likely, though perhaps they go to the County Council schools when they are at home. Mrs. Pelham told me that they give children a wonderful education there. And of course you could go there dressed anyhow. And of course you would learn to be rough. I dare say that *is* where they go. But I expect it was all nonsense about their knowing much."

"No, it wasn't. I said that they knew more than I do, and I meant it. They know more than you do, too, Grace."

As Grace Farleigh was certainly not as well-informed as Phoebe Guest, she felt this remark to be personal, and hinted as

much. But Phoebe did not take up the cudgels, so no fight ensued.

When they returned from the village, having executed all their commissions, they passed Woodbine Cottage again. No Mrs. Snuggs was at the gate this time, but the twins were in full evidence. They looked alive with mischief. Had the girls been close enough, they would have heard Kit say to Polly—

“ Let’s cram her.”

“ Rather,” replied Polly ; “ you begin.”

All that Grace and Phoebe did hear was a polite “ Good afternoon ” from the two conspirators, followed by an equally orthodox remark about the weather. They both looked suspiciously demure. They had heard of what had passed, for Mrs. Snuggs was not the wisest of women ; when she was annoyed, therefore, she was apt to hand her annoyance on. In this case her object had been to put the twins on their mettle.

“ What you’ve got to do, my dears,” said she, “ when you have a word to say to that eldest Miss Farleigh is to show her what sort you are, and what a good

education you've got. If you could speak a bit to her in a foreign language, so much the better. But don't let her think that you don't know anything and crow over you, mind that."

The effect of this advice, given in all good faith, was the reverse of what "poor old Snuggsy" expected. It filled Kit and Polly with mischievous thoughts and mischievous intentions. They meant to have a game with Grace—to take her in if she were silly enough to be taken in. But the first step was to get her on to the right subject. How they managed that it is difficult to say. They certainly did it with more skill than one would have thought possible of such hare-brained young folk. What Kit said Polly capped, what Polly omitted Kit supplemented. Grace was led on to the question of education so cleverly that she did not know of the trap set for her, and fell into it directly. Her increasing curiosity made this still easier. She replied to inquiries about how and where she had learnt. Then she felt able to throw in a question on her own account. Kit and Polly parried it,

appeared inclined to turn the subject, nudged each other, and pretended to feel shy.

"We like learning," said Polly; "we pick up what we can. But it isn't as if we had been to a grand boarding-school like you have, or a whole year under the care of Mrs. General Pelham."

The speaker sighed, and cast a glance at Phoebe. She did more than that, she winked so quickly that it looked like blinking. Only, Phoebe Guest knew that it was not that.

Grace was sublimely unconscious of being made fun of.

"Then, how do you learn? who teaches you?" she questioned.

"We don't go to school," said Kit.

"No, we don't go to school," echoed Polly.

"There's a fellow teaches me a bit now and then, though," said Kit. "He's a curate."

"And there is a kind lady who teaches me," added Polly. "I learn as much as I can."

"It is very good of Mr. Constable

and Miss Lennox, I am sure, to try and help us on a bit," said Kit; "we know that. But we are awfully glad to be here and have nothing to do for all that. It suits us down to the ground."

"Father says we shall both go to boarding-school by and by," Polly announced, "when we can afford it. He says it would tone us down."

"But, then, boarding-schools are jolly expensive." This from Kit.

"Oh, yes, of course," Grace condescended to continue the conversation, "especially if they are really select."

"And father is rather hard-up; he said so before we came down here. 'You little monkeys cost me a lot,' that is what he said."

Polly made this remark boldly; it was true enough.

"Well, we don't cost much while we *are* down here, and it's awfully jolly."

Kit addressed his sister now. They had forgotten the others for a moment.

"Yes, we are saving father and mother a whole heap of money," Polly responded gleefully.

"You bet," replied Kit, with a sigh of satisfaction.

Grace felt that she had gathered all that she wished to learn, and was beginning to reproach herself for being so familiar and talking so long with the Pontifexes. She made a move to go homewards. Kit called to her that he would have that pup for Trixy before long. He shouted his remark at the top of his voice lest she should not hear it, and because she made believe that she did not, which proceeding did not escape him.

She turned back to suggest that perhaps the vicar and Mrs. Guest might not allow her sister to have a pup on the premises.

"Bless my soul!" cried Kit, "he'll let her have it—I mean the vicar will. And as for Mrs. Guest, you know how nice she is. Three cheers for the Reverend Herbert Guest and Mrs. Guest!"

They delivered these in good style. Grace and Phoebe could hear them as they hurried onwards.

"There, now, what did I tell you?"

questioned Grace Farleigh. "A curate and a kind lady! And they *pick up* what they can. I expect some one teaches them from charity. Didn't I tell you they could not be properly educated?"

"I don't know what you told me and I don't care." Phoebe was getting exasperated. "But I'm sure of one thing. They were making game of you in some way or the other. And it really is your fault if they do."

"My fault!"

"Why, yes; you should not be so curious. What does it matter where they are educated, if they know something? And I told you that I knew they did. But you wouldn't believe me, and you would not believe Mrs. Snuggs either. I expect Mrs. Snuggs told the Pontifexes what you said. Didn't you see their eyes twinkling? Why can't you be sensible, Grace?"

"You are always finding fault with me," said Grace, and her voice had quite a pathetic ring. "I don't seem able to do anything right."

"I'm sorry, but you really are silly."

You keep bothering about such unimportant things."

"Education is not unimportant. It is the first thing to be considered. Mrs. Pelham said—"

"Father said that I was to do some reading with him this evening—rather stiff reading too. You had better join us," said Phoebe, "since you are so keen on education. And mother said that I ought to study more only this morning. I am to have a French teacher soon. You might learn with her too if you liked, I dare say."

In this practical fashion did Phoebe Guest get her friend off a topic that threatened to prove objectionable. Grace told Trixy all about it when she got home. Trixy said, "Oh!" nothing more. Grace endeavoured to rouse her to a sense of the immense importance of the subject. Trixy made another remark. This time it took the shape of, "Oh, bother!" But she was keenly interested respecting the promised pup.

"Good old Kit!" she cried, and ran to tell Robin about it. He was equally interested, so was Mr. Guest.

"I knew you would get it if Christopher Pontifex promised it to you," he said. "That lad always behaves like a gentleman."

Grace could not help exclaiming.

"You don't follow me, eh?" The vicar looked whimsical. "I'll explain if you like. What don't you understand?"

Grace muttered something that Mr. Guest either did not hear or allowed to pass.

"One mark of a gentleman is to keep to his word," he said. "The same remark applies to a lady, and I haven't known Kit break his. That is what I meant."

Grace looked rather puzzled. She was thinking matters over. She could not recall ever having heard Mrs. Pelham say anything like this, and she was always talking about the marks of a lady and a gentleman. Really poor Grace Farleigh had a good deal of work before her. There was so much to undo as well as to do. Yet somehow or the other this verdict of the vicar's delivered so positively had some little weight with her.

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Anyway, it was sufficiently novel to be worth consideration. She sat turning it over and over in her mind, and looked very serious

CHAPTER XII

" PARLEZ VOUS FRANÇAIS? "

" Now, I wonder," said Robin, who had just offered to take Trixy to the woods, " whether Grace would go with us."

" I expect she would. Why shouldn't she? Why do you wonder? "

" Because when we all went out together the other day she said she hated long walks, because she is always refusing to go out when the rest of us do."

" Robin, my boy, don't be a goose. Can't you see that is quite different; the Pontifexes make it different. Come now, you are not so dense as you make out."

" But that is such silly nonsense."

" No matter. Just do as I tell you, Robin. Go and tell Grace where we are

going. It is a lovely afternoon, and she'll go with us, of course."

Trixy was quite right. A moment later the two sisters stood waiting for their escort. He made his appearance almost directly.

"Oh, I see," exclaimed Trixy, "you've been smartening yourself up!"

Robin blushed.

"A fellow likes to look respectable when he goes out with girls," said he.

He had changed his suit and really looked very spruce. Grace was inclined to find fault with him if he were careless in his attire. Or if she did not go as far as that, she would just send him a glance that made him feel small. His father and mother were not sorry for this. They thought it high time that their boy should pay a little more attention to his personal appearance.

"It is a discourtesy to others not to be scrupulously clean and neat in one's dress," said Mr. Guest; "to be so is a form of politeness."

"Yes, father, of course."

Robin would make this admission

willingly, for he saw the point. But Grace's scornful glances had done more to keep him up to the mark than anything else. Another illustration of the fact that it is "an ill wind which blows no man good."

Robin looked anxiously at Grace now. Did she approve?

"You look very nice, Robin," she remarked graciously, and he smiled a satisfied smile.

"So do you," he replied gallantly.

Trixy nudged him and told him he was getting on nicely.

He had spoken the truth, though; the two girls in their white serge frocks did look extremely nice. Grace wore a shady white hat; she was always careful of her complexion. Trixy's ruddy gold hair was crowned by a little white knitted cap; she looked the picture of health and good spirits. Grace also had a colour in her cheeks that would have astonished Mrs. Pelham.

"Dear Grace looks delicate, but extremely high class," that lady had been wont to tell her friends. And, indeed,

the girl was refined in appearance and carried herself remarkably well, with quite an air of distinction.

"How is it that you are not going out with the Pontifexes to-day?" she asked of Robin.

Robin and Trixy, speaking both together, gave her to understand that there was some mystery about what the twins were doing to-day. They were off somewhere or the other on some mission or the other which it did not please them to divulge.

"But we mean to get out of them where they have been. We shall do it by hook or by crook."

This was Trixy's announcement.

"By fair means or foul," Robin amended.

"What does it signify?" questioned Grace languidly.

"We don't choose that the Pontifexes shall keep things to themselves," Beatrix explained.

"I don't suppose that they will," observed Grace, "for they are great talkers."

Trixy would have liked to deny this assertion, but truth forbade. Robin remarked that it was a lovely afternoon, and that he was sorry they were half-way through September, because though autumn was nice enough, and it was jolly in the winter if you could get some skating, there was nothing like summer after all.

"Saturdays," remarked Robin thoughtfully, "are a capital institution."

He was moved to this speech as it happened to be a Saturday and, as he was now back at school, he was enjoying his weekly holiday. He went each day to the neighbouring town, but was not quite as studious as might have been desired by the headmaster of the grammar school he attended.

It was rather difficult to the lad to realize that he needed "such a lot of cramming." For he had quite made up his mind to be a farmer if possible. He therefore gave it as his opinion that it was a pity to waste time learning all sorts of things.

Phoebe also was at work again. On

this particular afternoon she was having a violin lesson. She had watched the rest go on their excursion quite cheerfully, however, for she loved her fiddle. Playing it did not seem to her as anything but a pure enjoyment. She was heart and soul in it. They were talking of this, of lessons in general, and which they preferred amongst them, as they walked along.

Robin owned to a partiality for history, but it appeared to be of a mild description. Grace spoke somewhat grandly of "languages"; she did not mind them.

"Languages?" Robin looked at her respectfully. Did she know more than one? Well, she was considered forward in French, and she had begun German.

"Oh, I say, Grace," murmured Robin; "I didn't know you were so clever."

Beatrix, pressed to reply to questioning, had to confess that she was afraid she was rather a dunce. History was interesting, but she hated to have to remember the dates of treaties and wars and Acts of Parliament. "Oh, yes," she brightened suddenly; there was one

set of lessons she always enjoyed, "dancing lessons, you know."

Robin laughed heartily at this, and declared that you could not call dancing a study. You could dance without brains. Trixy declared that you could do nothing of the kind. How about set-dances? If you had not brains, you would not remember the figures, "and then wouldn't you make the others in the set wild, eh, Master Robin?"

This led to a discussion, in which Grace took an active part. She was given to argument, but objected to being disagreed with. You had to fall in with her views if you wanted to keep her in a good temper. Well, Grace was young, and older folk could be found who resemble her in this respect without going far in search of them. She was holding forth in a way that made her companions resolve to turn the subject as soon as they could, for there was a flush in her sister's cheeks that Trixy always called "the danger signal," when they became aware of a figure in the distance. It was that of a strange lady. Now, those who live in

such a place as Cloverfield know that every one knows every one, and that to see some one whom you have not met before is quite an event.

"Whoever can it be?" said Robin.

"She has style," said Grace.

She certainly had; she was tall and imposing, and somehow or other her clothes seemed to fit her as if they had been made for her or she had been made for them. She was dressed all in grey except for a touch of red in her toque, and she carried a handbag and walked with ease and dignity.

"She may have style," said Robin, "but she has got on the silliest pair of shoes for walking in the country that ever I saw. Look at their high heels and their pointed toes!"

"I call them *chic*," affirmed Grace, with her mouth set in its most obstinate fashion.

"I call them idiotic," replied Robin.

"Now don't squabble, you two. Whatever does it signify?" Trixy said, putting in her word. "What has the lady to do with us?"

Something, it appeared ; for here she was making for them, increasing her pace to do so. And here, again, was she, having come to a dead halt in front of them. They also stood still, looking at her and waiting for her to speak. This she did in a moment, and what she said was just this—

“ Parlez vous Français, mes amis ? ”

Trixy shook her head vigorously. Robin ejaculated, “ Oh, Golly, no ! ” under his breath. Grace looked up and replied boldly—

“ Oui, Madame . ”

It was as if (so they all said afterwards on comparing notes) this simple reply had opened a floodgate and let loose a perfect torrent of speech. What it was all about not one of the three knew, not even the intrepid Grace. The lady was asking them questions ; they were pretty sure of that ; but what questions ? What was it about, in the name of all that was wonderful ?

One after the other the trio said—

“ Je ne comprends pas, Madame . ”

The lady wrung her hands, depositing

her bag on the ground to accomplish the gesture more easily. She was evidently rather distressed about something. Any one of the three would have tried to comfort her, but under the circumstances it was impossible.

"She's making me feel like a rude beast," grumbled Robin. "What are we to do? If she'd leave off talking her silly French and behave sensibly, I might be able to help her. Why did you tell her that you could speak French, Grace, when you can't?"

"She thought she could because she can read French quite nicely. Don't scold her, Robin," interrupted Beatrix, who was always ready to defend her sister if she chanced to be attacked, and saw now how discomfited she felt.

The stranger talked on. They shook their heads at her to show her how matters stood with them. She paused and began again a trifle more slowly. But alas! it did not mend matters. They could not make out what she was driving at.

"Oh, whatever shall we do?" cried Beatrix in great distress. At that moment

the lady turned sharply round ; she had heard footsteps coming up the road behind her. And now she as well as the trio were aware of two young persons who were swinging along, carrying a basket between them.

“ The Pontifexes, by Jove ! What have they got ? Where have they been ? I wonder whether they can be of any use to us ? ” said Robin.

“ As if those children could be, ” replied Grace, her lips curled scornfully. “ Do they look as if they could speak a foreign language ? Why, they can't even speak their own properly. Kit talks horrible slang sometimes, and Polly is nearly as bad. ”

Robin and Trixy paid little heed to this contemptuous remark ; they were beckoning to the twins. A queer couple they looked, for they were hot and apparently rather tired ; furthermore, they were powdered with road dust that lay white on their serge suits. They had caps on for a wonder, but these were pushed to the back of their heads. Their shoes were a sight to see ; they had once been brown,

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WITHOUT A MOMENT'S HESITATION HE BEGAN TO SPEAK
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now they were a sort of grey, this also being due to the dust.

The elegantly dressed lady looked at them for a moment as they set their basket down beside her bag. Then she put her question, the same that had so disconcerted the others, with a vastly different result. Off went the cap of Christopher Pontifex. He bowed like a little gentleman; he and his twin smiled benevolently on the stranger, and the fun began. Christopher started it. Without a moment's hesitation he began to speak in fluent French. If his hearers could have understood it, they would have known that he was making inquiries as to what the lady wanted to know, and then supplying her with the required information. It came to this. Mademoiselle Josephine Duval—this was the stranger's name—had travelled from London by a train that arrived at Chillington Junction a short while since. Here she was told that she would have an hour to wait for the next train to Cloverfield, whither she was bound, but that she could walk the distance in less

time than that. Being of an intrepid nature and having a great objection to waiting at stations, she had started on what she hoped would prove *une belle promenade*. But she had begun by going the wrong way, and now she was terribly fatigued. She wanted to know how far she was from Cloverfield, or was there by chance any probability of getting a conveyance? She would die of fatigue if she had much farther to walk.

All this she poured forth in a rapid stream; all this Kit and Polly understood perfectly; all this was lost upon her other hearers. They gazed open-eyed at the expressive faces of the three speakers; for soon all of them were included in the animated conversation, but were blankly ignorant of its nature, until Kit said—

“This lady can't walk a step farther—says she would die if she did, or see herself hanged first, or something equally to the point. So I'm off back along there to Chillington Station, and I shall bring a fly for her ladyship. She's going to sit down on that tree-trunk yonder, that seems to be made especially for a weary

traveller from foreign parts. Polly will sit alongside of her and listen to her talk. You three can do what you jolly well like; no need for you to spoil your fun. Poll and I can boss this show."

They were evidently quite equal to it. Polly, in whose charge the mysterious basket had been left, entered into a lively conversation with the strange lady; both were smiling and gesticulating.

"She says," Polly interpreted, "that she is going to establish herself in Cloverfield and give French lessons there and hold French classes. She is going to teach the vicar's daughter for one. Now we know what sort Phoebe's French teacher is. Not a bad one, I should think. But run on, you three; you can't be any use, you see, and it looks silly to have you standing there. I say, you girls, what is the use of going to a select school if they don't teach you to talk French there? Good gracious me! What was Mrs. General Pelham about all the while you were with her, too? Dear, dear me!"

Now Trixy had heard from Phoebe of the interview Grace had had with the

Pontifexes, so she knew why Polly spoke in this way. It was not quite like her usual good-nature, but even a worm will turn when occasion requires. And Polly Pontifex, though amiable, was human.

"Let's get out of this," said Robin, and lifted his cap as Kit had, but with less ease and garce, in rather a countrified style.

As they trudged along together in the direction of the woods they met the fly from Chillington. Kit was lolling back inside it, and made the driver stop that he might speak to his friends. Robin and Trixy took the opportunity of complimenting him on his recent achievement. He did not seem to think there was much in it. Talking French was "quite easy," so he said.

"One of the things you pick up as you go along," he remarked, with a sudden recollection. He sent a quick glance to Grace. Her colour rose. He did not press his advantage.

"It just came in handy at the moment," he said; "and I was awfully glad to be of use," he added politely. "Ta, ta,

see you all again soon. I mustn't let Polly wait for me any longer. She'll be getting bored."

"Just one minute, Kit!" cried Trixy. "Do tell me what you two were carrying in that basket. I thought I heard something squeak."

"Guinea-pigs squeak; it might have been a guinea-pig," said Christopher.

The fly rolled away, leaving a cloud of dust behind it. A thought was in Trixy's mind that grew and grew as she walked, and remained with her while they were in the woods.

She did not like to mention it, for one should not talk too much about a promised present, of course. But—well, puppies may squeak as well as guinea-pigs. And Kit had said that he should see them again soon.

CHAPTER XIII

GOOD NEWS

ON the following Monday, when Grace and Beatrix were in the garden, Phoebe called to them from the dining-room window. She held something white in her hand. This she flourished in the air. Both of them guessed what that meant—a letter for one of them, of course. This was post-time, and, what was still more important, the Indian mail was due. Both girls, knowing this, raced indoors. Even Grace, the stately one, could hurry when news from mother and father was likely to arrive.

“A letter! A letter! For which of us?” cried Trixy.

“For both of you. It is addressed to the Misses Farleigh.”

“It’s from mother.”

Phoebe slipped away and left the sisters undisturbed. It was in little ways like this that one noticed her resemblance to Mrs. Guest. She had the tact that is born of unselfishness ; she realized at once when it was kind to leave folk to themselves. Grace and Beatrix were extremely excited.

" I do believe that mother and father are coming home at last," Trixy said, clapping her hands.

Grace's cheeks were pink. Their arms were round each other's waists, their heads were close together as they read. It was not a long letter, but it said all that needed saying. The colonel and his wife were to arrive in England in a few weeks' time. The written pages were full of love and tender thoughts, glad with expectation ; they seemed literally to throb with the joyful hope of a speedy reunion. The girls read them twice, then, for a moment, both were silent. It was Trixy who burst into speech.

" I am so glad, so very, very glad ! " she cried ; " but Grace," she paused, " I wonder if you will think me very strange.

I feel—oh, I don't know how to put it—I feel shy of father and mother. Do you know what I mean?"

She had little hope that her sister would understand her, but she found herself pleasantly mistaken.

"Oh, yes, I know," Grace said slowly. "I am so afraid that they won't be quite the same. It is such a long time since we saw them, and then they could only stay in England a little while. But wasn't it lovely while they were here when we lived with them. And perhaps they will be disappointed that we are not as forward as we ought to be. You see, we haven't learned much; we are not clever, either of us, are we?"

"No, we are not clever; it is quite clear that we are not. It was a pity we weren't taught to speak French. I did feel so ashamed of myself when the Pontifexes talked to that French lady at such a rate, and you and I stood still, looking so silly."

Grace sighed.

"Oh, don't let's think of it, don't let's talk about it," she said hastily. "I

wouldn't have minded if it had been any one but the Pontifexes. But they are——"

"They are my dear friends."

Beatrix straightened herself; her eyes flashed, her cheeks reddened.

"Well, we won't quarrel about them anyhow, at least not now, not when we have this to think of."

Grace kissed the letter. Trixy impulsively kissed her.

"No, we won't quarrel about anything," she said, "now that mother and father are coming home. Oh, isn't it lovely?"

Their arms were round each other's waists again, and in this fashion they walked into the dining-room, where sat Mrs. Guest reading her letter over for the second time.

"Well," she cried gaily, her eyes and lips smiling in concert.

"Well," echoed the girls, "isn't it just lovely? You know all about it, don't you? Doesn't it seem too good to be true? Mother and father have been coming so often and something has occurred to prevent it. But now they are really on their road!"

Grace spoke excitedly. Trixy followed suit.

“And now nothing can prevent them coming. Oh, I do hope there won't be a storm or anything dreadful just at the last moment. I read a story the other day about friends who were just going to meet, and——”

In came the vicar.

“No dismal forebodings. I don't allow them on the premises,” he cried.

Indeed, his very presence seemed to forbid them, he was so gay and cheery. He always seemed to bring sunshine with him. He brought it now.

“Good news this!” cried he. “Good news for you, good news for us. Children to see their parents again, bravo! Friends to see their friends. What beautiful things do happen in this beautiful world to be sure!”

He beamed upon the little company.

“I wonder whether you two girls will be glad to leave us,” said Mrs. Guest, her voice soft and a trifle pathetic.

It must have done her heart good to hear their rejoinder. It formed a duet.

"We shall be most awfully sorry to leave you."

"But we shall come back to you, if you will have us."

Trixy was, as a rule, the first to speak, but it was Grace who made this remark. When she was alone with Mrs. Guest a moment later, she crept up to her and rested her head on the kind lady's shoulder.

"You've been so good to us," she said.

"Mrs. General Pelham was kind, and they were kind enough to us at school. But this house is quite different, and so are the persons in it. It is like being at home to be here."

Mrs. Guest's sensitive face took on the happiest of all its expressions. If there were anything in the world that she aimed at it was to make folk feel at home with her. She blushed like a happy girl. Trixy had betaken herself to the garden. She felt that the house was not big enough to hold her, and she wanted to be alone. There, yonder, she would be safe, there by the bed of forget-me-nots, that a while since had been a mass of tender blue.

This was her favourite corner, and when she sat there on that rustic seat, it was believed by Phoebe and Robin Guest that she was invariably inspired by the poetic muse. They looked respectfully at her on this account, keeping an equally respectful distance.

Was she inspired now? Kit and Polly were convinced that she was. They were advancing slowly along the path that led to her retreat and yet she did not see them. Polly walked first. She carried in her arms a something enveloped in a shawl. Kit followed her; they both tiptoed.

"I am not sure," said the boy, "that I consider we have any right to interrupt a poetess at her devotions. We shall chase away the 'divine inflatus,' you bet we do. She's got her pencil and paper on her lap, that means business."

Whether it did or no, it is certain that Polly Pontifex was not affected by the fact. On she went, her face aglow with satisfaction, and from beneath the white shawl that which it covered emitted a faint squeaking like that of a very young infant.

Trixy, looking up, caught sight of her

friends. Pencil and paper rolled off her lap and were disregarded. She rose to her feet and confronted them. Her cheeks were as red as roses.

"Oh, Kit! Oh, Polly! Father and mother are coming home. They are on their way!"

"Good for you!" replied the boy; and the girl added—

"Bad for us!"

"Why?" queried Trixy, her eyes wide.

"Because we shan't have you with us, because we shall miss you so."

"But we shall come back here, or you will go to London. We are not going to be parted; we shall always be friends."

"Good old Trixy. Do you mean that?"

Polly made this remark, Kit emphasized it.

"Do you jolly well mean what you say, my dear?" he asked.

Beatrix Farleigh made solemn affirmation that she did. She looked past Kit while she spoke, and her attention, already attracted by his sister's bundle, fixed itself upon it and became alert.

"Why, it's moving!" she said.

"You allude, I suppose, to Sruggsy's Sunday shawl," remarked Kit. "She will be missing it by now. But we had to borrow it. Polly found it in Snuggsy's room. You see, Polly has a notion—I don't know where she got it, girls are such queer creatures—that all young things should be wrapped up in shawls; so—well, that's why she has wrapped this baby in a shawl. I hope he isn't smothered."

"He!"

"That's the pronoun; right you are, he, the wonderful, the charming, the thoroughbred fox-terrier pup, who is as yet nameless. I wonder if the vicar would christen him. Only, of course, we must fix on his name first. No good to ask the Reverend Herbert un'til we've done that."

The result of this speech was to make both girls scold him for being irreverent. Polly was most concerned on this point. Trixy, if the truth be told, was so eager to see what Mrs. Snuggs's Sunday shawl hid from her curious eyes that her one thought was to remove it. She did this without asking permission, tweaking it off

dexterously, and there stood, or rather nestled, revealed, the form of the dearest of pups, white of face, with little eyes and sensitive, quivering lips, and a pink nose. He was all of a shiver and squirm; his narrow tongue shot forth seeking whom it might lick, and accepting the loan of Trixy's face, though Kit scolded her for permitting such a liberty.

"Oh, the little sweet! The darling thing!"

"Yours," said Kit gaily; "yours, Trix, I promised it to you. I mean I promised *him* to you. Here he is, and be good to him. I present him to you and am grateful if you will accept him from your humble servant. Well do I know that we Pontifexes are not fit to associate with the sister of grand Miss Grace Farleigh, who has been to a select school, and subsequently resided with Mrs. General Pelham. Nevertheless, I venture to make you this little offering, and hope that it finds you well as it leaves me at present."

There was a good deal more nonsense that Kit was ready to reel off, but he came to a sudden halt in his stream of elo-

quence. Trixy had the pup in her arms and was kissing his soft head rapturously ; she was, therefore, in happy ignorance of a fact with which her friends were already acquainted. It chanced that Grace, standing behind a laurel-bush, had heard every word that Kit had uttered ; her face was crimson as she stepped out into the open. She stood silently gazing at the others. What was she going to say? Would she slay Christopher Pontifex with the lightnings of her wrath? Polly was really afraid of what would happen. Kit stood firm, but the smile seemed to have frozen on his face.

Presently he spoke, meeting Grace's eyes as well as he could.

"I don't suppose I ought to have said that. I'm sorry," he said. "Anyway, I'm sorry you heard me, Grace."

She answered him quickly.

"I did want to hit you when you said that of me," she said. "But I'm not surprised. Of course you have a right to crow over me. You can talk French like a native. And I had to stand and listen to you. Trixy was saying just now what



GRACE, STANDING BEHIND A LAUREL BUSH, HAD HEARD EVERY WORD THAT KIT HAD UTTERED.

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a couple of sillies we must have looked. And I know we did."

"Oh, bother the old French. I had forgotten all about that. I wasn't crowing, I am not such a cad as all that. Polly isn't either. Let's shake hands, Grace."

He extended a not particularly clean hand. Just before he left Woodbine Cottage he had been helping Mrs. Snuggs in her garden, and the friendly soil still adhered to his fingers. Grace touched them in gingerly fashion with her own; these were spotlessly clean and very slender.

Kit observed her daintiness and knew its cause.

"You needn't be so particular," he said, "hands will wash."

"Just what I was thinking," she retorted; "and why not do it?"

She had the best of him here, and he knew it.

Beatrix came to the rescue at this moment. She stepped between them, the puppy in her arms, and Grace's sternness broke down as she cuddled the soft little creature. Soon the four of them were discussing what name would best fit

Trixy's new pet. Suggestions were quickly made and as quickly rejected.

"The fact is," said Beatrix, "this sort of thing can't be settled in a hurry, it needs a lot of thinking over."

Grace was in no mood for contemplation. She took herself off, to the immense relief of Kit. He and Polly wanted a talk with their friend.

"Did you guess what was in the basket?" Polly asked.

Trixy admitted that she had had her suspicions. Her friends told her that they had wanted to bring the pup round on the preceding day, but that Snuggsy had said that "it would not do"; dear old Snuggsy must be humoured. The twins really did consider her in their own way. In proof of this they went to church with her and sat demurely at her side, neatly dressed, Polly wearing gloves, which she considered a great drawback to her comfort and as bad as being in London. "Mother said we were to run wild," she urged, "and look at us. Why, it *is* as bad as being in London, I declare it is."

"But you like to please me, don't you,

my dears?" said Mrs. Snuggs; "and I should be filled with shame if you didn't look nice just once in the week, and that day the Sabbath. That I should."

"It will keep us in practice, anyway," Kit admitted. "If we dress up once a week, perhaps it won't be so awful for us when we get back to London, where one is supposed always to look respectable, worse luck!" ✓

They set the puppy down and for a while talked of little else but his varied charms; each of them found something fresh to admire in him. The subject bade fair to be inexhaustible, they were all so fond of animals. But at last Kit turned it. He wanted to know all about the letter from India, and Trixy told gladly of her parents' home-coming.

"What are your father and mother like?" questioned Polly.

Trixy shut her eyes, and made a picture of them as she had last seen them all the more easily for doing so.

"Father is tall," she said, "and very handsome. He is really too young to have grey hair, mother says so. But I

am glad that his hair is grey, for all that. It makes him look most—oh, most distinguished. His hair is very thick, and his eyebrows are very dark, so are his eyes. He has a really beautiful nose, and he walks like a soldier, so uprightly and so bravely."

"Good!" cried Kit. "Keep your peepers shut, my dear, and drive on. Now tell about your mother."

"Mother is fair, like Grace, and she has a gentle look in her eyes like the look in Mrs. Guest's. Her hair is the colour of Grace's, and her eyes are blue, and she walks as well as Grace does; she doesn't swing along like I do. Oh, I can't tell you any more about her except that she is a dear."

"So is our mother," put in Polly, "and our father is the same. They are abroad just now. We told you that, didn't we? They are visiting a friend in Switzerland, but they will soon be back, and they will come down here and fetch us home."

"Won't you be glad?" asked Trixy.

"Rather!" replied both the twins in a

breath. "But we shan't like going back to London, it's so stuffy there," quoth Kit.

"One has to be in London for the winter," corrected Polly with some severity; "and it wouldn't be so nice in the country then. Now, would it, Kit?"

Kit declared that it would. Robin had told him there was jolly skating to be had, and Snuggsy said that the holly-trees were quite a "marvel to behold." Snuggsy knew what was what, you bet that she did.

There was a pause. All three were thinking their own thoughts. Kit broke it.

"I've been talking to Robin Guest," he said at last. "What do you think he says about you?"

Trixy did not know. She sought enlightenment.

"Robin says that you will go away from here and forget all about the lot of us. He is in quite a way about your leaving Cloverfield; he says he will miss you and Grace no end. He gets on finely with Grace now, as well as we get on with you. He won't even allow that she is

upish. But then she isn't uppish with Robin now, only with us."

"It's our fault, I expect," said Polly. "Snuggsy says that we don't do ourselves justice going about like we do. But Snuggsy is old and she doesn't know how much nicer it is to run wild in old clothes than in new ones. She doesn't even wish to run wild, and father and mother said we might. They sent us down here on purpose; you can't run wild in London. Going about without a hat on is delightful. I like the way the top of Robin Guest's hair has turned colour with the sun. Kit and I wish that ours would do the same."

"But we shall always have red hair, whatever we do," sighed Kit. "It is our doom."

He stooped to pick up the puppy, who was biting his shoestrings. In doing so, he felt something roll beneath his foot, and picked up Trixy's pencil. Polly made a grab underneath the seat and got possession of a piece of paper on which there was writing. She was too honourable to read it without permission.

"Of course you may read it if you like,"

said Trixy. "It's about my going away from here, and it shows you that I shan't forget any of you."

Polly cleared her throat, but Kit would have none of her interference. He laid it down as a maxim that poets must read their own effusions. "They give more point to them," he explained. "They always know what they mean, at least I suppose they do, even when other folk don't."

So it was decided that Trixy should read her verses. She did so quite willingly.

"We are going from the Vicarage,
But I would have you know,
'Twill always be most dear to us,
Wherever we may go.

We are leaving pretty Cloverfield,
With its darling village green
And the quaint old inn beside it,
The prettiest to be seen.

The Guests will surely miss us,
The Pontifexes too,
But I hope they won't forget us,
Whatever they may do."

"Bravo!" cried Kit.

"Brava!" corrected Polly, looking at him reprovingly.

"Oh, bother, don't be so mighty particular," grumbled her twin.

"Have you any criticisms to make, Christopher?"

This from Beatrix, for Kit was apt to give his opinion on her verses, and even ventured to hint at improvements.

"The word 'Vicarage,'" he said now, "doesn't quite do. And I would not have *going* and *go* in the same verse. Except for that, it's very good. Couldn't do it better myself."

"Well, I like your impudence!" cried Polly.

She patted her friend on the back and advised her "not to mind silly old Kit," after which piece of good counsel she had to rush after the puppy, who was beginning to make a meal off the vicar's favourite geranium.

"I say, Trixy," said Kit, "you are not going to get a lot of new friends and drop Robin and Polly and me?"

She looked at him reproachfully.

"I wonder how you can say such a thing," she said. A moment later she had risen, and now she was stooping low over the garden-bed.

"Whatever are you grubbing for?" asked Kit.

She had found what she sought, just a few sprays of forget-me-not blossoms.

"This is for you," she said, handing him one. "This other is for Robin and this is for Phoebe. When you are thinking horrid things about me these flowers will say that I don't forget my friends, and I hope you will believe them if you don't believe me."

Trixy's eyes were moist.

"Cheer up, old girl; what a queer one you are! Of course we won't think anything horrid about you or say it either, and of course you'll come back and see us directly, won't you?"

"I expect I shall." Trixy's face beamed. "I'll get father and mother to bring us to Cloverfield as soon as ever they can, before you go back to London, of course."

CHAPTER XIV

THE VICAR'S PLAN

"SHY of your mother and father, Trixy; surely you could not have been that!"

The speaker occupied a sitting-room in a quiet family hotel in the West End of London; her husband, Colonel Farleigh, and her two girls were with her. She leant back in an easy-chair. Grace sat on the arm of it. Trixy sat next her father, and kept lessening the distance between them until at last he slipped his arm round her, when she gave a little sigh of content and nestled closer still.

"I *was* shy of you," she said, her cheek against the colonel's; "shy of you both. I thought you might have changed. But you haven't, you dear things, not a little bit, except that I see mother has just three grey hairs in amongst her fair ones. I

don't believe that there are more than three, really."

She looked critically at her parents. Then she cried in a voice of triumph—

"Yes, you are exactly the same, both of you!"

"Exactly the same!" echoed Grace. "But what about us, father? What about us, mother?"

"That is quite a different part of speech," replied the colonel. "Do you know, when first we caught sight of you we could hardly recognize you. And when we were alone there was mother ready to cry because she had lost her two nice little girls."

"I don't believe it," said Trixy stoutly, "because"—her eyes were full of saucy fun—"she has got some nice big girls instead of them, hasn't she?"

She ruffled up her father's hair in a manner that certainly did not suggest fear of him.

"You are both looking amazingly well, anyway," said the colonel; "as for your niceness, we shall see what there is to be said about that by and by. The

first thing is to find out how the vicar has succeeded in fattening you so. I can't make out how he did it. I must cross-question him when I get hold of him. He will be here in a moment."

It was Mr. Guest who had brought his charges to London to meet their parents in response to a telegram. This had happened two days since. To-morrow he would journey back to Cloverfield again. They could not do without him there.

"We drank a lot of milk," said Beatrix; "the vicar will tell you that; and we ran wild, but not so wild as the Pontifexes, because Mrs. Guest drew the line."

"I should rather hope not," said Grace primly. "Father and mother would not approve of our behaving as they do."

"Hoity, toity!" exclaimed the colonel.

"Hoity, toity!" echoed the vicar, peeping in at the door. For he had heard what was said.

Neither of them reproved Grace, yet somehow or other the whimsical smile they exchanged made her feel more uncomfortable than any words.

"Now, girls," said Mrs. Farleigh, "we

three will have a walk in the park and leave the gentlemen to have their chat together."

"Delightful!"—Trixy clapped her hands—"we've shoals of things to tell mother."

"And mother is longing to hear them."

"Vicar, dear!"—Trixy addressed him now—"you are going to dine with us here at seven precisely. Won't it be fun to dine in a real hotel?"

"Rather! I am looking forward to it immensely," replied the vicar, with his jolly laugh. "I hope they will give us something very nice to eat, don't you?"

"Anyhow, we shall be eating it in England, eh, wife? and in company with our children and our old friend," said the colonel. "That will make up for shortcomings if there should chance to be any, won't it?"

"Indeed it will."

Mrs. Farleigh looked from the vicar to the girls who clung to her so affectionately, and went off happily with the latter. "Like a hen with her chickens under her wing," her husband said.

The two gentlemen, left to themselves,

were soon talking busily. For the first quarter of an hour the vicar was speaker, his companion an interested listener. Mr. Guest was giving an account of the girls' stay beneath his roof. In his quick, graphic fashion he let their father see how things stood. The colonel, knocking the ash off the tip of his cigar, looked very thoughtful as he watched it fall into the tray provided for it.

"In short, old friend," he said quietly, when a pause came, "you found it easy sailing as far as our little Trixy goes, but with regard to Grace there was a bit of difficulty, eh?"

"Just so, and I attribute a good deal of that to the unfortunate influence of the lady at Southsea with whom the children spent a year or more. The amount of false teaching she contrived to cram into Grace's head in that short time is really astonishing. My wife and I have done our best to try and get it out again; but we have not had any marked success. You can see that for yourself. However, we are very hopeful."

"These Pontifex children, what about

them? Are they at all like their father? He was a fine fellow, was Philip Pontifex, in the good old days when you and I and he were young together."

"He is a fine fellow still. Just as straight, just as upright and honourable. His children are like him in these respects. They have splendid stuff in them, take my word for that. I've been glad to see your Trixy make friends with them, though it has been the means of giving the wife and me more scares than one, I assure you."

"And my Grace still turns up her nose at them and considers them beneath her? God bless the silly little creature!"

"She still considers that the twins are not fit company for Colonel Farleigh's daughters."

"And you have let her go on thinking so?"

"My dear fellow, yes. Of course I have. Didn't I write you and your wife all about the business? Didn't I tell you that I believe there are certain cases that require drastic treatment? Or shall I say that there are certain complaints for which

one may try all sorts of remedies without meeting with any success? Then comes a sudden and unexpected shock, and your patient is herself again."

The colonel laughed.

"Good for you, Guest," said he. "Here's another metaphor. Your patient squints: a sharp operation is performed, and she sees straight. How will that do?"

"Admirably. We are getting on nicely between us."

"And what it all comes to or what we hope it will come to is that my little Grace—how she has grown, though, to be sure—will find out, at a moment chosen by yourself, you prince of schemers, that appearances are deceptive, that she is not superior in position to Trixy's friends after all. She ought to feel a good deal ashamed of herself; it ought to be a good thing for the silly child."

"Just so."

"My good fellow"—the colonel, leaning forward, brought his face, a beaming one, close to the vicar's, which beamed also, touched his arm, and said—

"Upon my word, Herbert Guest, you ought to have been a stage-manager, or a playwright, or something of the sort."

"In the name of goodness, why?"

"Well, here you are arranging a fine tableau and glorying in it. I know you are. Don't say you are not. One day, in a most dramatic fashion, the scene will be arranged, then down will go the curtain with a run. You certainly ought to be on the stage."

"I prefer being a parson; it suits me better. You haven't put it rightly either. The curtain will go down, I admit, and that very shortly. But it will be lifted again on a much prettier, pleasanter scene. That is the best of it. Grace will be a different girl; I am confident that she will."

"Good! I hope and believe that you are right. Now, my old friend, lay your neat little plan before me. I am all attention. I see quite well that you are going to make the dear child's mother and myself your fellow-conspirators. I take it that Mrs. Snuggs is already in the plot. Clever fellow that you are, you have

been able to keep that good soul's tongue quiet. You are a veritable wizard."

"I own that I am rather proud of that part of my achievement," said Mr. Guest.

"How did you do it?"

"I appealed to her kind heart. I just said, 'Do it to please me, there's a dear, good creature.' And she threw up her hands and said, 'There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you, sir; mum's the word.' And mum was the word, though more than once I have seen her lips move as if she must speak. A jewel of a woman is Mrs. Snuggs, I can tell you, my dear man."

"I believe you. Now, as a rule, I give orders; but on this occasion I am ready to take them. Better still, I am ready to pass them on to my wife. A soldier's wife knows how to carry out commands, bless your soul! You are safe with the two of us."

The colonel took another cigar. He declared that he could listen better when he was smoking. The vicar laid his aside, for he had more talking to do.

Now, what he said need not be set down here; the events that follow will speak for themselves. He was still with his friend when Mrs. Farleigh and the girls came in from their walks in the park.

"We are just in time to dress for dinner," said Grace.

"Doesn't she just swagger because we are going to change our frocks?" said Trixy.

"I like dining late and dressing properly," retorted Grace. "Trixy's idea of happiness is to be always in a cotton frock. I call that bad taste, don't you, father?"

He did not answer her, but she saw his lips twitch, and knew that he repressed a smile. Yet she was certain that she had not said anything either ridiculous or amusing.

It was after they had dined, seated at one of many convenient little tables in a vast room, that they began to talk of Cloverfield. Then they heard a piece of news that concerned them. It was most interesting, not to say exciting, and filled

them with pleasurable anticipation. There were to be great doings at Chillington on the 23rd instant, of which Mr. Guest spoke with enthusiasm. A very rich gentleman who had been born in the neighbourhood, though it appeared that he was now of mature age and the father of a family, had presented the folk of the little town with an Institute.

"It will be an immense boon, I assure you," explained the vicar, rubbing his hands with glee, "not to Chillington alone, but to Cloverfield and other places in the vicinity. It is really a fine building. Classes will be held there and concerts given. There will be a course of lectures and entertainments during the winter, and that is just what we countryfolk stand in need of. A little amusement goes a long way with most of us, but we need some to keep us out of mischief.

"Now, children"—he turned to Grace and Trixy—"I've persuaded your father and mother to run down and be present at the opening of this building, because there are going to be grand doings and because your father used to visit the

neighbourhood in his younger days, before he was bothered with two tiresome girls, and still has a soft corner in his heart for it. But of course *you* wouldn't care to come, now, would you?"

He knew quite well what their answer would be before they gave it, the pair of them speaking in excited unison. They would love to come, they said. Father and mother must not go without them. Trixy was wild with delight; her questions were clamorous. They were duly answered. The last was an inquiry as to whether the Pontifexes would be at the opening ceremony. It was replied to in the affirmative.

"Bless your heart, yes; they are quite excited about it. And Mrs. Snuggs is having a new gown and a new bonnet for the occasion. Oh, I can tell you this is not going to be any commonplace affair," said the vicar. "My Phoebe is to wear a new frock, too, and Robin will have to make himself look smart. As for my wife——"

"Mrs. Guest always looks just right whatever she puts on," Grace announced

decisively. "And Robin is much more particular about his appearance than he used to be, I am glad to say."

She spoke impulsively and glanced as impulsively to see what effect her words had had on her father. There he was, smiling again in a good-natured, quizzical fashion that matched the vicar's. She was just going to feel cross about this when Mr. Guest said in quite a serious tone—

"I'm glad, too. Robin has been a bit careless about his person, but that is better than his being conceited. However, Phoebe and his mother will be sure to keep him up to the mark on the 23rd."

It was forthwith agreed that Mrs. Farleigh, the colonel, and the girls should go to the opening of this celebrated Institute. The colonel pretended to be difficult to persuade, but every one saw through this piece of acting. He just wanted a little more kissing and coaxing, and Grace and Trixy humoured him in this respect with the best will in the world. He told them that business would not allow him to take them to Chillington until the 23rd,

but they would leave Waterloo Station by an early train, so as to be in good time for the ceremony. They would put up at a hotel in Chillington and stay there a few days. Would that do?"

"Perfectly, you nice, kind father!" cried Trixy. "I'll show you the tower where we spent that horrible night, and I shall introduce you to the Pontifexes and Mrs. Snuggs and Samuel and Mary Anne. Don't pretend that you don't know who they are, because I am perfectly certain that you do."

"Mary Anne is the dog, Samuel is the cat," declared the colonel perversely. He had to be shaken before he would acknowledge his mistake. But what a gentle shake it was, to be sure, and how he seemed to enjoy it! Grace looked on. Presently, when the fun slackened, she said—

"When *we* first saw the Pontifexes they were sitting on a gate, swinging their long legs and looking disgraceful. I hope mother and father will have a better first view of them."

"It is not wrong to swing your legs,"

said Trixy with some heat; "and the longer they are the better you can swing them."

"And," suggested Mrs. Farleigh gently, "every one does not think appearance of so much importance as my Grace does. I am glad of that."

"But, mother"—Grace flushed, knowing herself to be reproved—"it isn't only appearance that I go by; it really isn't. I can tell directly I meet them what persons I ought to make friends of and what class they belong to. Mrs. Pelham said it was quite a wonderful instinct to have."

Mrs. Farleigh sighed. Her husband said—

"Bless my heart, miraculous! But aren't you ever wrong, my dear?"

Grace got hotter than ever. But she said boldly—

"No, father, I am never wrong."

"Marvellous!"

"I can tell by the look of people; indeed, I can. You don't believe me, but it is quite true. And these Pontifexes are——"

Trixy broke into sudden speech.

"You shan't talk against them!" she cried, her eyes flashing; "they are my friends. Father and mother, please tell her to leave off. I oughtn't to stand by and hear unkind things said about my friends; it isn't loyal."

"Right you are, Trixy," replied the colonel; "but don't let any of us get excited about it. Mother and I shall be seeing these children before long, and we beg to be allowed to form our own opinion about them. Now, had we not better talk about something else? The ears of Kit and Polly Pontifex will be burning so that they will catch fire soon if we go on talking of them any longer."

The colonel switched the conversation off on to another line without further ado, and this in such a fashion that no one could switch it back again; that would have needed too much courage. Meanwhile Mr. Guest listened and watched attentively. But he did not interrupt nor did he offer an opinion.

When he spoke again it was to tell his friend of improvements to be made in

Cloverfield, and he seemed pleased when Trixy exclaimed—

“ Oh, I do hope that nobody will spoil the dear little place. I like it just as it is.”

“ You’re right, my dear,” said he ; “ we won’t have Cloverfield modernized out of all its beauty if we can help it. But there are things that can be done to make the cottages more comfortable to live in without that. That is what we are after.”

“ Snuggsy—I mean Mrs. Snuggs,” said Trixy, turning to her mother, “ lives in the prettiest of cottages, and her mother and her father lived there before her. I wonder what coloured dress Snuggsy will wear on the 23rd ; she doesn’t often have a new one.”

“ I can tell you,” replied the vicar gravely, “ because the twins described it to me. It is black with bugle trimming, and she has a pink rose in her bonnet. Polly went with her to buy it. She and Kit both say that it suits her beautifully.”

“ I am glad of that ”—Trixy was grave also—“ and I hope that Polly will see that she puts it on straight. Mrs. Snuggs

is rather apt to get her bonnet on one side. That spoils the effect, doesn't it, mother?"

Mrs. Farleigh agreed.

Another thought struck Trixy. She appealed to the vicar for the latest news of her puppy, who was left under his care until such time as its rightful owner should be able to have him with her. Mr. Guest said that the dog was in excellent health, and Trixy told him she had decided on Dingo as a good name for him. Would he please ask Robin and Phoebe to begin to call him by it so that he might be able to answer to it by the 23rd. Mr. Guest listened with the greatest attention, and promised to deliver her message. After this he took his departure, as he was travelling home early on the following morning.

As for the girls, they were glad to go to bed, tired out by a day's enjoyment.

CHAPTER XV

HOW IT WAS CARRIED OUT

NEVER surely did October bring a brighter day than the much-anticipated 23rd. The sun shone as it had shone in August, though on a vastly different landscape. But what a beautiful one! At Cloverfield the trees were a sight to remember for many a day to come. Here was one with leaves turned to gold, here another of ruddy brown, there a wonder of crimson foliage that dazzled the eyes. Then the blue of the sky and the softness of the air were, considering the time of year, another miracle. Cloverfield folk inclined to the opinion that a special Providence had ordained exceptional weather for an exceptional occasion; Chillington folk agreed with them. The entire locality

was in a state of excitement. This was a great occasion for such a quiet part of the world, and every one intended to make the most of it.

No one, however, was more resolved on this point than was Beatrix Farleigh. Before Mr. Guest made his proposition, she had been thinking how delightful it would be to get her father and mother to Cloverfield in order to introduce them to the scenes and the people that had given her so much pleasure. And ever since the date for this opportunity had been settled she had counted the days, ticking off one after the other with immense satisfaction.

But now—well, now here they were at Chillington Station, dressed in their best and looking remarkably nice. Father hustled them into a fly, and they were rattled along the High Street of the little town in the best of spirits. How gay it looked, to be sure! There were Venetian masts with evergreens twined up them, there was bunting of varied hues, there was even a triumphal arch of the most gorgeous appearance. The sun shone

upon it, lighting up the huge tinselled "WELCOME" that adorned it, and making the letters look like gold.

"Whom do they say 'Welcome!' to? It can't be meant for us," exclaimed laughing Trixy. "Cloverfield folk are awfully kind, but they would not go quite so far as that."

"No," replied her father, "we are not quite grand enough to be received in that fashion. We shall have to take quite a back seat, I assure you. The welcome and all this fuss and preparation are certainly not in our honour. They are for the hero of the day and his family—the important gentleman who has given this fine new Institute to Chillington, and is to be present at its opening. We will do homage to him, won't we? We'll take our humble places on the footpath and see him go by, and huzza with the rest. What a fine building it is, to be sure! Dear, dear, it must have cost a good many thousand pounds, eh, wife?"

Though he spoke to her now, he seemed to look at Grace alone, and to watch her kindling face as if he were anxious to

know what effect his words produced upon her.

"Oh, yes, let us see him arrive!" she cried. "You can bow to the great folk, father, but ladies have to keep their hats on. Never mind, we will wave our handkerchiefs."

They got out of the carriage and stood on the pavement with the crowd. There were two policemen from Chillington, another from Cloverfield, another from Crowberry. Every one was very busy and fussy. The school children were massed together on a stand, seated in tiers, one above the other, and well shepherded. They had on their smartest clothes, and were well aware of it. There was a brass band that played the liveliest of tunes, but in spite of it one could hear the buzz of talk, and the sound of merry laughter and joyful exclamations. Both Grace and Trixy were so infected by the general excitement that they could hardly keep still.

"What is the gentleman's name?" asked Grace.

Her father smiled.

"Wait and see!" he cried

"Do you know him, father? Will he speak to you?"

The colonel smiled again.

"We used to be friends when we were both young," he said, "but if he has the same views as my little Grace and Mrs. General Pelham he won't have anything to say to me now. For he is a very rich, very important man, with a handle to his name, while I am merely Colonel Farleigh, a person of no note with a limited income. But we shall see—we shall see. Now attention; look, girls! Here they come, I do believe."

The bandsmen were clearly of the same opinion, for they thundered out, "See the Conquering Hero comes!"

The school children shouted themselves hoarse, giving cheer after cheer. There was a great but a very lively uproar. All eyes looked up the road for the coming carriages, necks were craned, clean handkerchiefs were fluttered in the breeze.

Here was the mayor dressed in his robes and chain of office, and followed by other

gentlemen wearing favours ; all of them were looking very important. They stood bareheaded on the steps of the Institute.

“ Bravo ! Bravo ! ”

A carriage came along. It was occupied by the vicar and his wife and children. How nice they all looked, to be sure. Phoebe was in blue, and had a charming hat on her head that even Grace considered suitable to the occasion. Mrs. Guest was in grey. The vicar's rosy face was rosier and cheerier than ever. Robin's hair was smoother than they had yet seen it, brushed till it had a brave polish upon it. They alighted hurriedly.

Squire Winterbourne and his friends came next, then Sir John Fitz-William and his house-party. All were as smart as smart could be ; they formed a line on each side of the steps, leaving room for the hero of the occasion to pass between them with those who might accompany him.

“ Bravo ! Bravo again ! ”

For here came a carriage drawn by two magnificent bays, their silver harness reflecting the sun, the coachman and footman in the sprucest of livery.

There was a tremendous clapping of hands, a deafening shout.

"Bravo! bravo!" "*Long live Sir Percival and Lady Pontifex!*"

The words rang out through the clear autumn air, distinct and unmistakable. Both girls heard and wondered.

"Pontifex! The same name as those twins have!"

Grace spoke to her sister.

"But it can't possibly mean that they are any relations of theirs, Trixy."

There was a quaver in her voice as she uttered these words. While she did so her eyes were wide with wonder; she could say no more, she could only look.

"Welcome to Chillington, welcome!"

The carriage passed under the triumphal arch amidst the huzzas of the people and came to a halt before the Institute. It held a distinguished-looking gentleman, Sir Percival Pontifex, and Lady Honoria, his wife, tall and stately, wonderfully well dressed and very gracious.

It held also—in the name of all that was wonderful—*the twins!* Did their eyes de-

ceive them? No, no! The twins, no matter how they were dressed, in spite of the fine feathers that are said to make fine birds, were yet the twins. Theirs was an identity that could not be hidden. Polly was daintily dressed all in white, there were drooping snowy feathers in her hat; the suit of Kit was immaculate. But their faces were not changed; there were the *retroussé* noses, the freckles, there the familiar expression. It was not replaced by one of pride, though all eyes were upon them; they were not in the least self-conscious.

They looked about them with glad, honest eyes, and nodded to any one they knew with the old familiarity, just as easily and frankly as when they ran bareheaded and gloveless through the lanes of Cloverfield.

"Father!" exclaimed Grace.

She looked up at him, but could say no more.

"You don't understand the situation," he said kindly, "but it is simple enough, my dear. You heard them call out Sir Percival and Lady Pontifex, didn't you?"

“ Yes, father, but why are Kit and Polly with them? They can't be relations.”

“ Rather near relations, Gracie. They could not be much nearer. Father and mother to Trixy's friends, the twins. But hush! The mayor is presenting Sir Percival with an address.”

Hush, indeed! No need to say that! Grace had not another word to say; she could only look with all her might while a little girl handed a magnificent bouquet to Lady Pontifex, look and wonder and feel terribly ashamed. These children about whom she had said so much, whom she had deemed so inferior to herself, were really superior in position. Ah, how much she had said of her own wonderful ability to judge at first sight whether they were fit associates for Colonel Farleigh's daughters, what airs she had put on! and all the while— Oh! it did not bear thinking of. She had made herself ridiculous; everybody must think so; she knew it herself now.

Kit and Polly caught sight of their friends suddenly, and nodded gaily to them, their eyes full of pleasure. They

would have liked to break away and hail Trixy, but they had to follow their parents, to join in the triumphal progress up the steps that led into the Institute, bowing right and left and smiling broadly.

"I wish we needn't wear gloves, beastly things," Kit whispered to his sister.

"I wish I needn't wear a hat," grumbled Polly, "it is ever so much more comfortable without one."

She glanced over her shoulder.

"There's dear old Snuggsy," she said; "her bonnet *is* straight, isn't it, Kit?"

"Straight as a die," quoth Kit; "Snuggsy is a great success."

Grace had slipped her hand into her father's; her face was white, her lips quivered.

"Oh, father," she whispered, "I—I made a great mistake."

"Yes, love," he answered, "I knew that, but I am glad to hear you say so. If you see a fault and own to it you've made the first step towards getting rid of it. And the first step is a very important one, isn't it, little maid?"

If he had reproved her, if he or her

mother had looked sternly or contemptuously at her, if Trixy had said, "I told you so," it is probable that Grace would have tried to defend and excuse herself. But not one of these things happened. Trixy looked for one brief moment as if she wanted to say something, as if she were inclined to laugh, but she did not do it. Hers was a generous nature, and the expression on her sister's face made her feel sorry for her, rendered her silent and serious.

So they all filed into the handsome new building, and Grace sat with bowed head while speeches were made and applauded. She was feeling as she had never felt before. Certain doubts and misgivings with regard to the soundness of Mrs. General Pelham's views, which had arisen during her stay at the Vicarage, suddenly rushed in upon her. They had been feeble before, now they seemed to have gathered wonderful strength. She tried to shake them off, but found it impossible; they overwhelmed her.

"I *was* dreadfully mistaken," she said to herself over and over again. She

lifted her head and stared at the platform and its occupants. There were Kit and Polly just as at home among the grandees as they had been at Woodbine Cottage with Mrs. Snuggs. Amazing! The children of Sir Percival Pontifex and his wife! Still more amazing! Grace's brain was in a whirl.

And they were Trixy's friends, not hers; she had been determined to have nothing to do with them.

Colonel Farleigh and his family were at the Vicarage on the evening of this important 23rd of October. They sat in the drawing-room and made a merry party, so merry that Grace's silence and preoccupation failed to damp the general high spirits. They were laughing and chatting gaily, but paused when they heard voices in the hall.

"There they are!" cried Trixy.

Every one knew who "they" meant, and Robin cried—

"Good business!"

There they certainly were. Impossible not to recognize their voices or their

footsteps, or their familiar forms of speech.

They burst into the drawing-room; their father and mother followed in less boisterous fashion. There were mutual greetings of the heartiest description; old friends meeting again after years of separation had much to say to one another. Under cover of their animated conversation one of the company slipped away. Grace Farleigh could not bear it; she told herself this many times; it was not to be expected of her; she had to run away and hide herself somewhere.

It was quite half an hour later that Robin sought her out and found her in the room that still went by the name of schoolroom. She was sitting at the table with her head in her hands. The boy went to her and asked what was the matter, but she would not or could not answer him; when he drew her hands away from her face he saw that she had been crying.

"There isn't anything to cry about, old girl," he said cheerfully.

He could make a good guess at the

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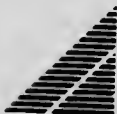
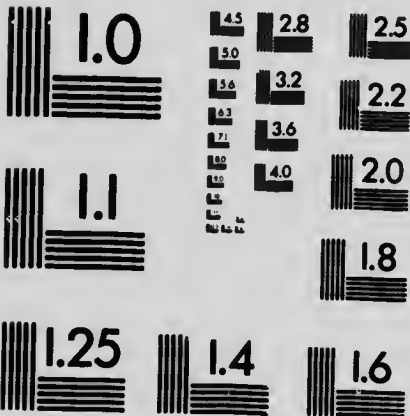


"THERE IS NOTHING TO CRY ABOUT, OLD GIRL!"



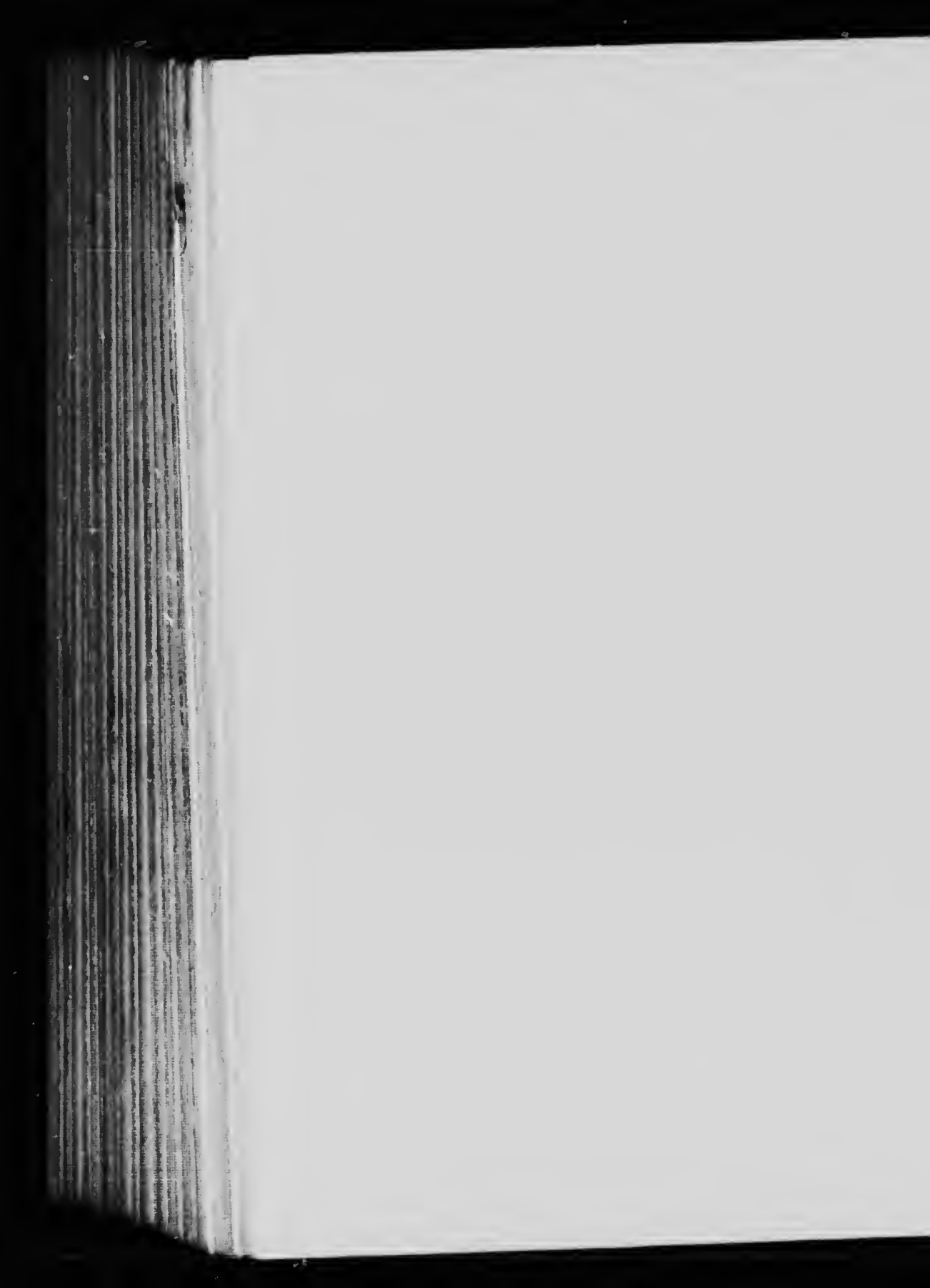
MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

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APPLIED IMAGE Inc

1653 East Main Street
Rochester, New York 14609 USA
(716) 482 - 030J - Phone
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cause of her distress, though he said this.

“ Oh, Robin, there is ! Why didn't you tell me ? ”

There was reproach in her voice.

“ Tell you what ? ”

“ About Kit and Polly having a ‘ Sir ’ for a father and a ‘ Lady ’ for a mother. ”

“ I didn't know myself until after you went to London. But what's the trouble ? Kit and Polly are themselves anyway. What difference does it make ? ”

Grace was about to explain ; a month since she would have done this very easily and eloquently. But now, looking into Robin's honest eyes, a sudden timidity seized her. She could not say what she would have said then. She was— What was she ? Ashamed to do so. Ashamed to own to thoughts that had once seemed right and proper ones. She answered her friend's question by another.

“ Why didn't Kit and Polly tell us ? ”

“ I don't suppose they ever thought of it. Whatever can it signify ? Why didn't your father tell you, if you come to that ? He knew. ”

Grace was silent for a moment, then she said quickly and in rather a strange way—as if she were forcing the words—

“I think that father did not tell me because he thought that it ought not to make any difference to me, and because he knew that it would.”

Robin smiled.

“Perhaps so,” he replied, “but, anyway, there isn’t anything to cry about.”

He laid his hand on Grace’s shoulder in a way that was meant to comfort her.

“Never mind, old girl,” said he.

Then he let her go because of a noise in the hall.

“Enter the Pontifexes,” said he.

They burst in. Trixy was with them, the puppy in her arms.

“Couldn’t think what had become of you, Gracie,” said she.

“Hullo, Grace!” said Kit.

“Hullo, Grace!” echoed Polly.

Then they proceeded to explain, speaking for the most part together, that their father and mother wanted the vicar and his family and Colonel Darleigh and his to spend the following day with them.

HOW IT WAS CARRIED OUT

There was to be a concert at the Institute and recitations and all sorts of fine doings. They would have "a ripping time," so Kit said.

Polly was of opinion that it would be "most awfully jolly."

There was not a sign of resentment in their manner; they seemed really anxious that Grace should be of the party. Their goodwill was of the heartiest, their forgetfulness of the past complete. Trixy fairly danced with expectation.

"It will be such fun, Dingo," she cried, kissing the pup's smooth head rapturously.

"The twins' father and mother are such nice persons," she declared. "I do like them so much."

Grace did not hear. She was thanking Kit and Polly for their kind invitation and seemed very nervous. It was a relief to her when they bounced out of the room as quickly and noisily as they had bounced in.

"I wonder they don't hate me," she said, turning to Robin.

"Because you were uppish with them? I expect they've quite forgotten that,"

replied Robin. "They would, you know, they are that sort."

"I—oh, I *am* so sorry, Robin."

Grace looked as if she might cry again; that frightened Robin. He persuaded her to go back to the drawing-room with him.

"She won't cry before a lot of people."

It was with this thought that he comforted himself.

Nor did she. She just tried to be as gay and pleasant as the rest were, and though it cost her an effort she succeeded wonderfully well.

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"I told you so," said the vicar to Colonel Farleigh. "I told you that the curtain, after it had gone down on one scene, would go up again and show you a much pleasanter one."

But it was not until a few months later that he made this remark. For it takes some time to set the wrong right; that is a gradual process. To unlearn the old and learn the new is not an easy task.

It would take a long time, too, to tell

how Grace Farleigh managed this—fill another book perhaps. Be that as it may, the fact remains the deed was accomplished.

There came a day when Grace saw with clear eyes, knew the false from the true, the gold from the tinsel, when she could wonder at her old self, when she could say and realize that—

“The rank is but the guinea’s stamp,
The man’s the gowd for a’ that.”

And what of Trixy? She has her trio still. They are the best of chums. But many other friends have been added to her list; it is really a very long one. Her bright face and pleasant ways are as magnets to draw others to her. For love begets love, and sympathy evokes sympathy.

The only way to have a friend is to be a friend.

It was a wise man who wrote these words, one who knew much of life and of his fellow-creatures.

Trixy Farleigh has learned little of

either yet, being so young. She is just a happy, glad-eyed girl. But she has within her a power of love that is not given to all. It is so strong, so bright, that it would shed radiance on the roughest path.

So good-bye to her, God keep her and God bless her !

THE END.

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