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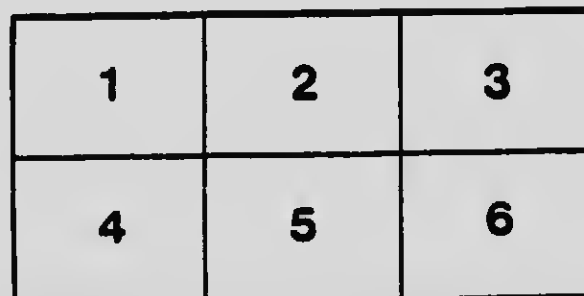
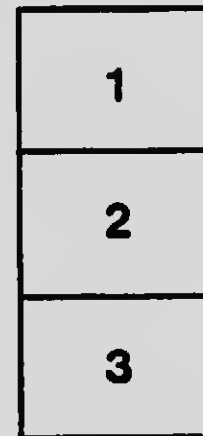
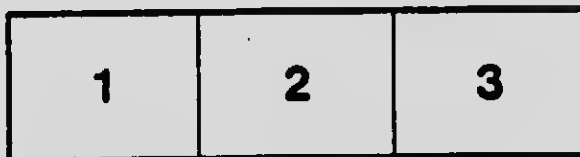
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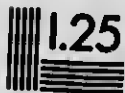
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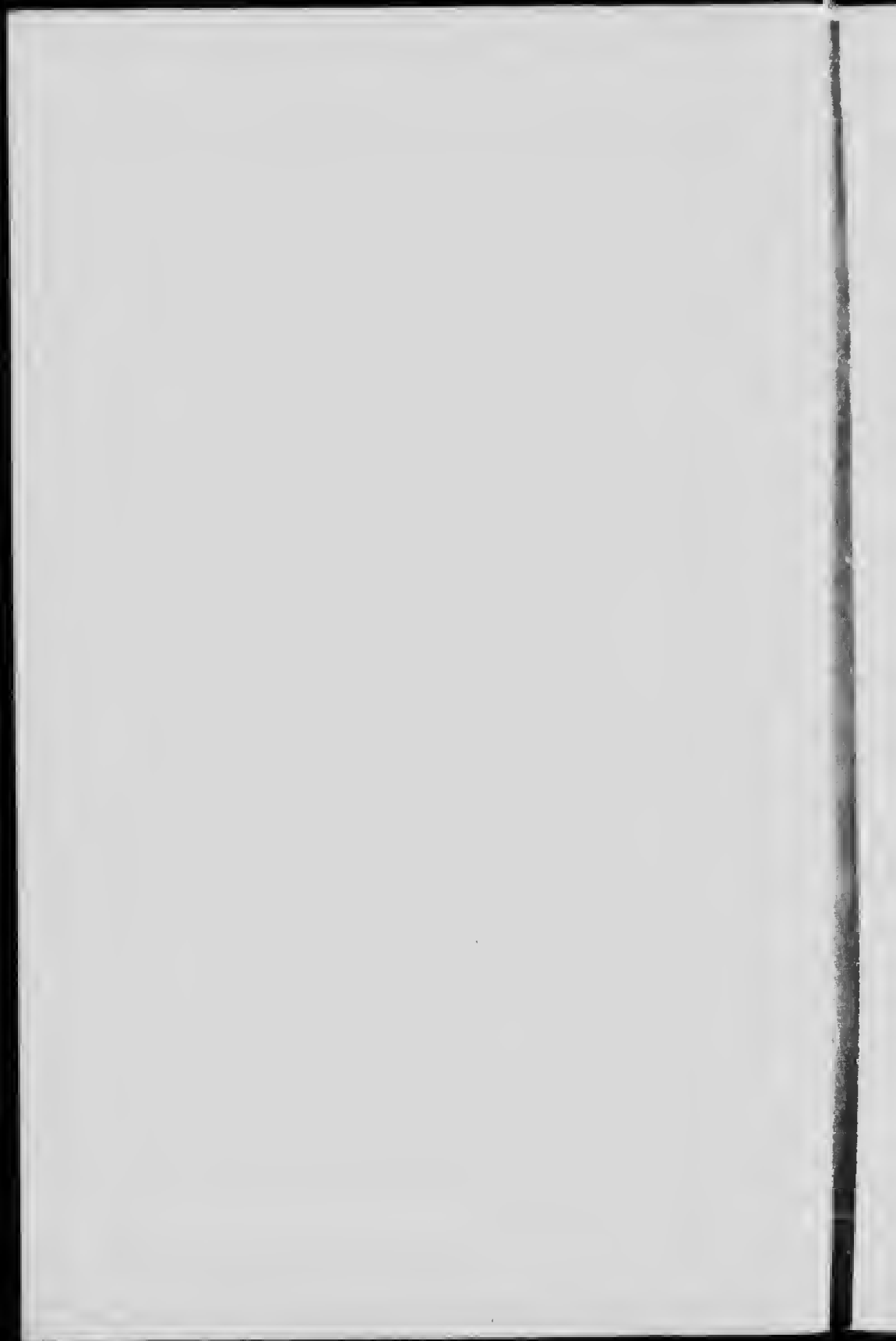


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DO YOU SAY, MR. DALE, THAT YOU DO NOT WANT
MY MONEY.

THE TROUBLE MAN

or

THE WARDS OF ST. JAMES

By

EMILY P. WEAVER

Author of "A Canadian History for Boys and Girls,"

"Old Quebec"

TORONTO

THE MUSSON BOOK COMPANY

LIMITED



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THE TROUBLE MAN

CHAPTER I

THE PARSON'S HELPMEEET

"OH, Roger, must you go? You will stick fast in the drifts. You will freeze to death."

I could hear the complaining wail in my own voice, but Roger, shapeless and shaggy as a bear in his rough buffalo coat and cap of staring fur, threw up his hands and laughed. Yes, he laughed to scorn my wifely fears and the whistling winds.

"It is nothing, Nelly. A mere flurry," he cried, catching up a bundle of rugs in one hand and the flickering lantern in the other. "Indced I must go."

"Wait till morning," I still urged. "It is so dreadfully lonely here."

Roger, at the door, turned to look back at me. "I am sorry, very sorry for you, little Nell, but—you would not have me neglect my duty!"

With that he passed out into the white whirling confusion of powdery snow, and I went to the window to linger there till the faint tinkle of his bells was lost in the rattle of the ice-laden wind against the panes. At length, thoroughly chilled, I turned from the desolation without to huddle over that wonder of ugliness and warmth, our huge black kitchen stove.

The Trouble Man

I was angry that Roger should have paid no attention to my last desperate appeal, and angry at myself for having made it.

It was not yet two weeks since he had brought me, a three-months' bride, to his queer little low-roofed parsonage near Willow Point ; but long before he married me he had given me fair warning that the new life in Ontario would be vastly different from that of my girlish days in dear old-world Shrewsbury. He had talked of difficulties, of loneliness, of hard work, and I, in the blissful ignorance of nineteen, had chided him for his lack of faith in me.

I remember the scene so well—such a contrast as it was to my Canadian kitchen on that December afternoon. The firelight dancing all over my aunt's pretty drawing-room, the dainty china, the cosy rich-hued cushions and hangings—I could see them all. And from that soft luxurious nest of my childhood I had looked out into a picture-world—painted by my own fancy, I suppose—of shining snow-fields, of glorious-tinted forests, of picturesque, simple people, of love in the proverbial cottage, and I had told Roger that I would go with him to the ends of the earth, that hardship and toil were nothing to me, and that my one desire was to be of use.

Dear old Roger, he had smiled a little at my enthusiasm, but his cheeks had glowed and his eyes had brightened when he spoke of his work and his people, so soon to be mine too. My special province was to be the old blind women, the bedridden cripples, the bonny barefooted children, and the fair young girls of his great scattered parish.

As we sat in the gloaming, Roger had whispered sweet words of love and thankfulness—for me—and I,

The Parson's Helpmeet

so much less earnest and noble, so much more easily tempted by the pomps and vanities and pleasures of life, dreamed that I had caught his spirit of self-sacrifice, and vowed that I would be in all things his true helpmeet.

Looking back, I am sure that I set out in my new life with an earnest desire to be to Roger and his people all that he thought me. My wedding day was glorified with dreams of "sesame and lilies." I meant to "double" Roger's usefulness, to be his self-effacing "perpetual curate," another minister to the needs of his little flock.

Alas, for dreams and good resolutions! Here, at the first test, I had broken down. I had been mean and cowardly enough to beg Roger to think of me before the poor dying creature who wanted him to smooth the road down to the dark river. Oh, what a mistake Roger had made! Why had he married such a miserable little coward?

But calling myself a coward did not make me any braver. Left alone in that solitary parsonage, a long quarter of a mile from the nearest occupied house, I was horribly frightened. I was frightened too for Roger. Suppose he lost his way in the drifts, and froze to death—such things had been in Canada! He was so reckless where his own safety was concerned, and again I seemed to hear his gay laughter ringing out in mockery of my terrors.

"No fear of tramps on such a night as this," he had said. "They are summer visitors, like the robins and the orioles. Lock the doors, Nell, and you will be as safe as in Aunt Sally's drawing-room. Only—don't expect me till you see me, and don't wear yourself out listening for my bells. Go to bed early, and remember,

The Trouble Man

little woman, that we are both in the care of One Who neither slumbers nor sleeps."

Clergyman as he was, Roger made no glib use of Scriptural phrases, and I suppose that it must have been the distress in my face that prompted the words. Very perversely, however, I recalled them chiefly as an admission on Roger's part that he was leaving me in danger, and I felt somewhat aggrieved.

Slowly the grey light faded, and the wind howled more furiously, and the drifts rose higher. "A mere flurry," according to Roger; a mad tearing tempest, from what I could hear and see.

The parsonage, built on a wind-swept slope, had never a tree to protect it on its western side, though a whole regiment of well-grown firs mounted guard over it in front, screening it from the southern sun. In time, I learned to love those trees, but during the storms of my first Canadian winter, their creaking and groaning branches unduly stimulated my imagination. They had indeed a ghostly trick of tapping on the porch or sawing slowly at the corners of the house, like a cautious burglar. Of course, when Roger was at home, I never heard them, but the parsonage was not a pleasant place to be alone in.

It was picturesque—that was undeniable. Its low, quaint, miscellaneous roofs lay along the hillside like some natural growth, and, within, it was a medley of small rooms, enormous chimneys, irrational cupboards and superfluous doors. Roger, who was subject to architectural ambitions, had visions of our rambling dwelling converted into a model of convenience, whilst I, unhappily, was haunted with doubts as to whether we could ever make it even homelike. Perhaps I was prejudiced by the disorder, which still reigned, in spite

The Parson's Helpmeet

of the mighty exertions of a committee of parishioners with paint, whitewash and wall-paper. The dining-room, for instance, which was like an old-fashioned "house-place," with doors leading to every other part of the house, had been utilized, perhaps on this account, as a refuge for all the most unwieldy packing-cases. That very morning, Roger, in a wild search for a lost package of sermon-notes, had spread out all our most valuable wedding presents on a table under an uncurtained window, and it suddenly occurred to me that they were in full view of any one—Roger's improbable tramp, for example—who might come up from the road.

Hastily I covered the long heap with a white cloth, which somehow gave it a disquieting resemblance to a shrouded corpse, and the association of ideas added to my anxieties for Roger, out in the bitter cold and the blinding drift. I had a horrible feeling, moreover, that my every movement was watched from the gloom without by unseen eyes. Improvised shades of paper and blankets would perhaps have proved a greater solace to my nerves, had not the arranging of them led to the discovery that not above half of our five crazy outer doors and ten rattling ground-floor windows were fitted with proper fasteners.

A moment of despair for myself and the silver was succeeded by a paroxysm of endeavour to strengthen my defences. Regardless of the new paint, I resolutely nailed up several of the doors, and I wedged down all the windows with our best table-knives, reserving the carver as a weapon, in case of need.

Hot and elated over my own resourcefulness—surely a valuable asset in colonial life!—I returned to the kitchen, determined to pass the evening in a manner at once pleasant and profitable. I had a song to practise,

The Trouble Man

but on that occasion there seemed a little too much of the tremolo in my style to suit the subject, and I took up a magazine. I chanced upon a harrowing story of murder and mystery; and it appeared to lend significance to the eerie knockings and thumpings, the wild screams that sounded all round me. The voice of reason assured me that these noises were nothing save the tricks of the wind and my own excited fancy, and I struggled hard to behave myself like a sensible woman. I might have succeeded, had it not been for that blood-curdling tale of crime, but that, in the scale against me, was too much.

Looking back from the vantage ground of a quarter of a century's added experience, I, the middle-aged woman, am full of pity for the lonely girl who once was I. Roger was wrong. It was a dreadful night—no mere flurry, but a storm that has become historic. And up to that time the poor little townbred bride had scarcely known what it was to pass an hour alone.

I laid down my magazine, where it broke off, at the close of the chapter, in the middle of a scene of horror, and fled to my bedroom to try and sleep. Vain hope! I suppose I had tossed for fifteen minutes amongst the pillows, when I heard a door within the house burst open. This time I was certain that the sound was no fancy; and the noise of stumbling steps on the bare floor of the dining-room made assurance doubly sure. I rose and crept softly to the door to peep into the outer room, which was now dimly lighted by a lantern, not of my providing. A sharp click of glass or metal rang through the ceaseless hiss and rattle of the tempest, and I saw some one, not my husband, bending over the table.

CHAPTER II

THE BURGLAR

THE tramp! In spite of the weather, not a doubt of it! His very dress betrayed him. An old coat, frayed and green with wear; a cap, which might have been made from the skin of a drowned cat, a worsted comforter of crudest red, knotted about his throat. And ne'er-do-weel, tramp, burglar! was written all over the man himself. The strong, squat, thick-set figure, the shambling knees, the unkempt beard, the narrow forehead puckered up with deep lines and wrinkles, the restless, furtive eyes, all told, I thought, the same story.

The eyes, with rolling balls of bluish white, like those of a negro, especially terrified me, for I saw in them the look of a wild beast; and I felt overwhelmed with anguish when I thought of Roger's return, in the chill dawn, to find his wife murdered and his home a rifled ruin. My own eyes grew dim at the picture, but I rubbed away the tears and determined for my husband's sake to sell my life as dearly as I could. But what hope was there?

I was no Amazon. Five feet four in height, not much over a hundred pounds in weight, little exercised, as English girls now are, in severe athletic feats, absolutely unarmed—what chance had I? No doubt the burglar

The Trouble Man

was armed to the very teeth, and for a moment I wondered whether it would not be best and most dignified to resign myself to my fate and die, like a martyr on the scaffold, without a murmur or a struggle.

But, as the seconds slipped by and the stupid fellow made no move to accomplish his evil purposes, life seemed too sweet to throw away without one effort to preserve it.

After all, victory falls more often to the wise than the strong, and mind wins many a triumph over dull brute force.

We stood staring at one another in a fashion that reminded me of two foolish young chicks, longing but fearing to measure their strength. At last I broke the spell, for the happy thought had come to my relief that the practised criminal, like other artists, rejoices in the nice adjustment of means to ends, and that murder would be his last resort.

Feeling a little safer for this philosophic reflection, I composed my countenance to the kind of expression demanded of his sitters by a photographer, and advanced towards the burglar with extended hand. Doubtless my unsuspecting friendliness caused the vibration of some well-nigh broken chord of humanity in the criminal's dark breast. He pounced upon my offered hand and wrung it with dreadful fervour. I did not scream, but a suspicion crossed my mind that he might be basely endeavouring to render his unprotected victim still more helpless. However, my presence of mind did not now fail me. Under the torture of my foe's crushing handshake there flashed into my brain a beautiful though rather complex plan for his discomfiture.

Never, never before had I caught sight of this black-browed scoundrel, of that I was convinced. That

The Burglar

crime-seamed forehead, that wolfish glare, were no product of a simple, innocent country village, but of some huge wicked city. I had never seen the fellow before, but—was the deception less justifiable than the evasions constantly practised in society, the strategy that makes the art of war?—I pretended that I knew him. I murmured something about having had the pleasure of meeting him at the church door, and though my voice quivered like the cabin of an Atlantic liner under full steam—I gained my object.

The burglar repaid my feigned delight with smiles as ghastly, showing a set of teeth strong and gleaming as those of the wolf in Red Riding Hood, and at my earnest invitation tore himself away from his lodestar—our silver—and accompanied me to the kitchen.

With awkward and officious courtesy he filled up the stove with wood, and, when the flames roared up the chimney, spread his blue hands to the heat, with an expression of enjoyment that was almost childlike. For the first time a kind of pity mingled with my fear of him, and, though I did not flinch from my purpose, I remembered that he was human, and set before him an ample meal of bread and ham and scalding tea.

To keep him in good humour I sat down to the table with him, and made a show of enjoying my supper too, though under the influence of my good cheer he soon betrayed his whole wicked scheme. He had an appalling trick of leering and rolling his eyes to add emphasis to his remarks, and there were moments during that ghastly feast when I longed to fly from him, even out into the darkness.

"My, you've made this place most as tight as a jail," he began. "I banged an' yelled at them front doors o' yourn, till I thought I'd made noise enough

The Trouble Man

to waken the dead." Then he laughed uneasily. "By-the-by, I took an observation through that dinin'-room window, an' for one blessed minute I thought you'd got a corp laid out on the table. It give me quite a turn. Thinks I, it's the minister's had a mighty suddint call, then it come to me in a flash—'tain't him anyways, 'cause I know he's out and away. Next I wondered if the corp could be you," he concluded, with a low chuckle.

I saw nothing amusing in his coarse suggestions. Happily, the burglar—the word sounds harsh, but I knew that he had my little Indian silver paper-cutter in his vest-pocket—silenced himself with a hunk of bread, and I regained my composure before he was in a condition to speak again.

"Yes," said he, "I was cert'n sure you was alone, or I'd never a put my nose out o' doors on sich a night. I see your husband drivin' down the Boswell road, as solemn as a funeral, jest about dark. He was goin' to Boswell, I s'pose?"

I nodded. In a state of war, I supposed that there was no necessity to add that he was bound for a point eight miles beyond Boswell.

"Jest as I thought. He can't be home much afore mornin', wi' that old hoss, an' I know'd you'd feel kind o' homesick and lonesome, so I comed along here. You's awful hard o' hearin', missus, or was it that you was a leetle skeered?"

Again he rolled his eyes upon me with such a wicked look that I almost expected to feel one of my own knives in my heart, but I schooled myself to suppress all sign of fear.

"Scared, why should I be scared?" I cried, again calling to my aid an artificial expression of enjoyment.

"Why indeed?" he retorted. "But you'd fastened

The Burglar

everythin' up so mighty close, that if I hadn't a know'd every nook an' corner in this yer old dovecote, I doubt I couldn't a got in. Leastways, wi'out takin' out a pane or two o' glass, like a common burglar."

"How did you get in?" I inquired with interest.

"Jest set my shoulder to the woodshed door an' lay a leetle heavy on it. I know'd that hasp wouldn't stand nothin'. I'd a gone away, when I found all so snug an' tight, if it hadn't been for ketchin' sight o' that corp. Some'ow I couldn't bear the thought o' leavin' a young gal like you alone wi' that gashly objick."

I couldn't resist saying that I had supposed that it was that which had brought me the pleasure of his company.

"Did you, ma'am? Really now?" he muttered, with another grimace. "Well, that was pretty sharp on you. I can tell them folk down to the church they'll hev to stand round a bit now you's got among 'em. The minister is none too bad with the men folk, though he do get took in shameful wi' his horses, but it needs a woman to size up a woman, same as it takes a thief to ketch a thief."

"Sir, thieves often catch themselves, and save honest people the trouble," I retorted wit' dignity, for his remarks savoured of impertinence.

"True's daylight," he responded glibly. "If I'd anythin' much on my conscience I guess I'd be skeered to death o' my own shadow."

His impudent duplicity was disgusting, but after all he really had some conscience. As I gazed at him, he slipped his fingers into the pocket where the stolen paper-cutter lay, and instantly withdrew them, as if they had come in contact with something hot. A deep blush reddened his face to the very whites of his eyes, he

The Trouble Man

writhed in his chair, then sprang to his feet with an eager glance over his shoulder towards the dining-room door.

"Not so fast, friend, not so fast," I thought. "You shall not have anything more without a struggle."

Then began a duel of wits. In a careless, accidental kind of way, I backed my chair against that door. The burglar sat down again with a heavy sigh, and appeared to revolve many things in his mind. At length he re-opened the conversation, taking the bull by the horns with an audacity that provoked my unwilling admiration.

"I ain't quite easy about all that silver o' yourn," said he. "If I was you, I'd get it hidden away quick. Others, besides me, might come a-pryin' round that there corp, an' them window-fastens on that room ain't not a mite o' good. 'Tain't the same here as it is in town, ma'am, where there's a constable allus hangin' round every corner, as one may say. There, the burglars is kind o' paralyzed by the fear o' makin' a noise. But here, in the wide fields, noise don't count. You might blow the old house skyhigh, an' no one 'ud be a mite the wiser till daylight. If I ain't pretty badly mistaken, some thieves 'ud tear out them old windows as nice as pie, an' you looking on. No, 'tain't the place to store valuables, take my word for't, Mrs. Dale!"

This was a mere truism, but was none the less disquieting for that. However, I resolved to do all that one solitary woman could to save our goods from the spoiler.

"Those windows are most unsafe," I began innocently.

"Right you are, ma'am," replied the burglar briskly.

"There is an old pair of shutters in the cellar," I

The Burglar

continued, "I wonder if you could and would nail them on the dining-room window for me?"

"Why, cert'nly, ma'am. Make whatever use you can o' old Sten Pepler. Haven't I comed out this unpleasant night for the sole purpose o' aidin' and abettin' you, as the lawyers say, in all that's right an' lawful? An' what could be lawfuller, I should like to know, than you's makin' good an' sure o' your own—an' the parson's—silver? Weddin' presents, I s'pose? an' a very pretty lot o' curious things they is. Blessed if I can guess what half o' them is fur, an' if you could take the time, ma'am, it 'ud be a kindness if you'd explain."

Again he stood up, and looked most seductively at the door, but I was not to be moved by his blandishments. "I'll explain anything you like, sir, when we have fixed those shutters on," I said.

"Well, the fust thing to do is to measure them windows," he observed, gently sidling towards me.

But I "sat tight," refusing to be drawn from my position on any pretext. "Let us get the shutters first," I said, in a tone that I had found efficacious in my Sunday School class at home.

Still he raised objections. "My lantern's almost burned out," he said. "Could you find me a spot o' coal oil, Mis' Dale?"

"I'll fill it for you when you come up," I answered, looking with something like savage joy at the feeble, uncertain flame. "Please, Mr. Pepler, do get the shutters quickly. I am so anxious. They are at the far end of the cellar."

"Well, I s'pose I must help you in yer own way," he muttered, stooping down to raise the heavy trap-door beside the stove, which during winter was the only way of access to our inconvenient cellar. "If my light do

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go out, I don't know as I can wander very fur afield in the parsonage cellar," he added, with a chuckle.

I sat still till his rough shock of hair had disappeared from view, then I dropped on my knees, to listen to the slow thumping of Mr. Pepler's ponderous boots across the mud floor of the cellar. Presently that sound ceased and the handle of the lantern clicked against the glass as he set it roughly down. Then came a mighty sound of the overhauling of heavy boards, as he rummaged wildly in a pile of useless lumber. Now or never was the moment for action.

Softly I raised the heavy trap, but it was with a bang that I let it fall into its position, and I was not surprised to hear a howl of astonishment from below. Now the clumping boots moved quickly enough—too quickly, but before they touched the stairway I had shot the bolt into its socket, and was flinging upon the door sticks of wood, pots, pans, irons from the stove—anything to make it heavy enough to resist the assault from beneath that was sure to come.

But it did not come as soon as I expected. The culprit, taken red-handed, with the evidence of guilt upon his person, had the assurance to pretend that he thought his imprisonment accidental.

"Has the stove-legs give way?" he demanded breathlessly, after a vain effort to raise the trap. "Has it fell right across the door? Throw a pail o' water on't to keep the old house from ketchin', an' I'll be round to you by the other way in no time, missis."

Now my ingenious husband had utilized the outer way to the cellar as a storage place for a quantity of wood, for which there was no room in the cellar itself, so I knew that even my clever burglar could never break prison in that way. For a few minutes we worked like

The Burglar

beavers, he at the wood-pile below, I at my heap of boxes and furniture upon the trap above.

At last I paused in my labours, for want alike of breath and movables, and heard the burglar demanding in a high wild scream that sounded like genuine astonishment, "Is it an earthquake, missis, or has you went stark, staring mad?"

I had no desire to enter into an altercation with my captive, but when he fell into a rage, and roared out "Jael" and "Jezebel" at me, I felt it due to my position as the minister's wife to inform him that his misfortune was the result of his own ill-doing.

"You's off your head, missis, that's a fact. Let me out, let me out!" and he beat at the trap with blows that shook the house.

But the trap held firm.

"Missis, missis, tell me one thing," he shrieked suddenly, "where's that smoke a-comin' from? Is that red-hot stove a-layin' on the trap door or not? If it is—if you has gone an' pulled the legs from under it—as I verily do believe—it'll be a hangin' matter, let me tell you that!"

He deserved to suffer, but I had no wish to torture him with the horrible dread of being burned to death in his prison.

"Have no fear; the stove is all right," I cried.

"Well, but where's that smoke a-comin' from? It's fair suffocatin' down here."

I too was half-choked with the smoke, and at last I realized that in my agitation I had borrowed one or two lids from the stove to serve as weights. I replaced them as speedily as possible, and would have made another effort to set his mind at rest, had it not happened that his thunderous onslaughts on the trap

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rendered explanations impossible. I flew for the hammer and those useful nails, and for ten minutes my captive and myself practised a furious duet on the heavy old door.

I stopped at length for dearth of nails, and found that the blows from Mr. Pepler's bludgeon were becoming feebler, or that I was becoming accustomed to the quivering sensation that they caused along my spine. Again it seemed that a parley was in order.

In a tone so gentle and persuasive that I scarcely recognized it came the words, "I'm thinkin', Mrs. Dale, that there's a misunderstandin' somewheres. I come here to-night just fur your sake, an' I fear they'll be worritin' about me at home."

"I should worry worse if you got out," said I hard-heartedly. Indeed, the thought of his breaking loose, with his savage heart full of a thirst for vengeance, turned me cold with horror. "You will stay where you are till Mr. Dale returns."

That was my last word, but Mr. Pepler was very persistent. Again and again he attacked the trap-door, and once I caught him in the act of trying to enlarge a rat-hole in the floor. Happily, the boards were thick and the beams close, but I was forced to quell his enthusiasm for liberty with a pail of ice-cold water.

The long hours of that night seemed interminable. Towards morning the wild strife of the elements subsided, and my captive ceased to trouble, but I was still on guard, when, in the early twilight, my husband returned.

It cost time and labour to let him in, but on succeeding at last in getting a door open, I threw myself sobbing like a great baby into his arms.

"Why, Nelly child, what is the matter?"

The Burglar

"That silver, Roger—a burglar—in the cellar—" I gasped, dragging him in.

He thought I was dreaming, and gave a maddening little chuckle, when he saw all our heaviest property piled on the trap.

"My dear Nell! Is it an earthquake?" he too asked.

"I told you, Roger. There's a burglar in the cellar," I repeated with emphasis.

"Don't you believe her, sir!" shrieked an agonized voice from below. "There's no one down cellar but me."

"You? Stennett Pepler?"

"Ay, sir, that's the name given me by my godfathers an' godmothers."

"What are you doing there?" cried Roger, beginning to fling pots, sticks and furniture to right and left.

"Ask her," roared the man. "She's the one to tell you, if she ain't too mad."

I clutched Roger's arm. "Stop! listen! Send for a policeman, Roger. He broke into the house, and was trying to steal the silver. I saw him—with my own eyes—pocket that Indian paper-knife."

"Believe me, Nell, there's some mistake. Stennett Pepler is as honest as the day. He is one of my best friends."

"Then this fellow isn't Mr. Pepler, for I caught him stealing."

"Don't you believe her, Mr. Dale," came again the wailing voice from below. "Tell her you know me—tell her I ain't a thief."

"The voice is Jacob's voice," murmured Roger, beginning in spite of my protests to extract the nails I had driven in so painfully. "I must let him out, Nell; but, dearest, you are quite safe now with me here."

It took him many minutes, with the assistance of the

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prisoner himself, to wrench up the trap. When the task was accomplished it was a very dejected, miserable-looking object that emerged from the black abyss in the floor.

The burglar looked balefully at me, and then turned to Roger. "I had it in mind to congratulate you hearty, sir, when I see her in church last Sunday, lookin' as sweet an' pretty an' gentle as a lamb in a pictur', jest as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, but now I seen more on her— Well, sir, I can only say my feeln's is more suited to a funeral nor a weddin', fur a mad dog couldn't be no fiercer than her, an' a lawyer couldn't be no more suspicouser. I'm real sorry for you, sir—you, that might a had your pick of a wife for ten mile round Willow Point."

He sighed heavily, and Roger actually condescended to apologize for me. "She did not know you, Mr. Pepler. That's the trouble, don't you see?"

"I know him better than you do. Put your hand in his vest pocket, and see if you do not find my Indian paper-cutter there!"

Mr. Pepler forestalled him. Slowly he drew out the paper-knife, and looked at it with a well-simulated air of wonder that reminded me of a certain notable "sleight-of-hand" entertainer. "Oh," said he at last, "so that was the trouble, was it?"

"There, Roger, what do you think of Mr. Pepler's honesty?" I exclaimed, with a note of triumph that I couldn't quite suppress.

"I think the same of Mr. Pepler's honesty as before," he answered promptly. "I think of it what I think of your honesty and mine; but now, Sten, old man, tell us all about it!"

"Well, it's all as clear as daylight," began Pepler, with an aggrieved glance in my direction. "I come

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over here, as I told her, 'cause I thought she'd be lone-
some in the storm, her, a stranger, an' you away an'
all. Well, at the first go off, I couldn't make her
hear, so I jest shoved the hasp off of the woodshed
door, an' walked in, same as I've allus done here, both
in the Reverend Bryce's time, an' in the Reverend
Smith's. I looked fur her in the kitchen, then in the
dinin'-room. She warn't no place to be seen, an' I
was jest givin' a glance at them things on the table—
which was fixed up to look the very image an' moral
of a corp—when she come suddint out of her room. I
had that 'ere little knife in my hand, an' 'stead o'
droppin' the blamed thing, I s'pose I must have went
an' shoved it into my pocket."

"You see now, Nell, how it was," said Roger. "It's
all been a mistake, and the best we can do is to shake hands
all round, and keep the precious story to our three selves."

"I hear what he says," said I.

"Ay, yes, an' she don't believe it, sir—not a bit of
her. Well, missis, you can take the thing into court,
you can hev the law on me, if you likes. I won't up
and deny I had yer precious paper-cutter or butter-
knife, or whatever it is, in my pocket, and I won't play
the soft-spoken, deceivin' party, like some I knows on,
not if I has to go to jail for't. I wouldn't be so sus-
picious—no, not fur a king's crown—that I wouldn't.
But I'll be at home to the constable, ma'am, if you'll
send him round, any day inside o' two weeks."

With this parting shot, my burglar burst out of the
house, and Roger—graceless fellow!—laughed till the
tears came into his eyes. "Poor old Sten," he cried,
"to be taken for a burglar, at the parsonage of all places
in the world! Serves him right, though, for his everlasting
meddling. I've warned him agaln and again. I've told

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him he'd burn his fingers some day, if he would think he could manage other people's affairs. But it was a pretty hard lesson for him, Nell," and he laughed again. "I wonder now whether he will confide his grievances to the whole country-side!"

"Oh, I hope not," I cried. "Ought I to have known him, Roger? Did I see him on Sunday?"

"Of course you did. Why, Nell, he's one of the pillars of the church! No one can stir hand or foot at St. James's without Stenny. He's one of our famous characters. I'm sure I've written you no end of yarns about his doings—the 'Trouble Man,' don't you know? By the way, though, did I ever tell you that his real name was Pepler? The 'Trouble Man' is a nickname he's got because he is in his element when there's trouble, and he runs to the help of any one in a scrape."

"Indeed you never told me," I cried. "It's a dreadful business altogether. He'll never forgive me. He'll be my enemy all my days; he'll set every one against me! I shall never be of any use. Indeed I think we'd better go to another parish at once, before we get anything more unpacked."

"Nonsense, lassie. You'll live it down. Don't make mountains out of molehills. He'll forgive and forget. He'll be your bondslave, if you'll only ask a favour of him. Poor fellow, he never bears malice."

"But you don't know the worst," I sobbed. "I got him into the cellar under false pretences, then I nailed him in, and I—I poured water on him when he tried to come up through a rat-hole."

Again Roger shouted with laughter. "That's dear old Sten all over," he exclaimed. "Never was such a fellow for futile ambitions. Who else would have dreamed of trying to squeeze out of the scrape through a rat-hole?"

CHAPTER III

THISTLES AND THUNDER-STONES

A DAY or two later I had another caller, a tall, thin, sharp-featured, elderly woman, who, wiser than poor Pepler, took the precaution of reminding me at the door that she was Mrs. Rand, "one of St. James's flock."

"I thought I'd just run in and see how you were getting on," she explained. "I'm always sorry for newcomers, they have so much to learn, poor things! But whatever you do, don't allow yourself to be discouraged, Mrs. Dale."

"Thank you. I am not at all discouraged," I answered, with some stiffness.

She looked at me sharply. "I should like to help you if you would let me," she said. "Believe me, my dear, I know exactly how to sympathize with you. I have been through it all. At first, like every other young bride, I hated to take advice, and groped my way along as best I could. I have lived, however, to be thankful to take advantage of other people's experiences whenever I can."

What was she driving at, I wondered? I was not soon enlightened.

"I have always liked your dear husband," she continued, "and I felt quite drawn to you from the moment I saw you at the church door. Now will you take a hint from an old woman?"

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"Please speak plainly, Mrs. Rand."

She took both my hands, drew me towards her and kissed me with solemnity on the brow. "Dear Mrs. Dale, you must try not to let yourself be prejudiced by trifles. When you have lived in this country as long as I have, you will understand that it is impossible for a poor farmer—working hard from morning till night—to go about dressed like a bank-clerk. You will live not to expect these things. In the mean time do not judge us by our clothes."

"I don't understand you, Mrs. Rand. I don't indeed."

"Not but what it is a pleasure to us all to see a pretty young girl becomingly dressed," she went on, with condescension. "Your dainty new gowns are by no means wasted upon us, my dear. We like pretty things as much as more fashionable people; but don't, I entreat you, fall into the mistake of estimating our characters by our clothes. We are not a rich community, as Mr. Dale has doubtless informed you. We are obliged to look after the cents and let the dollars take care of themselves. We women are great at piecing and patching. It is really marvellous—if I may say so—what we can do with shreds and ends. What with rag-carpets and hooked mats and patchwork quilts, I may say that I can find a use for every inch of stuff that comes into the house, and there's nothing like making the best of everything, if one wants to enjoy real satisfaction in life."

"What about one's time?" I wondered, but for Roger's sake forbore to raise that question.

"Yes, it's the rule in our house that nothing shall ever be wasted," she added complacently; then for my benefit she rapidly epitomized some Canadian "Book

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of Household Management," containing chapters on the making of soft soap, and the painting and papering of one's rooms, shamefully neglected by the immortal Mrs. Beeton. I found it rather over-whelming, for it was evident that my husband's parishioners not only expected me to be a model minister's wife, but also to be an expert cook, "a notable housewife," and—in short—a female Jack-of-all-trades.

I sighed a little, and wished she'd go—poor, dear, well-meaning Mrs. Rand—and now I know that all the while I was sorely misjudging her.

Presently she came back by a circuitous route to her original proposition that "the exterior is often misleading," and now I got a sudden light on the object of her visit. "I am not surprised," she observed, "that a stranger should take Stennett Pepler for a hard character, but the truth is that he is one of the honestest and best-natured creatures that ever walked God's earth.

"I'm not excusing him," she added hastily, looking straight before her and stiffening her spine. "If I were Mrs. Pepler— which, thank goodness, I don't think I'd ever have been fool enough to be—I'd cut up that dreadful old coat of his for mats. It's nothing less than a disgrace to the whole village, and I don't wonder at your mistake. But all the same it was a mistake, my dear, and will lead to trouble, if you don't take care. I have never known Sten quite so worked up about anything since that Harvest Home dinner, when he put a couple o' pounds of salt into the coffee in mistake for granulated sugar."

"Did he tell you that I had taken him for a tramp?" I asked.

"Tell me? No, my dear. He went down to the

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corner shop and got talking with the idle fellows who spend their evenings hanging about there, and of course he was out with the whole story."

"Oh, I hope not!" I gasped. "I was so nervous, I fancied all sorts of things that night, but I suppose I ought to have known better."

"So should he," replied Mrs. Rand. "Sten always is too officious, but—what is this tale of his about a corpse on the sitting-room table, I think he said? 'Mark my words, girls,' I said, when I heard it, 'Sten has been dreaming.'"

I hastily explained the corpse, and also other things, and in the midst of it all it occurred to me that I was not making a greater success of guarding the awful secret than poor Sten himself. But when the murder was out, Mrs. Rand was seized with an idea that appeared hopeful.

"I'll just drive you over to Pepler's place, and you can apologize to Stenny, and explain things to Mrs. Pepler," she suggested.

I consented, perhaps too hastily, and I shall remember that drive as long as I live. The road was drifted into a painfully accurate imitation, save for its rigidity, of a choppy sea, and the little cutter bumped from crest to trough and from trough to crest of the snow-waves with a jerking motion that grievously belied the much-vaunted joys of sleigh-riding. More than once we came near being tossed out into the drifts, and the perils of the way silenced my doughty charioteer, who, despite the jolts, sat up stiff as a ramrod, watching her meek beast with an unflinching and suspicious eye. It was not till we had swerved from the road into a track which led through a broken fence and across a field, that Mrs. Rand found time to observe: "Even the weather

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seems to have a pick on poor Sten! Never a winter storm that doesn't drift up his lane! Never a summer one that doesn't beat down his oats or shell out his wheat! And you should just cross this field in summer."

"Why?" I asked innocently, looking round on the desolate snow-covered field with its ill-defined edging of half-buried raspberry canes and long fence rails pointing obliquely towards the sky. "Is it very pretty?"

"Pretty?" she repeated with emphasis. "Perhaps city-folk might think so; farmers don't. No indeed, it's all the colours of the rainbow with thistles and mustard and every kind of weed mixed up together. People call it 'Hit-or-Miss Farm,' and the name kind of fits, for Sten's always in such a hurry, running after other folks' business that he never has time to clean up his fields, and he plants his crops anyhow all amongst the weeds. I wonder how he holds on at all; but it's Mrs. Sten I'm sorry for."

While we were working our way slowly across the ridgy top of the field from which the snow had been swept away, I caught my first glimpse of Pepler's home. It was a little unpainted frame house, built after the same rambling pattern as our own, but on a smaller scale. From a distance it had a neglected and forbidding air, but this was relieved on a nearer view by the fresh white curtains that hung at every little window.

As we drove up towards the barn we saw a boy at one of its upper doorways, throwing down straw to the rough-coated beasts in the yard below.

"H'm, I wonder if Sten is out," said Mrs. Rand. "That's Alick, and I'm afraid he's going the way to grow up a ne'er-do-weel like his father."

"Alick? Alick Pepler? Surely that must be the

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clever boy my husband has been telling me about. The boy who borrows all his books, and is so much interested in geology and that sort of thing."

"Yes, Alick is all right when it come to books," admitted Mrs. Rand grudgingly, "but he's always getting some fancy into his head. Of course, it's kind of Mr. Dale to give up his valuable time to him, but there's no doubt he does encourage him in his ambition."

I gazed with interest at the light active figure moving about so briskly, and said, "He does not look lazy."

"He isn't exactly lazy, nor Sten either. It's misplaced activity that's the matter with them. One would think that there was work enough for two to fix up this place, but Sten must needs go mooning after all kinds of hobbies, and Alick is no sooner old enough to do a hand's turn than he begins to talk—or think—of college. No, I've no patience with them. If it wasn't for Mrs. Pepler and Mary, I wouldn't care."

Ah, what a place to live in, where even one's secret dreams and hopes were counted for conversational purposes common property!

But Alick interrupted the discussion. He came round from the barn to meet us, and I must say that my first impression of Pepler's son was a pleasant one. Yet Alick was not a handsome boy. His lanky frame, sloping shoulders, hollow cheeks and bright eyes recalled to my mind a well-known print of that redoubtable hero of Englishmen and Canadians alike—General Wolfe, but the boy's features, though plain enough, bore in profile no resemblance to the odd side-face of the great soldier. Alick's nose was rather long, and his chin, though a little too small, was by no means receding. His hair, moreover, was dark instead of red.

The lad greeted us with friendly eagerness and led

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us into the house, which was as daintily clean and well-kept within as it appeared neglected without. At this I was not surprised when I saw its presiding genius. Mrs. Pepler was a woman of a trim figure, quick, bright eyes, and impulsive manner. In short, there was a strong likeness between the mother and son. Unhappily, it was easy to see that to her I was a most unwelcome guest. She received my apologetic messages for her absent husband coldly; but I think Mrs. Rand's presence made the interview more awkward.

"It certainly was an unfortunate mistake," was all Mrs. Pepler would say; so we soon took our leave.

"You have done the right thing," said Mrs. Rand consolingly; "and she'll come round in time."

But I was not so sure of that, and when I told Roger of my afternoon's adventures, he called my visitor "an impertinent old mischief-maker."

"Mrs. Pepler is a good woman and a kind one," he said, "but she is proud, and of course it cuts to have one's husband taken for a tramp, especially when there is some superficial resemblance. No, my dear, the expedition was a mistake. If I had known you thought of going, I would have driven you over myself."

"But I did not think of it till Mrs. Rand suggested it, and she seems to know all about them."

"She knows, or tries to know, about every one for ten miles round, though, personally, I make a point of never being the individual to carry her the news for which she is thirsting. Of course she means nothing but good to all of us, but, between her and Sten, I often wonder that we are not all at each other's throats. Well, Nell, never mind. It's all in the day's work. Mrs. Rand was bound to find some occasion for taking you in hand."

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"Twenty occasions, Roger. I am to take lessons from her in making rag carpets, soft soap and ginger cookies."

"Don't do anything of the kind, Nell, till you know our people, at least," entreated Roger. "She looks at humanity through smoked glasses, unless it chances to be sick or suffering, and I want you to like our Willow Point folk."

"She didn't say anything very terrible this afternoon—only that she pitied Mrs. Pepler, and that Sten and his son were both ne'er-do-weels."

"Just what I told you. About Alick, that's distinctly untrue," said Roger, with energy. "He's the lad I told you of—don't you remember?—who came to me two years ago with some Indian arrow-heads—thunderstones, Sten calls them—which he had turned up when he was ploughing. Since then he has read every book on geology and prehistoric man that he can lay his hands on, and I firmly believe that he will live to make the name of our village famous. A ne'er-do-weel indeed!"

"Don't be so indignant, Roger. I like the lad's face; and I won't believe anything against him, not for fifty Mrs. Rands. If only his father and mother would forgive me," I said mournfully.

"Give them a day or two, and all will be well," prophesied my husband; but I was not so sure.

CHAPTER IV

OUR MUSICIANS

DOES one miss more pain or pleasure, I wonder, by not being musical? Perhaps that depends on one's environment. Roger, at any rate, was perfectly satisfied with any kind of singing that he could classify as hearty; and heartiness was the outstanding characteristic of the singing at St. James's. Stennett Pepler, actuated more by his desire to be of use than by any special talent for music, had constituted himself choirmaster; and on ordinary occasions his voice went wandering and humming through hymns and chants like an erratic bumble-bee. The Sunday following our unhappy misunderstanding proved altogether extraordinary, however.

Late on Saturday night the organist sent, begging me to take her place; and, as I cherished hopes of bringing about in time some reforms in the musical portions of the service, I was glad of an opportunity to identify myself with the choir.

On the following afternoon, Roger and I set out to church very early, for I wished to try the organ before the arrival of the congregation.

It was a lovely winter's day, and as we slowly descended our slippery lane toward the road, I stopped more than once to feast my eyes on the scene before us—a sky of wondrous blue; fields white and glistening,

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like the transfigured raiment of our Lord ; low, gently curving hills, following the sweep of the river ; winter woods of soft sepia tones, clustering here and there upon the slopes, and all bathed in glorious light. In this setting lay our little village about the great bridge that girdled the river with a belt of steel, and just above the point jutting far into the stream, which with its gnarled old willows had given the village its name. I was thankful that day that our lot had been cast in a place so fair, and, as time went on, it seemed to me to grow ever fuller of quiet beauty ; but perhaps, looking back, I see that first home of my married life under "a light that never was on sea or land." Roger says I have a tendency to idealize, but I am sure I try to tell the truth as I see it.

It would have taken a remarkably poetical mind to idealize the little church which sorely tried my feelings by its resemblance to a packing-case, whitewashed and finished off with a low-pitched roof, turned gable end towards the road. It was innocent of the humblest apology for tower or belfry, and its severe frontage was broken only by a little porch, mounted on the platform which served as a kind of landing stage for those who drove to church. This porch was flanked by two huge staring oblong windows. There were three at the other end, facing due south, and on a summer afternoon, despite a set of flimsy blinds, they formed a background against which to contemplate the minister. Roger declared that those windows would ruin his preaching, by forcing him to be sensational in the effort to keep his blinking congregation awake, but the Willow Point people clung to their afternoon service as an inalienable right.

I found that the organ was woefully out of order, but

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played some kind of voluntary upon it, while the congregation was straggling in ; and as I sat in my corner close to the communion rails I had a good opportunity to scan the faces of the worshippers, for I was determined to make no more mistakes amongst Roger's people.

The women and children, strangely bandaged with woollen mufflers across brows and chin, came in first, collecting in a knot by the great red-hot stove to warm their numb fingers. As they stood there they laughed and chatted in a way that again stirred within me a zeal to reform. By the way, it is a curious fact that, however conservative English people may be at home, they no sooner land on this new soil than nine-tenths of them are consumed with a desire to reform everything, from the salt butter to the funeral customs of the country folk. I was no exception to the rule. My only doubt was where to begin.

While I was thinking this out, Roger's entrance gave the signal for the women to disperse to their seats ; and a moment later, the men and boys bustled in from the horse-sheds, where they had been comparing notes as to the price of oats, and criticizing the points of Dr. Garnett's last purchase in the way of "a driver."

Stennett Pepler, in all the glory of an immaculate collar and his well-brushed Sunday suit, tramped heavily the length of the church towards the choir ; but, catching sight of me at the organ, he stopped short with the suddenness of a restive horse, and with a shake of his head turned his back on me. Evidently I was not forgiven. He even signed to his elder son and daughter, who were also singers, to follow his example of desertion. At this ominous proceeding there was a general rustle all over the church, and I heard a loud whisper of, "What's got into Stenny now ?"

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He charged into his wife's pew, which, by ill-fortune, was at right angles to most of the others, and therefore in full view of every one. As for me, I am afraid my husband's eloquence was lost on me, as I sat through the sermon contemplating the Pepler family and wondering what sort of olive-branch would be most effective with them.

At first I felt annoyed at the implacable Mrs. Sten, but gradually my heart softened towards her. Her face was worn with care and trouble, and as I watched her I realized that it must cost her a mighty effort to keep step patiently through life with a companion so slouching and so erratic as my supposed tramp. But clearly she was not a woman to shrink from effort; even her dress and that of the children gave evidence by its shabby neatness of almost superhuman toil. No wonder that her cheeks were thin, her movements nervous, and yet the very way in which her younger children cuddled up to her during the sermon showed that she was a tender as well as a careful mother. I heard later that she had lost three children, and I think I might have guessed something of the kind from her look when my husband spoke of our glorious hope of immortality.

She still had two sons and two daughters, of whom Mary, the eldest, was surely the flower of the family—soft-eyed, low-voiced—a creature of gracious curves and dimples, of dainty rose-leaf bloom, and wonderful spun-gold hair. Next in order came Alick; then Lily, a child of six; and last of all shockheaded Jimmy, a droll four-year-old likeness of the father, whom he adored and flattered by comical aping of his peculiar tricks of speech and manner.

The longer I looked at the Pepler family the more

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deeply I regretted the luckless beginning of my acquaintance with the head of the household. As a mark of his displeasure, Pepler would join neither in hymn nor chant of my playing. The congregation was sorely puzzled by his obstinate silence, and I cudgelled my brains in vain to devise some way of wiping out the insult I had put upon him.

Presently, in the last hymn, my wandering thoughts were brought back, by an appalling succession of wrong notes, to the question of our church music. There were one or two good voices in our little choir—notably a fine bass and a sweet, clear soprano, but both betrayed a woeful lack of training.

The bass was too old and probably too much hardened in musical wrong-doing to offer much hope of reform, but the little soprano was a mere child, and surely something might be done with her.

Celia Garnett was as pretty as Mary Pepler, but in a different way. On this wintry Sunday, with her deep brown eyes, clustering curly hair, and brown coat and hat, she made a lovely "study" in warm but sober colouring. She was tall of her age and slender, as a half-grown girl is apt to be, but her feet and hands were small and finely formed, and she held her head erect with a saucy yet womanly grace.

The child pronounced her words, even in singing, with a precision and correctness that told she was not of the class from which most of our amateur choristers were drawn, and on the way home Roger informed me that she was the daughter of the village doctor. She was a spoiled child, he said, but had one younger sister, as pretty and as wilful as herself, who, he thought, might yet serve the purpose of iron sharpening iron, and might neutralize the effect on poor Celia of her mother's weak indulgence.

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"Why, Roger, I thought the child seemed better brought up than many of these children," I said.

Roger shook his head. "You will not find it so, as you get to know them. Mrs. Garnett, poor woman, is a mere bundle of nerves. Mark my word, within a year's time, Celia will be mistress of that house, unless Ida is," he added, with a little laugh. "I wish, Nell, you could see your way to doing something for these neglected little ones. Garnett is a fine fellow in many ways, but he is busy and self-indulgent—more's the pity. Surely you might gain an influence over Celia at least. She loves music and pretty clothes and pretty faces."

That little compliment touched me, and I have sometimes wondered how much it had to do with all that followed. "If she loves music, I think I can find the way to her heart," I said. Then I added: "What about the Christmas treat, Roger? Ought we not to begin at once to practise for it? I am longing to do something to improve the music. We were dreadfully flat in that last hymn, and the people dragged behind the organ, as if they were drawing a load of coals."

"I thought the music went very well to-day."

"Did you notice that Mr. Pepler didn't sing a note? I thought he belonged to the choir."

"Yes, he does. He and Alick and Mary all sing a little."

"And they wouldn't sing to-day because I happened to play?"

"Oh, Pepler's a funny sort of fellow," replied Roger evasively. "Don't worry about him. When we begin to prepare for Christmas, he and his will all come in. Sten couldn't keep out of anything going on at the church to save his life, Nell."

But Roger was wrong. We held our teachers' meeting;

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we made all arrangements for the Tree ; we began to train the children, and still Stennett Pepler held aloof. What was worse, he had evidently forbidden his offspring to join us either, and, whenever I went down to the church to drill the other children in their songs and recitations, I had to encounter the shy, sorrowful looks of two or three little Peplers, hanging dolefully on the outskirts of all the pleasurable excitement.

"Don't you want to come in and learn to sing a nice little song like the other girls?" I said to Lily, one afternoon.

Lily twisted and wriggled and made no answer, but Jimmy piped up solemnly, "Pa says he won't hev us wastin' of our time, learnin' silly songs ; an' I guess," he added confidentially, "that he's thinkin' maybe you'd shove us down cellar ; but I ain't afraid—not a mite. She couldn't ketch us, could she, Lil? We can race Pa, any day."

Lily did not commit herself to an opinion, but I felt my cheeks burning as I passed on into the church.

Celia Garrett was the only child present. "Mrs. Dale," she cried, springing to meet me in her impulsive fashion, "I have been waiting here an hour for you. Do, do sing something for me. I love to hear you."

Surely this was my chance. "I'll sing, Celia, if you like," I said, "but do you know that you can learn to sing twice as well, if you will only study? Naturally your voice is far better than mine."

Celia caught my arm, and her great brown eyes appeared to light up her whole face. "Mrs. Dale, do you really mean that?" she whispered. "Then you believe that I really have some music in me?"

"Yes, Celia, you ought to sing well, though you need teaching."

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The child shook her head and looked earnestly into my eyes, as she said, "I'd like to learn to sing, Mrs. Dale, but I'll tell you a secret—there's something else I want to do far more."

"What is that, Celia?"

"I want to play the violin. That is the loveliest music of all. It goes down deep into one's heart; and that is the kind of music I want to make."

"Well, Celia, if you wish to play like that, you will have to give up a great deal for the sake of it."

"What?" she said.

"Ease and pleasure. You will have to study much and practise hard, and—I don't think any one can make the best use of a gift like that who is not good and noble."

Celia let go my hands, and a dreamy, far-away look came into her beautiful eyes. At last she murmured, "I understand, and I will remember. Dear Mrs. Dale, will you try to help me? Will you tell father what you have told me, and beg him to let me study?"

I began to wonder whether I had been going too fast. "We will not speak to your father," I said, "till we can show him that you can do something. If you would like to learn first to play the piano, I can help you in that, and you would be getting some knowledge that would be useful afterwards. Could you come to me for half an hour once or twice a week?"

This plan surely promised to give me the influence over the child that I desired, and an hour later I told Roger triumphantly what I had done.

"Be careful, lassie, how you sow these seeds of ambition," he said. "Don't rouse hopes you cannot be sure to satisfy."

"I believe that Celia will prove a musical genius,"

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I cried. "In the mean time, Roger, an absorbing object in life will be the making of her."

Roger still showed scepticism as to the wisdom of my proceedings; but the night of the Sunday School entertainment brought encouragement both to Celia and to me.

The little Town Hall was full to overflowing, there did not seem standing-room for another creature, when there was a little bustle near the door, and Roger whispered, "There's Sten at last. For weeks he's been dying to take part in this affair, and the poor children were nearly broken-hearted to be out of everything. I hope you have something on the Tree for them, Nell."

"Yes, I did not forget them."

"I ran across him this afternoon, and begged him to bring the young folk down anyway. Say a pleasant word to them all, Nelly. I know they really want to be friends with you."

Without a moment's delay, I squeezed my way down the hall, but my advances were received but coldly, and I felt sorely discouraged. However, when the performance began everything went well. Even "the infants" covered themselves and me with glory, and Celia Garnett's singing drew great applause. The young men at the back clapped and shouted with delight, and it gave me a special glow of satisfaction when, above the rest of the uproar, I heard the voice of Stennett Pepler, who was carried fairly off his feet by excitement.

Celia took it all as if she had been born to it. She bowed her thanks with an air as easy and unembarrassed as if she had passed her life mounted on a platform above the level of common folk. But when her father came to her, behind our improvised curtain, it did my heart good to see the way she threw herself into his

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arms and clung about his neck. It was a comfort in after years to remember that simple natural little scene.

When every one was going away, Celia rushed to me to say, "Dear, dear Mrs. Dale, how can I ever thank you? Father says he will do whatever you advise about lessons, and he wants me to tell you that he thinks it very good of you to take so much trouble with his naughty little Gipsy. He would have told you himself, but Jake Agnew came for him in a great hurry."

Celia helped me to put on my wraps, going down on the floor to button up my overshoes, and then, before I could rise, she put her arms around me and whispered, "When I am a great musician, Mrs. Dale, I shall let all the world know who it was that gave me my first start."

Suddenly a shadow passed over her bright face. "I wonder, oh, I wonder," she cried, "whether it's all a dream! Shall I ever be rich and great and famous? Or will something come to spoil it all? I wish you were a prophetess, Mrs. Dale. I wish you could show me what I shall be ten years from now. Come, come, tell my fortune, darling! Shall I be living or dead, happy or sad, rich or poor, good or bad, a success or a failure ten years from now?"

Her laughter pained me, and all night her questions haunted me. What would come of it all? How had I dared to rouse the fierce ambition of this young soul? But "what's fairly done can't be undone," as the old song says. Celia came to me regularly for lessons, and we both dreamed dreams about her future. Moreover, I had reason to hope that my efforts on her behalf were destined immediately to bear fruit, for one day her father stopped me in the road to ask what witchcraft I was exercising over Celia. "She is like a new child,"

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he said. "She is so kind and thoughtful and considerate about her mother that I hardly know what has come over her."

"It is only the well-known charm of music," I returned lightly.

"The charm of music and of a good fairy combined," he said. "I shall never cease to thank you, Mrs. Dale, for your kindness to my little girl."

A very kindly, tender smile lighted up his handsome face, and I, looking up into his bright brown eyes, was grieved to think how the Willow Point folk qualified their frequent praises of the doctor by the insinuation that he was "his own worst enemy." Often, however, they added generously, "He ain't no person else's enemy, though."

CHAPTER V

THE LITTLE BAY HORSE

THE "rig" in which the Pepler family came to church bore painful evidence that it was under the jurisdiction, not of the mistress, but of the master of the establishment. At each turn of its wheels every bolt shook and rattled, and the vehicle had such an abnormal attraction for mud that very few people could discover what its original colour had been. The harness matched the carriage. Its leather was hard and brown for lack of cleaning, its buckles were rusty or missing ; indeed, the whole complication of straps was held together chiefly with string and old bootlaces. The horse whose fate it was to appear in public in this outfit of shreds and patches was an animal dejected and shamefaced by nature ; and no wonder, for it had a rough coat, a shambling gait, and an ill-mannered trick of sniffing and snorting when asked to make any kind of speed.

Every Sunday afternoon for years Stennett Pepler had guided this rig, or one so like it that it would have taken an expert to detect the difference, into a particular division of the church sheds. For years he had had to endure the sly speeches of men "who knew a bit about a hoss, thank goodness." For years he had made no sign that these gibes cut. Then one bright March Sunday he had his revenge.

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Ten minutes before the hour of service, when as many women as could find standing-room on the outside platform were comparing notes as to their house-cleaning, and when all the men had collected in a knot on a little knoll from which they could eye the horses in the sheds and could keep watch on the gate, a cloud of dust whirled towards us from the village. It was enlivened by the quick flash in the sunlight of highly varnished wheels, and advanced to the sharp, clean-cut accompaniment of the trotting of a spirited horse.

"That's a strange rig," murmured Mrs. Rand, instantly agog with curiosity. "And it is no livery rig either."

"Maybe it's Haverstock folk wanted a drive from town this fine Sunday," suggested Mrs. Mosely. "Shouldn't wonder, now, if it was the new banker. They say he's quite a horseman."

"That's just who it is," replied Mrs. Rand, with decision. "I heard that he had a large family, and that is a lovely horse."

There was a general chorus of admiration, which suddenly broke off in a gasp. "Why, it ain't nobody on airth but Sten! My lands! Goodness gracious! Did you ever!"

With an imperturbable dignity that was a wonderful lesson in the old-fashioned subject of deportment, Sten Pepler pretended to be deaf to these shrill ejaculations. At once graciously and gracefully he raised his hat, drove in through the open gate, adroitly avoided the corner of the platform by a hair's breadth, and drew up with a flourish, to allow Mrs. Pepler and his two daughters to alight.

Instantly we flung ourselves upon them to learn where Stenny had got his fine new rig. But Mrs.

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Pepler was never voluble, and somehow she contrived to escape to her own peaceful pew before we had extracted any explanation of the portent, except that volunteered in a high key by little Jimmy: "Pa buyed the hoss down to Whitechapel, and I tell you, sir, she's a good un to go!" Meanwhile Stennett himself was running the gauntlet of the more persistent curiosity of the sterner sex. The sight of that new horse was to the frequenters of the sheds as the sight of land to the ship-wrecked mariner. Pepler and his son acted as joint showmen of the animal, which was instantly surrounded by an admiring crowd of wiseacres, who felt its legs, stroked its glossy coat and tried to inspect its teeth. I heard many comments on the creature's good points, of which I should probably make nonsense if I attempted to repeat them. The gist of the matter, evidently highly gratifying to Pepler, was that he seemed to have picked up a very pretty beast. In fact, it was "a real smart turn-out altogether"; and then one or two of the men asked him point-blank how he had managed it, and whether he'd "paid spot-cash or give a note for the critter." But Sten shook his head, looked wise, and for once kept his own counsel.

"I didn't steal him nor beg him," he said, with a self-satisfied smile. "What should you say, I wonder, if I was to tell you I'd made a pretty good trade on him?"

"What, you don't tell me that you traded off your old outfit for this swell turn-out? Sten, you won't arst us to believe that you traded even, will you?" demanded George Oliver, waving his hand incredulously towards the shapely little bay.

Oliver, one of our churchwardens, by the way, was the smartest, handsomest and most prosperous of all the young farmers belonging to our congregation. He was,

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moreover, a notable "horseman," and Pepler, though he affected at that moment to care for no man's opinion, was visibly elated by Oliver's implied admiration of his new possessions.

"I don't arst you to believe nothin' 'cept this," said Sten, nodding his head. "I warn't born yesterday, an' I think I knows a hoss when I seen one."

"Hear, hear, Stenny!"

"Give us a few pointers, now."

"Yes," laughed Oliver, with the very spirit of mischief dancing in his merry dark eyes, "it would be too mean, Sten, to let us poor innocents get cheated, when you can so easily save us."

Alas! not perceiving the ironical character of these requests, Sten launched forth, Sabbath though it was, into a dissertation on "What a feller has to look out fur in buyin' of a hoss," but, suddenly realizing that I was in danger of missing the opening hymn, I fled to my seat.

We were halfway through the last verse before the men entered, sheepish and shamefaced. Indeed, I believe that many of us felt sorely conscious-stricken when my husband read out as his text the Saviour's command, "Render unto Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's, and unto God the things that are God's." On the other hand, I do not doubt that some of the congregation were haunted throughout the sermon by disturbing visions of that "little beauty of a horse," and by curious cogitations as to how "Sten Pepler could a fooled any man into taking his old hoss off his hands at any price."

My husband seemed out of spirits as we walked slowly home. "I think sometimes, Nell, that trying to raise these people to higher thoughts and nobler ideals is as fruitless as the labours of Sisyphus. Now to-day that unlucky horse ruined everything. I doubt whether

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five men in the congregation gave heed to a word I said, and half of you women were just as bad. What was the sense of Pepler making his appearance so late, this day of all days in the year?" he groaned. "He knew perfectly well what would happen."

"That's why he did it," I said. "He has dramatic instincts. He has a feeling for the psychological moment. Besides, Roger, I dare say he was suffering more than we know from the comments on his old turn-out. Poor fellow, don't grudge him this one great day."

"But, Nell, don't you see what a dismal failure it all is, if a trifle like this can cause such a ferment? Why, even George Oliver—churchwarden as he is—could not tear himself away from that unlucky animal till the first hymn was nearly over."

"Well, Roger, he and many of the others had the grace to be ashamed of themselves, and perhaps they will remember your sermon all the better for this foolishness. For my own part, if I were a preacher, I'd rather talk to conscience-stricken sinners than hold forth to a set of smug, comfortable Pharisees, who need no repentance."

But that day Roger was not to be comforted easily. "It is so utterly unworthy, Nell, all this excitement over such a trifle."

And we had not done with it yet. We had just got in at ten o'clock that night from the service, which Roger always held on Sunday evenings at Cleeve, a little village nine miles west of Willow Point. Roger was "putting the horse away," and I was making a cup of coffee, when I heard a loud thump at the door.

I opened it; and, white against the black darkness of the night, I saw Stennett Pepler's troubled face, "Where's the minister?" he asked abruptly.

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"He will be in in a moment. Come in and sit down," I said, holding out my hand.

Sten wrung it absently, and for the first time since the burglar episode crossed our threshold. He was so full of some new notion, however, that I think he made peace with me accidentally without quite realizing what he was doing.

"It's all along o' that hoss," he began. "Mrs. Dale, I want to tell you that I've bin cheated outrageous. My old hoss ain't perhaps much of a beast to look at, but——"

I nodded the assent for which he appeared to be waiting.

"——but in all my born days I never seen a animal, that could call itself a hoss at all, more quiet an' kind. Why, ma'am, if you'll believe it, old Nan 'ud let our little Jimmy hitch her up. He'd swarm up inter the manger, a-hangin' on to her mane, an' she'd lay back her ears as sensible as a lamb, fur him to wiggle the headstall over em. Oh, she's a hoss in a thousand is Nanny, an' it makes me feel kinder mean to think I've parted with her to a stranger—an' all fur ths 'ere mad brute."

"Is something wrong with the new horse, Mr. Pepler?"

"Wrong, I should say!" he burst out. "Everythin's wrong, Mrs. Dale—leastways her head is, an' when that gives away—either in man or beast—what's left, ma'am? What's left, I'd like to know?"

Just then Roger came in, but Pepler, now launched on the full tide of his woes, gave him but an incidental nod, and ran on, "I was thinkin' as I come along of them swine in the Bible. Mr. Dale, sir, if ever a animal were afflicted wi' what the doctors calls homocidal maner, this 'ere new hoss o' mine has got the disease pretty bad."

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"Come up to the table, Sten, and have a cup of coffee while you tell us all about it," said Roger, soothingly.

"There ain't much to tell," answered Pepler, "but—my lands!—there might a bin! We come pretty near bein' immortalized in next week's *Sentry*, ma'am. 'A Crazy Hoss—Shockin' an' Fatal Accident—A Whole Fam'ly Swep' into Eternity'—I'm like as if I seen it all in big print right across the page."

"What happened, Sten? What did the horse do?" asked Roger, as he helped our excited guest to cold meat.

"What didn't she do, sir? That's what I'd like to know. But, to begin at the beginnin'—As you seen, she drove off from the church as steady as an angel. My, but when she's in her right mind, she has a pretty gait. Well, she druv along fine down the stone road an' past Parsons' place, but directly we turned into our own lane she began to act up. What got into her I don't know. Jest as we turns the corner, she shies fit to jerk us all out o' the rig, then she shook some, an' stood shaking, as though she'd seen visions. Well, says I to myself, it won't never do fur me to let her carry on this fashion fust go off. I've jes' got to larn her who's master—so I give her a touch o' the whip. At that she fair sprung into the air. Little Jim, he flew out o' the rig into a bush on the one side, an' my missis fell out on t'other. May be it wasn't no worse they did neither, for I'd barely time to wink when that hoss bolted. My, she made the fences fly!"

Mr. Pepler paused, drank off a cupful of scalding coffee at a draught, and absently passed up his cup to be refilled, then took up his parable again.

"Mr. Dale," he said solemnly, "as we was a-tearin' express speed down to Lambert's place, your sermon last Thanksgivin' Day come like a flash into my mind

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—how we was to be thankful for common mercies. What a blessin', says I to myself, that my wris'is is good an' strong,—fur if they should give away or the lines should break—I'd jest a felt kind o' sorry fur them two gels o' mine, let alone Alick.

"After a while, I managed to get her calmed down enough to turn her into our own lane. All the time, though, she was a-rollin' her eyes from side to side, lookin' out what she could see to make a shindy over. Unfortnetly, I'd hung a bag on the fence when I comed out, that I'd been feedin' the chickens out of, an' that bag a-flappin' in the wind set her off again. She was trottin' along as meek as a lamb, when all of a suddint she ketched her eye on to that bag an' went into high sterics again. Allick he slipped out at the back and made a dive fur her head—an' me a-bawlin' an' a-hollerin' at him to keep clear on her—an' he says he never seen a hoss look so ridic'lous. She rared up as tall as Goliath, an' then she clapped up her fore-legs agin her body, as if she was a lady wi' palpitation a-feelin' for her heart. She found it all right, I s'pose, fur next second she made one bound forrard, and lit down right acrost our new fence. The pickets bust up, but the wires held, an' there was she in a fury, mixed up with that there fence, same as a blue-bottle in a spider's web. Alick he thought it was time to pull the gels out o' the rig."

"I should say so. Did the horse hurt herself?"

"Not a bit of her, sir; but I tell you we had a time with her. I kinder clucked encouragin' like to her, an' give the lines a bit o' a jerk, thinkin' to make her rare again. But she'd no more notion o' gittin' out o' the scrape the way she got in, than a fool turkey in a trap. In a minute she riz, not her fore-legs, but her hind uns, an' then didn't she let fly! 'Pon my word,

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Mr. Dale, I ain't done wonderin' yet how I happen to be here in a shape to tell the tale. I've heard tell of a man that went round wi' a water-wheel an' come up smllin', but I felt as if a threshin' machine had took me in hand. Her heels glve me one little cut jest over the left eye, then she kind o' klicked things loose, an' I fell clear of her. I'd jest like you to see that fine new rig o' mine when she got through wi' it. Fact, it's jest a heap o' kindlin' wood, nothin' more—but now, parson, I want to arst your advice."

"Yes?" questioned Roger.

"It's clear to me that I aln't a-goin' to risk my life nor the lives o' my fam'ly behind her heels again."

"Certainly not."

"Then what am I to do with her? I've lost my old Nanny along of her, an' what my missis 'll do without her passes me. Seems as if I must buy another hoss right away, but where will I get the money?"

Roger made no answer. He merely refilled Pepler's plate, as a silent token of sympathy, and Pepler hastily demolished its contents before propounding the question he had trudged half a mile to ask.

"As a Christlan man, Mr. Dale, I put it to you, hev I a right to sell her?"

Now it was Roger's turn to ruminate for some seconds in silence. "I think you have," he said at last, "if you tell any purchaser the whole truth about her."

"Then, sir, who'll buy her, less it's fur her hide an' her bones?"

"Some one might," answered Roger—rather weakly, it must be owned. I knew, however, that he was thinking that there were men who might safely undertake to manage the animal, though Pepler had failed. But it was impossible to explain that to the poor fellow himself.

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"If any man bought her, knowin' all I know now, he's be a born fool," said Pepler, slowly; "an' it looks to me, Mr. Dale, like as if I hadn't oughter take advantage o' the innocent to his hurt."

"What will you do, then?"

"I guess I'll hev to shoot her," answered Sten, ruefully. "I don't see no way out. It's like this. S'pose I did manage to git my money back on her, an' she was to turn round an' kill some one—what 'ud my feelin's be? I guess I'd feel like Cain."

"Well, Sten, talk it over with Mrs. Pepler."

Pepler shook his head. "My mind's pretty well made up, sir. I'll hev the execution some time to-morrer, an' after that, when she's clear off my mind an' my hands, I'll figure out how I can get another hoss, an' a rig an' some harness. Well, they do say, bought wit pays best in the long run, an' I guess it'll take a pretty smart man to do me a second time out o' my hoss an' rig."

"Where did you pick the beast up, Pepler?"

He blushed as he answered, "Down to Whitechapel, sir, last Friday, from some strange feller peddlin' sewin' machines from London way. He said the hoss was too smart an' spirity fur his work, so I give him my old outfit an' ten dollars to boot. Old Barker comed up as we was talkin', an' he pretended not to know the other feller, an' he advised me—as a friend—to make the trade. I guess now it was all a put-up job between 'em. I oughter hev fled from temptation when Barker opened his mouth, fur when he takes a hand in sellin' a hoss, it's pretty certain that the buyer's goin' to be bested."

"True enough," murmured my husband; for Barker was a noted horse-trader, and a past master of all the villainous tricks in which horse-traders are prone to indulge.

CHAPTER VI

A COMPROMISE WITH CONSCIENCE

THE next day Stennett Pepler borrowed a huge scraper from our "road-boss," and cautiously hitching to it his little bay, drove her to a corner of his farm, abutting on the road, where there was a steep bank, from which at times he sold a few loads of gravel. The animal appeared to have recovered her good humour, and made no protest even when her new master set her to deepen the incipient pit with the borrowed scraper. Could she have divined his purpose, she would hardly have been so docile. As it was, she almost disarmed his just indignation.

"My, but she's a pretty, spirity little beast," he said to his son. "I wish we could have kep' her!"

"What are you doing with her down there?" said Alick.

"I'm a-makin' her dig her own grave," said Pepler, grimly. "When it's deep enough, I'm goin' to tie her to that tree, an' get Thomas Dewey to put a ball into her head. By the way, Alick, I wisht you's run over to Dewey's place an' arst him if he'd come an' do the deed fust thing this arfternoon."

"It looks a downright shame to do it, father, doesn't it?" said Alick. "She's far an' away the prettiest horse we've ever had. It does seem a shame."

A Compromise with Conscience

"What seems a shame, lad?" said another voice joining suddenly in the conversation. It was that of Dr. Garnett, who happened to be passing along the road. "So that's your new horse, is it, Pepler? Well, I must say she's a little beauty. But what in the world are you doing with her? You'll ruin her for a roadster, if you put her to that kind of rough work."

"Her work's nearly ended," replied Pepler. "She's jest helpin' to dig her own grave."

"Her grave, Sten?"

"Yes, sir. For all her smart looks, she's jest the worst kind o' beast that goes on four legs—a downright vicious brute an' kicker; an' she's goin' to be shot this very day."

"Don't do anything of the sort, Pepler. It would be sinful. Look here, I'll give you five dollars more than you gave for her, and take the risk of her viciousness."

"I ain't goin' to hev any man's death on my conscience," answered Pepler. "No, sir, thank you kindly, but she ain't fur sale. I talked it over with the minister last night, and I come to the conclusion that I'd sooner walk all summer than pass on that hoss to any man."

"Oh, come, Pepler, don't be foolish. I guess she wants exercise, that's all. I'll soon take the monkey out of her."

Alick told me afterwards that the argument went on for nearly half an hour, and that the doctor sneered at Pepler's scruples. "Any one would take you for a timorous old granny, Pepler. If you don't want the horse yourself, for pity's sake, let some one have her who does want her. Listen, I'll make you an offer. Mind, I don't know what you gave for her, and I don't care; but, if you choose to let me have her in settlement

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for that old account of mine, I'll take her, and call it square and be thankful."

"If I refuse, doctor, it's only because I think the brute's downright mad," said poor Pepler; "an' as to the bill, you shall have it—or part of it—certain at harvest."

But the doctor had set his heart on the horse, and at last Pepler gave way, so far at least as to consent to his trying the beast for three days.

At dusk on that same day, just as we were sitting down to tea, Pepler burst into the house without knocking—bare-headed, wild-eyed, gasping for breath.

"God forgive me!" he said. "I've killed the doctor an' Mrs. Garnett. Oh, sir, come quick, come quick! I'll never, never forgive myself as long as I live!"

He dropped into a chair, covered his face with his hands, and sobbed. Some minutes passed before we could get his tale from him; but all the while Roger was making hasty preparations to go with him.

"I lent him the hoss—he was set on buying her. In spite of knowin' what she was, I let him have her, an' then he tuk his wife, an' they druv out to Cleeve, an' comin' back they struck the village jest when the express was whistlin'. The doctor tried to make her cross the line—I seen it with my own eyes—an' the brute carried on, an' rared, an' wouldn't neither stand nor go forrard. At last the doctor got mad, an' give her a good leatherin', an' she bolted down the line, an' the express on top o' them. Oh, it was the awfulest sight I've ever seen. I'll never, never forget it!" His voice rose to a shriek of horror. "Them little gels—them little orphan gels—what will become of 'em, what will they do? And it's all my doin'!"

"I felt kinder oneasy in my mind," he groaned, "an' I was goin' down to the office, jest to hear if any

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one had seen the doctor, when I seen it all. That crazy brute a-tearing' along the line, an' the express right behind! Then it ketched up, an' throwed em all off the rails inter the ditch.

"Torrance Dickey, he seen it too, an' he had 'em fetched right into his place, an' they telegraphed up to Haverstock for Dr. Morton to come out; but they was both stone dead, an' it's me that's killed 'em. Oh, why didn't I shoot the beast—as I meant to—bright an' early this morning, 'stead o' foolin' round makin' her dig her own grave?"

In vain we tried to comfort him. "If o'ny I'd done what was right the minute I seen it, this wouldn't never have happened," he wailed. "I had ought to a stood out firm again Dr. Garnett, for I seen, when he comed along this mornin', makin' sich a to-do 'bout the hoss, that he warn't jest up to knowin' azackly what risk he were takin'. Poor feller, he warn't no one's enemy but his own, an' maybe them little gels. I'll never be able to sleep nights fur thinkin' of 'em. God forgive me!"

Then he turned to me. "Mrs. Dale, they don't know it yet, poor innocents! My Ruth went down to 'em, an' Alick has bin keepin' guard afore the door, so that no one will go a-bustin' in on 'em wi' this awful news. But they's got to know it, an' we thought maybe you'd know how to tell 'em best. God help 'em, poor little orphans!" and again, at the thought of the children, poor Pepler sobbed like a woman.

I went with Roger to the doctor's dark house, but somehow, in spite of all precautions, the news had got there before us, and we found the poor children—the one stunned, the other almost beside herself with grief. With them were gentle Mrs. Pepler, and childless, tender-hearted Mrs. Dickey, the wife of the great burly,

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good-natured inn-keeper of the village, who, to spare the poor children, had had the mangled remains of the doctor and his wife carried into his own house.

Weeping in agonized sympathy for the grief they could not assuage, the two women were on their knees beside the poor little shrieking Ida, trying by every soft motherly wile to soothe the poor child's anguish. But Celia held aloof from their ministrations in stony, tearless silence. I could not find one word to say to her, but she cried out, "It is cruel, Mrs. Dale, unjust! Don't tell me God cares for us. I won't listen!"

We stayed with the unhappy little ones all the long night—dumb, useless comforters though we were. At last Ida fell asleep in Mrs. Dickey's tender arms, and Celia, if she did not really lose consciousness, turned her face to the wall and pretended to sleep. Then Roger led me out into the grey dawn.

The cold, cold light fell on the desolate house and the little ice-covered garden, as the curious glance of unsympathetic eyes sometimes falls on the tear-stained face of a mourner. As I stood there at the gate, waiting for Roger to bring round the horse, I felt frightened and faithless beneath the thought of the widespread sorrow of this dreary world. I was chilled to the bone, nay, chilled to the very soul of me. Suddenly from the shadow of a clump of leafless lilac bushes there darted out a figure, wild, distraught.

"Mrs. Dale, how are they?" cried Stennett Pepler, clutching at my hand. "I durstn't go near 'em. I've got their blood on my hands. How are they? Oh, I'd give anythin', anythin' in the wide world to make up to 'em what I've robbed 'em of! but it can't never be done. That's the worst of it, Mrs. Dale. I can't undo nothin', for ever."

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Truly this grief was even worse to try to assuage than that of the poor children within. "Mr. Pepler, you blame yourself too much," I said. "Poor Dr. Garnett had himself to thank for that terrible end."

"But I let him hev the brute, knowin' all. No, Mrs. Dale, the blame's mine—God forgive me!"

"He will forgive you, Mr. Pepler, and perhaps He'll show you some way of making up a little to the poor children for what they have lost."

The wild hunted look of terror passed for a moment from poor Pepler's strained eyes. "If He let's me do anythin' to make up, then I'll know I am forgiven," he whispered, wringing my hand.

Just then Roger came slowly round the corner of the house, and I was going to meet him, when again Pepler convulsively grasped my arm.

"Mrs. Dale, I darsn't arst them little uns to forgive me—not yet—but some time when you seen a good chance you'll tell 'em maybe how I'd do anythin' fur 'em?"

"Indeed I will, Mr. Pepler."

"If ever they can bring themselves to forgive me, it 'ud make it easier to think God might too. Oh, if on'y I hadn't done clear wrong, knowin' what I were doin'! If on'y I'd held out firm, vex him or please him!"

CHAPTER VII

THE WARDS OF ST. JAMES

"I BELIEVE Stennett Pepler is worrying himself sick, Nell," said my husband, a few days later. "If we can't discover something that he can do for those poor children, I'm sure he'll fall ill."

"Is it true," I asked, "that they are left very ill-provided for?"

"Yes," said Roger, wrinkling up his forehead; "as far as Mr. Stern and I can make out they are left absolutely destitute. You know what Garnett was—he has left nothing behind him but debts, and his books are in such confusion that a Solomon would be puzzled to read the riddle."

"Is there any relation, I wonder, who might give the children a home, till they can provide for themselves?"

Roger shook his head. "There is no trace in Garnett's papers of any such person, and the little girls say they have no relatives. Of course Celia will be able to earn something in a very few years. Indeed, I dare say it might be possible to get some one to give her food and house-room at once, for the help she could give out of school-hours."

I thought of Celia's ambitions that I had been so diligently fanning during the last few months, and my heart sank. I could not bear to imagine the children,

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till now petted, indulged, and luxuriously brought up, acting as little drudges for some rough farmer's wife.

"Oh, Roger, we can surely contrive something better than that for them," I cried. "They ought to be kept at some good school for years yet."

"How is it to be managed?"

"Could we take them?"

"I don't think we ought to take them, Nell. Your strength is overtaxed as it is, and I wish we could lighten your labours instead of adding to them. Besides, it is not as if Celia and Ida were gentle, carefully trained children."

"Don't be hard on them, Roger, especially now."

"My dear Nell, I am not hard on them. I admire them both, and believe that they may grow up very fine women; but, all the same, they are little wild things at present, and the woman to whose lot it falls to train them in the way they should go, will need the patience of Job."

"Poor little maids!"

For the next few seconds, Roger strode restlessly up and down the room, then came to a stand beside my chair.

"Nelly dear, perhaps you are over-anxious about this matter? We don't need to decide anything yet, and happily the fate of these little people does not hang entirely on our wisdom. Perhaps some way of providing for them will open."

"May I give a text to the preacher, Roger?" I demanded, a little saucily, I fear. "It has been haunting me all morning. 'If a brother or sister be naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things that are needful to the body, what doth it profit?'"

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Roger frowned, and then smiled. "Nay, Nell, it is not fair to bring our patron saint into the lists against me. I promise you, for your comfort, that I'll not say to the doctor's children, 'Depart in peace,' till I see some reasonable prospect of their being warmed and fed. Will that satisfy you?"

A moment later he exclaimed excitedly, "I have an idea, Nell. We'll call St. James—or rather St. James's—into the consultation; and I don't doubt that either our united wisdom or our united charity will work out some plan."

"What do you mean, Roger?"

"Simply that I'll call a meeting of the parishioners; and we'll see what can be done for these poor orphans. There's no doubt that they have a claim on St. James's people, for their father, during all the years he was here, did far more for most of us than he was ever paid for. I'll give a notice out to-morrow for Monday night, and I guess we will adopt them as the Wards of St. James."

The plan was duly carried out, and on Monday night we met in the little church, which was dimly lighted for the occasion by three or four smoky lamps. These were so disposed as to illuminate the little circle round the great stove at the back of the church. It was not a convenient place for a meeting, but the vestry was little more than a cupboard, and we had no schoolhouse. It grated at first on my English prejudices to put our church to so many and such various uses, but after all, as Roger said, the church was made for the people, and not the people for the church.

For the comfort of the minister, Pepler had planted a sturdy, square-legged table in front of the stove. Round this he had collected half a dozen wooden chairs, which, like the pews, were painted lead-colour, perhaps by force

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of that suggestion of which we hear so much nowadays, to keep the minds of the congregation in a sober and serious frame.

When we reached the church at a quarter to eight, we found ten or twelve of our people in a high state of curiosity and expectancy; but Roger blandly talked of indifferent matters till the hands of the clock pointed to the hour. By this time we had a representative gathering of heads of families, reinforced by a few young people, like Alick Pepler, who almost invariably attended our church meetings. The first comers established themselves in the chairs, and the rest grouped themselves in the adjacent pews in various uncomfortable and grotesque attitudes. To this day I have a somewhat comical remembrance of that meeting; but Roger, who had to direct the proceedings and keep the peace, was not in the best mood for enjoying the quaint humours of his flock. There was one picturesque, gruff old farmer, Robert Mosely by name, who was a thorn in Roger's side. He growled out objections systematically to everything proposed, and they had an utterly disproportionate weight, even in our simple community, because the old fellow was one of our few moneyed men.

Roger opened the meeting with a brief prayer, then, rather to my dismay, read my text from St. James's practical epistle, and at the sound of the word "give" old Mosely writhed in his uncomfortable seat and pursed up his mouth in a fashion that boded ill for the success of our scheme.

But Roger laid down the book, and said with an air of well-simulated cheerfulness, though I could see that he was nervous, "It occurred the other day to my wife and me that, considering that we call ourselves the Church of St. James, we might appropriately take

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this message of the apostle as a kind of motto or watchword."

Two or three women nodded encouragement, but the men were non-committal, except Mosely, who muttered, "I don't know as I've much use for mottles an' watchwords since I give up eatin' candles an' sendin' valentines."

Roger pretended not to hear; but he changed his tactics, and plunged without further preface into an explanation of the destitute condition of the doctor's orphans. Whilst he was speaking, Stennett Pepler turned his back squarely on the rest of the meeting, and sat in silence with his head bowed down on the edge of the pew in front; but I could hear his heavy, laboured breathing, as if he were crushed beneath some overwhelming weight.

"Many of us owe something to Dr. Garnett," said Roger.

"Not me," protested old Bob, shaking his head. "I make a p'int o' payin' spot cash fur my doctorin'."

"If not in money, we most of us owe him something in other ways," added Roger, hastily. "I know as well as you that he had his failings, but I know too that his heart was full of kindness, and I could tell you many a story of his brave, unselfish service to poor folk, who could make him no return."

Mrs. Rand nodded, and said emphatically, "So could I, Mr. Dale."

"Yes," cried George Oliver. "The worst kind o' weather couldn't stop Dr. Garnett goin' where he thought he was needed. When he first came, he rode up through the woods to father's place in the awfulest storm I ever see. Every now and again he'd find a tree drawed up by the roots an' slung right acrost the

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road. He come 'pretty nigh bein' crushed by a big pine, but d'ye s'pose he thought o' turnin' back? Not a bit of him. No, sir, he jest held tight on till he done what he set hisself to do. Our Jim, you know, he was an awful pickie them days, an' he'd gone a-shootin' musk-rats wi' some of his chums. In course he stumbled, gittin' over a fence, an' put a big charge o' shot inter his leg. I've often heerd mother tell o' that day. Well, when the doctor got out, the storm was at its height, an' mother she says she seen the lightnin' a-playin' on Garnett's little lances, as he probed around for the shots. No, no, he warn't a man to be turned aside by nothin'. When he seen his duty, he went right for it, through thick an' thin, as the sayin' is."

"I'll never forget his goodness to my poor darlings," murmured Mrs. Dickey. "He worked over them night and day, and I only wonder he didn't catch the diphtheria himself."

As she spoke, her husband raised his big hand and rubbed it across his eyes. "No," he said slowly, "whatever folk could say, and did say, again Dr. Garnett, he warn't no coward. In all the years since he come to the Point,—a chicken just out of the shell, as you may say,—I never heard any one so much as whlsper that he didn't think more o' doin' his duty than of his own ease an' pleasure. Not but what he liked them things as well as the next one, but—the more honour to him, says I."

"I think we are all agreed," said Roger, "that we—many of us at least—owe Dr. Garnett a debt that we should have liked to pay to him. And in a way we can pay it. As I have said, the doctor's affairs were not in very good shape, and we fear that when all is settled up there will be little or nothing left for those little girls

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of his. Now, friends, what are we going to do about them?"

The meeting promptly resolved itself into a committee of the whole house, and for some minutes there was a confused and eager discussion of the problem presented. Still Pepier sat with bowed head, saying nothing.

Presently, grinding like a saw through the hubbub, sounded the voice of old Bob Mosely. "What I'd like to arst, sir," he demanded, struggling round in the narrow pew to fix his pastor with his severe eye, "is why should us do anythin' about Garnett's girls? You talk of debts, but I've read somewheres in the oid Book that him that don't provide for his own is worse nor an infidei."

There was a startied pause, then the thin voice of Mrs. Rand piped up, "I don't see how that's likciy to heip the chiidren. What do you think ought to be done with them, Mr. Mosely?"

"Nothin'. They ain't no concern o' mine, nor yourn neither, Mrs. Rand, an' I hold, as I always have heid, that them that minds their own business is the usefulest foik in the long run."

"I don't know that I agree with you, Mr. Mosely," answered Mrs. Rand. "And at any rate these helpiess children are our neighbours, if any children ever were, and it will be a disgrace to the whoie Point if we let them come to harm."

"Get some one to adopt 'em," advised Mosely. "They's strong, likely girls enough, an' I dessay a sensibie woman could make 'em earn their keep. She'd hev to be a bit strict on 'em at first, fur they's sassy little youngsters an' no mistake. Still, I don't doubt the right woman 'ud soon get her own out o' them,

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specially in these days, when help's so dear an' hard to come by. Any one now, wi' a few cows an' a good patch o' small fruits, could get a good bit out o' them children, an' they could go to school in slack times, when there warn't much doin'."

"How could we find such a place for them, Mr. Mosely?" I asked.

"Why not put an advertisement in the *Sentinel*?"

"Has any one else a suggestion to offer?" inquired Roger.

At that moment I chanced to glance at Alick Pepler, who was eyeing the various speakers with looks of intense, though suppressed amusement and delight; and I wondered what the boy had in his mind.

"If no one can make a better suggestion, I should like to propose another plan," said the chairman. "Let us appoint two or three of our number to canvass the congregation, and see if we can't get together a sufficient sum to keep the girls at school for a few years—long enough, perhaps, to have them trained for teachers or stenographers, or whatever they seem best fitted for. I know that we are not overdone with this world's goods, but surely most of us might contrive to spare a trifle each year to help these little ones."

Again the women nodded sympathetically, and Roger continued, "If we all bear a hand, the burden will not be overpoweringly heavy on any one; and surely we may venture to take the responsibility of caring for them. Why should we not take them definitely as our wards—the wards of St. James, I mean?"

"The plan is excellent," said Mrs. Rand, with decision. "The way I look at it is that these children are our own in a way; and that, as Mr. Mosely says, if we don't provide for them we are worse than infidels."

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After this little rap at her old neighbour and frequent opponent, Mrs. Rand demurely straightened out the bows of her bonnet-strings and smoothed down her dress, as if she had said her say, but in a moment she thought of something else. "No doubt the minister's thinking that, as we are St. James's folk, we ought at least to be practical, so if you'll excuse my stepping out of my place—for I've always heard that it is the right and privilege of the rich to head the subscription lists—I'll thank you, Mr. Dale, to put my name for five dollars per annum." She glanced at old Bob, and said very slowly, "No, on second thoughts, I'll make it ten, and now"—with a sudden pounce on her gruff neighbour—"now, Mr. Mosely, what will you do?"

"I ain't prepared to say, ma'am. I don't believe in pauperizing no one—not even——"

"Infants in arms," jerked out Mrs. Rand, contemptuously. "Well, Mr. Mosely, all I can say is, I hope you'll never need pauperizing yourself. But I've lived long enough to see a good deal of what is called poetical justice in this old world, and it has a trick of giving back to people by the same measure as they mete. You're getting on in years, sir, and I do believe you'd have a little more comfort out of your property if you laid up a little in the Lord's bank instead of putting everything in the North American. Come now, make a beginning with these poor children. You know you'd never miss it, if you took them both yourself."

Robert Mosely screwed up his lips and significantly buttoned up his pockets, but Mrs. Rand's appeal to him was probably less offensive than it appeared, for he loved to be regarded as a man of substance. Roger, however, imagined that he would resent the imputation that he was a skinflint, and tried to turn the conversation into

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a safer channel. "Ladies and gentlemen," he exclaimed, "would any one else like to subscribe now for the assistance of these children, or would it be better to take time to think over what you can give? Mr. Dickey, what do you say?"

For some time Mrs. Dickey had been gently nudging her husband, and now the inn-keeper rose to his feet. Oddly enough, Stennett Pepler was seized with a like impulse at the same moment, and Dickey, saying laconically, "You tell 'em, Sten," promptly sat down again.

"The thing is here, sir," said Sten. "Thankin' you an' Mrs. Dale an' Mrs. Rand an' all kind helpers, in the name of me an' Mr. Dickey an' the little gels, we don't need no subscriptions whatsomedever, fur everythin's all settled!"

"What do you mean, Mr. Pepler?" This from the chairman, in a tone that voiced the astonishment of the whole meeting.

"Well, I mean that Mr. Dickey an' me had a meetin' to our two selves last night, an' then we talked it over with Celia an' Ida; an' it's all settled. We've follered up that idee of Mr. Mosely's 'bout the 'doptin', on'y there warn't no need of advertisin'. Mr. Dickey, he's adopted Ida, an' me an' Mrs. Pepler's goin' to take Celia, an' do fur her same as if she was our own, givin' her every chance wi' her schoolin', an' music, an' all. We've talked it over all ways, first me an' Torrance, than me an' Mrs. Pepler an' Mary an' Alick—an' we's all agreed that there ain't nothin' to hinder our doin' what we want to. Mr. Dickey an' me was in seein' the lawyers this mornin', an' they say everythin' can be fixed up to suit, so the fac' is, the gels is with us now!—Celia with my wife an' Mary, an' Ida sleepin' as cosy as a lamb down to Mr. Dickey's."

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Pepler sat down again ; and the meeting, feeling that the wind had been taken out of its sails with astonishing suddenness, remained for a few seconds becalmed in helpless amazement.

"Why didn't you let us know of this plan earlier, gentlemen?" demanded Roger at last, with a touch of irritation in his voice.

"Well, sir, you know you never said why you wanted us here to-night," protested Pepler. "Fur anythin' we knew, you might jest a tuk a notion to run up a spire on the old church, or to build out that chancel that so many of the parsons hev wanted."

"True enough," admitted Roger, smiling. "Certainly it was my own fault. But, Pepler," he added in an undertone, "the girls themselves—what do they think of it?"

"Arst 'em yourself, sir. But, true as death, I do believe that, spite of all that's come an' gone, they's glad an' thankful. Even Celia don't seem to feel that I was so awful much to blame, an' so it won't hurt her to live wi' us, not in that way. Thank God, she don't seem to feel that the doctor's blood is on my hands."

"Well, Nelly," said Roger, on the way home, "there seem to be only two great objections to this precious plan for the children. One is that Sten can't afford to take another youngster. The other is that, kind and good-hearted as Dickey is, that hotel is not the place for a child like Ida."

"But Mrs. Dickey is a saint," I said.

"Yes; and yet I wish we could have arranged something different for them."

"It was not of our arranging at all, Roger; and we shall still have some chance to look after St. James's wards."

CHAPTER VIII
THE "RIVER HOUSE"

"HELEN, I am not happy about those children," began Roger again, the morning after the meeting. "Sten doesn't realize what a burden he is taking on his shoulders, and he really is not able to provide properly for his own four."

"I feel a little sorry for Celia to have to go to live on that untidy farm," I said. "She has evidently been used to dainty ways."

Roger shrugged his shoulders. "Mrs. Pepler is one of the most refined women I know. She and Mary will teach Celia nothing but good. What I feel is that it is hard on them to have to take her. However, perhaps we can do something from time to time to lighten the burden. It is a far worse matter about Ida. No child ought to be brought up in an hotel."

"What can we do about it?"

"As such places go, the 'River House' is a model of respectability," continued Roger. "Torrance takes a pride in the fact that he never serves a man when he has had too much, but—Well, Nelly, you know if I could have my way, I'd move such places off the face of the earth, and—doesn't it seem very inconsistent to let Ida go there without an effort to prevent it?"

"What can we do?" I repeated. "Our consent was not asked."

"No; and I think there's nothing that the people

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resent more than one's presuming, on account of one's cloth, to interfere in their affairs unmasked. I suppose we can do nothing."

He went away uneasily to study his Wednesday evening's sermon, but as I was washing the breakfast dishes, I could hear him overhead, wandering restlessly between his table and his book-case. In an hour he came downstairs again.

"Suppose we call at the Dickeys' this afternoon on our way home from Cleeve," he said. "Perhaps by this time Torrance may be repenting of his offer to take the child."

"I don't expect that. He loves children."

"Or we may get a chance to talk to Mrs. Dickey. I am sure she will agree that the hotel is not the place for Ida."

It was with reluctance that I consented to accompany Roger on this visit, for it seemed far more likely that we should give offence than that we should be able to accomplish anything in Ida's interests.

The "River House" stood in the centre of the village close beside the fine steel bridge that spanned our mighty stream. It was a roomy, wide-spreading frame structure, with a broad verandah and many gables. In front it was shaded by two or three graceful elms, and on its southern side, along the river's bank stood a row of gnarled willows, their soft, well-rounded masses of twigs looking in the afternoon sunshine almost as bright as autumn leaves, between the deep blue of the sky and the silver of the crusted snow. Behind the house, which was painted white, with shutters and window frames of brown, stretched a wide, open space—paddocks and fields and a garden, gay in its season with beds of many-coloured flowers, in a setting of soft green turf.

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As we drove up to the place on that lovely wintry afternoon, I thought I had hardly ever seen a more peaceful or homelike dwelling—if only it had not been for that hideous sign that swung before the door. It reminded me of a Christmas card, or of one of those quaint English country inns, described with such zest by Dickens.

The stableyard, across the road in front of the house, was still more interesting to me. It was indeed a barnyard rather than a regular stableyard, for Torrance Dickey was farmer as well as hotel-keeper. It was neat and trim as a yard need be, but that is not saying that it lacked the usual medley of wheel-barrows, old waggons, sleigh-runners, shovels, forks, and wooden buckets, so suggestive of the hundred and one different industries included in the comprehensive word "farming." The yard was a large one. A great bank-barn, flanked at right angles by stables and driving sheds, stood back several hundred feet from the road. In the centre of the quadrangle thus formed, littering the snow with gold, stood a great straw-stack, around which half a dozen sleek cows and several shaggy colts were disporting themselves. About their feet, blissfully scratching and picking amongst the straw, was a mixed multitude of bronze turkeys, white geese, grey Plymouth Rocks, and black Spanish fowls. Above all these creatures, high on the yellow stack, danced a little fairy-like figure, with clustering golden-brown curls, brilliant eyes, and cheeks to which the sharp air had lent a soft rose-tint. The child's movements were so light and graceful that they suggested the fancy that she might have been wafted by the wind like a tuft of thistle-down to the top of the yellow stack.

She greeted us, Roger perhaps—for she was his little

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favourite, and she knew it—with merry laughter and gestures that, in their abandonment, reminded me of her wild, unrestrained grief on the night of her great loss. That was not yet a month ago, but for the moment the child herself was evidently conscious only of the gladness of life in sunshine.

Suddenly, with a little shriek of laughter, she leaped from her pedestal of straw out of sight behind it. Next moment Torrance Dickey, looking bigger and redder than ever in a blue overall jacket, appeared round the corner of the stack with the child perched on his shoulder.

He came forward with beaming face and outstretched hand. "Leave your horse to me, sir," he exclaimed. "Mrs. Dickey will be pleased to see you. Go right in, and me and this bit o' sunshine will be along in a moment."

"The little thing looks so happy and Torrance looks so delighted with her that it seems a shame to try to disturb them," I said, as we stood on the verandah.

"I foresee we have a hard task before us," said Roger, ruefully.

"Is it really your duty to interfere, I wonder?"

Roger had no time to answer; but as we followed Mrs. Dickey to her cosy sitting-room I saw that his purpose was unchanged. After a brief greeting he plunged into the subject, hoping to enlist Mrs. Dickey as an ally before her husband's entrance. "I fear that what I am about to say may wound you, Mrs. Dickey," he began ominously. "I would not approach the subject so abruptly, if I did not fear that we might be interrupted."

Mrs. Dickey was a small, quiet woman, with thin

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cheeks and anxious eyes. She was a woman of few words, but of great quickness of perception, due more, I think, to a singularly sympathetic heart than to any unusual intellectual gifts. In this conversation she often appeared to read Roger's meaning from his face before he could clothe it in words, and it was well, for I have not often heard him speak so haltingly.

"You are thinking that this is no fit place for the little girl," she said gently.

"No hotel is," answered Roger, gravely, "though this place is far better than it used to be in Stratton's time."

"And you have come to ask us to give her up?"

"Do you not agree that it might be best for her that you should do so? I believe you do."

"Where would you send her?"

"That is the difficulty," confessed Roger. "It is essential that she should be in the hands of a good, kind-hearted woman, who could give up some time to caring for her. Oh, Mrs. Dickey, I wish your husband were in another business!"

"I wish he were; but I cannot persuade him that here our living costs us too dear. Poor as we were, we were infinitely happier during the years we lived out at Brooklands," said Mrs. Dickey, with a sigh. "I cannot make Torrance see it, however."

"If you were still at Brooklands, there is no one with whom Ida would have a better chance of growing up good and happy. But here—Mrs. Dickey, I entreat you not to keep her. It may be her ruin."

"Have you seen Torrance yet?" asked his wife uneasily. "No? Then, Mr. Dale, I may as well tell you at once, he will never let Ida go. His heart is set on her, and, easy-going as he looks, there are times when nothing can turn him."

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"But, Mrs. Dickey, don't you admit yourself that this is no place for a child?"

"It looks like it, sir. But God sometimes sends children into strange homes, and I believe it was He Who sent this little maid to us. She chose us of her own free will, and how could we say her nay? On the day after the accident, Stenny wanted to carry her off home with him. Mrs. Pepler coaxed and prayed her to go, looking like an angel as she is, and I stood by, saying nothing, but she turned and clung to me, and nothing they could do would make her let go. Then Torrance happened in to fetch me home. 'Torrance,' I said, 'she will not leave me.' He looked down at her, with her face hidden in my gown, then he dropped down on his knees beside her, and twisted one of her curls round his fingers. 'Her hair's the self-same colour as the curl you've got at home, wife,' he whispered. 'Maybe God's givin' her to us in place of the little one that was taken.' All the time he was playing with her curls. Suddenly she turns round and lookin' up at him, with her lovely eyes full of tears, she says, 'Please, please, let me stay with Mrs. Dickey I' 'That you shall, my dear,' he says, pickin' her up an' huggin' her. 'No one shall take you away from her, till you wants to go.' Then she put her little arms round his neck and laid her cheek against his, an' I've never seen a prettier sight. Torrance always did have a way with children."

She paused; but Roger, seeing that she had more to say, waited in silence.

"Two nights ago Sten Pepler came along and told us he was going to take Celia, and wanted to take Ida too, but Dickey stood firm. 'No,' he said, 'she's chose to stay with us, and I've promised to keep her till she

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wants to leave us.' They had a lot of talk, but Torrance stuck to it. 'She's given herself to us, and she's goin' to be our daughter in place of the little one that died, and she shall never want for nothing that her old dad can get for her.' Mr. Dale, it would break their hearts to part them—and mine too," she added, as an afterthought.

Yet Roger made one more effort to do what he thought to be his duty. "Mrs. Dickey, I am convinced that you are not the woman to let your wishes weigh against the child's real welfare," he protested.

"God forbid it, sir!"

"I know you can give her what no one else at Willow Point could," continued my husband. "She will have a pleasant, easy life, and the best of training, so far as it depends on you, but you know the objection."

"Ah, sir, don't I know it?" sighed the poor woman. "Isn't it a shame and a disgrace that cuts deeper every day? I tell you, sir, that the thought of the way much of our ease and comfort comes to us—not all, thank God, but a good part—poisons my food and spoils all Torrance gives me. But that makes no difference; I never tried to stop Ida going with Mrs. Sten. It was God that sent her to us, and we cannot let her go. Maybe He'll use the child to do for Torrance what I cannot. That's my hope, at least. I was dreaming last night that we'd left this place, and Torrance was like what he used to be when I married him. Oh, Mr. Dale, I wish you'd known him then; but maybe little Ida's goin' to bring back the happy old times."

"I wish, I wish that I could see that you were right to keep her."

"I can't send her away," said Mrs. Dickey, steadily. "Listen, sir, there is one word more to say. When the

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little darling dropped off to sleep in my arms, it came into my heart to wish I could keep her always, but I thought—as you say—that this is no place for a child. Then she chose to come herself; I didn't even hold out my arms, I didn't whisper her name—but I prayed to God to put it into the little one's heart to choose right for herself. I was praying hard that time when Torrance came in—'Give me a sign, Lord,' I said. 'Let the child choose right,' and she chose Torrance."

The anxious lines about the thin face softened in a smile of hope. "She chose Torrance," she repeated, "and somehow I think it means that God has chosen him too. He will bring him back to what he was long ago when I married him. I'm looking for him to see that to make money out of men's weaknesses and sins is no business for a true man; and maybe it's the child'll open his eyes."

We heard Dickey's steps on the verandah. The prattle of the child struck in on our grave conference, as the rippling treble of some gay music contrasts itself with a heavier, slower, sadder bass. Then hastily, but with a decision that left no room for argument, Mrs. Dickey spoke.

"Do not think, Mr. Dale, that I am making light of what you say. I see all the objections, but it is only right that I should speak plainly."

"Yes, surely, Mrs. Dickey."

"Well, sir, I want to say that we have both made up our minds to keep the child and—forgive me, sir—we do not mean to change."

So it came about that Roger said no word of protest to the big inn-keeper himself, and little Ida was left undisturbed to make sunshine in the "River House."

CHAPTER IX
THE CUCKOO

A DAY or two after our talk with Mrs. Dickey, Celia came up to see me. She looked taller and slighter than ever, in her clinging black frock, and her thin face wore a look of resolution that destroyed its old childish charm.

"I suppose, Mrs. Dale, you were rather surprised to hear what Ida and I have settled to do," she said.

"Yes, we were planning something else for you," I answered.

"I know. Mr. Pepler—Uncle Sten, as he wants me to call him—told me. But I am glad that we had settled on this other plan first. We, at least I, should not have liked to be—what was it he said?—the wards of St. James."

"Why not, lassle?"

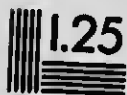
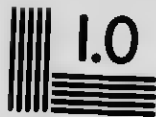
"Because"—the girl flung back her head proudly, and a deep flush dyed her pale cheeks—"because father would never have liked us to be charity children—and how could I ever have paid back what we should have owed to the whole congregation? Now with Mr. Pepler and Mr. Dickey I can keep account, and some day—when I have learned to play enough to bring crowds to listen to me, then I'll pay back everything—everything, Mrs. Dale."

"My dear, they won't want to be paid. Mr. Dickey



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is a rich man, and Mr. Pepler——” I didn't know how to put what I wanted to say, so I broke off.

“I know,” repeated Celia. “Mr. Pepler owes something to father—a good deal, he says. Besides, he begged me to go to them, because—— Oh, Mrs. Dale, he told me that the accident was his fault. He spoke as if he didn't think father was quite able to judge that day what he was doing; but that wasn't true, indeed it wasn't. Still it really seemed as if it would make Mr. Pepler happier in his mind if I accepted his offer, and I promise you that I won't let him lose a cent by it in the long run. Father used to say that poor Sten would be lucky if he managed to hold on to his farm till the children were grown up; and if I pay back all I cost him, it will be as good for him in the end as if he had saved the money and put it in the bank. I came to-day to ask you if you will help me a little longer with my music. Somehow I don't mind taking help from you, even if I never should be able to repay you. I suppose in this world one can't quite get through life without some help.” The child sighed.

“I suppose if God had meant us to depend solely on ourselves, He would not have sent us all into the world as babies,” I suggested. “Dear, dear, what a dreadful place it would be if we were all independent grown-up folk from the first, each fighting for his own hand and letting every one else shift for himself!”

“Would it be dreadful to be absolutely free to make the best of one's own life and one's own gifts? Now I think it is more dreadful, Mrs. Dale, to have to eat bread one can't pay for—at once, I mean. I'd do anything rather than even seem to be a burden on people. It's very hard, very hard.”

Celia burst into a paroxysm of weeping, but it cost

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me an effort to take her in my arms and try to comfort her, for there seemed something repellent and unlovely in her grief. I could not help fancying, indeed, that she was grieving more for the loss of her fair prospects in life than for the loss of her parents. But I forgot that several weeks had passed since the accident, and that such bereavement takes no count of time. Indeed, there are moments in our lives which fix a great gulf between past and present; and years afterwards I found that, deep in her heart, Celia cherished tender memories of her long-dead parents. The truth is that Celia was, in those days, very reserved; and she paid for her proud independence of spirit the penalty of being often misjudged and belied.

There were times when even I thought she had no heart, and now, when I see more clearly my own share in the shaping of her life and her ideals, the memories centring during those years about Celia Garnett are full of pain—of that pain that clings through all time to the consciousness of having injured those we love.

I see now that it was wrong and foolish to appeal as I so constantly did to her ambition. I ought to have known better. I did know better than to set the cultivation of body and mind above that of the soul. Alas, I fancied that I was doing her a kindness, when I was playing the tempter's part of setting before her the kingdoms of this world and the glory of them.

I saved my conscience by urging her not to trust the repayment of her debt to the Peplers all to the future, but to do her utmost to return their kindness with little helpful deeds as the days went by; and once Mrs. Pepler told me, with the air of one trying to be just against some conscious bias, that she believed that Celia really did try to help.

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That was on a hot summer day, when Mrs. Pepler came to pay her first visit to my new-born son. I think the baby's presence opened her heart to me, for she gave me such a glimpse into her life and her thoughts as I had never had before.

"Celia is a bit forgetful, like most girls," she began, "but if it wasn't for the music she'd soon make a smart little housekeeper."

Despite her unwillingness to be indebted to a number of benefactors, Celia owed her piano to the generosity of St. James's people, who had bought it in for her at the sale of her father's effects.

"As things are, ma'am," continued Mrs. Pepler, "she runs off to practise directly she gets up, then she is at it again the moment she comes in from school. Not but what she does anything I ask her to do, Mrs. Dale; and—and, if it wasn't that it's a bit hard on Mary and Alick, I wouldn't grudge having her, poor lamb. Indeed, I hope I don't grudge it to her now. No, no, poor motherless lassie. Besides, it would have broken Sten's heart if I had refused to take her. He thinks, you see, that in a way the deaths of the doctor and his wife lie at his door, and I really was afraid that he'd worry himself ill about it. He is a very tender-hearted man, is Stennett. Yes, and whoever says a word against him, I always say, and I always have said, that he's a good husband and a good father and a true friend."

She broke off to hum a low, soothing slumber-song to my wee boy, whom she was gently rocking to sleep. "This makes me think of my Alick, when he first came," she murmured. "He was a lovely baby too, Mrs. Dale, as strong and as bonny as this darling, though never so fair. It brings it all back again, you know."

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She paused, then continued, in her gentle, even tones, "I never told any one before, Mrs. Dale, but my own people were not well pleased when I married Sten. They said he was a ne'er-do-weel, and they thought I might have looked higher. You see, when I got acquainted with him, I had been teaching for five years, and mother thought—she knew I was always a bit proud and hot-tempered—that I'd feel shamed by him and his ways."

I had always seen that Mrs. Pepler had been better brought up than her husband, but till this moment she had never by word or sign given a hint that she realized his deficiencies.

"Mother didn't know him as I did," she went on. "She only saw the little roughnesses outside, but Sten has a heart of gold, and I'm proud of him, Mrs. Dale. Yes, I'm proud to be his wife."

She looked at me, as if she challenged me to contradict her; but I knew better than to do anything of the kind.

"He has a heart of gold, and my lad, Alick, takes after him. He is just as honest and kind and true as his father. But that wasn't what I began to say," she added, with a little laugh. "I was going to say that, whilst he lay in my arms as this baby is lying now, I used to plan for him what he'd be and do when he was a man. Many folk would think that he was born to a poor enough chance in life; but I used to pray that he'd be as good as his father, and as clever as his grandfather—my father, the doctor, you know; I never saw old Mr. Pepler—then it came into my mind that Alick would want to be a doctor too, and sure enough when he was only four years old he loved to play at making pills and physic. It seems I was mistaken, though. He tells me

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now that ever since he was a little lad—long even before he found those thunder-stones—that he has wanted to give his life to learning about the rocks, and how this earth come to be what it is now. His first teacher used to talk to the children about those things, and Alick never forgot. He enjoyed it more than any fairy-tale. He has been working hard at his books for years, though he has never had much time, poor boy, and Mr. Landry says that if he could have one year at the High School he is sure he would be able to pass the Matriculation for Toronto University. We were planning—he and Mary and I—that he should go to Haverstock this fall, but it is hard for us to make two ends meet. Sten's never idle, as you know, but he isn't a fortunate man—he never was—and we no sooner get a little money saved up than it has to go for something we couldn't count on."

Her anxiety not to admit that her husband was in any way to blame was really pitiful. I couldn't trust myself to speak, lest I should say the wrong thing, so I only put out my hand and stroked hers.

"Last winter, for instance, we lost that horse and rig and everything. It seems heartless to think of the money, seeing all the harm it did, but I do feel that Alick ought to have his chance, and that made it hard to take in poor little Celia. I try to remember that it is God that sent this to us, but—she doesn't mean it, Mrs. Dale, I know she doesn't mean it—but somehow she costs us twice what Mary does. She's never been used to saving like us, and if she just whispers a wish to father, he gets her what she wants the next time he goes to town, if he doesn't make a purpose journey for it. Sometimes it's books—and those are good for Alick too—but oftenest it's music."

Mrs. Pepler sighed heavily, and I said, "Don't let Mr.

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Pepler spoil her. Let her wait for her books and her music till she can buy them for herself. I'll lend her anything I have, or Alick either," I added hastily. "I should like to help Alick."

"Thank you. You are very good, Mrs. Dale. Mary and I had got a bit saved up for Alick's schooling, but we were forced to use that for the new horse. We are making a new beginning with the egg and the butter money; but of course it costs more to clothe five than four, and I don't see when we shall have enough to do Alick much good."

"What does he think about it all?"

"Oh, he's just his father all over again. Celia must have everything and do everything that she fancies; and he can wait. He is always planning some little surprise and pleasure for her. Indeed, he makes a slave of himself to her whims. He never owns he's too tired at nights to take her anywhere she wishes to go; and then——" Poor Mrs. Pepler, this was the hardest of all. "——then she laughs at him—Cousin Alick, as she calls him—for the way he holds his knife at table and takes off his cap when he meets people and helps me out of the rig, and for the mistakes he makes in his grammar. Indeed, Mrs. Dale, I have tried to bring them up to behave nicely, but there has always been so much to do, and their father never was one to trouble himself about trifles——" Poor Pepler, what a euphemistic description of his lack of the common graces! "——so perhaps the children are a little careless."

"I think that you have every reason to be proud of your children," I said. "Of all the young people I know, there are none cleverer or more lovable than yours."

Mrs. Pepler's face brightened. "Indeed, they are good children, and I am thankful for them every day of

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my life. Still, I know—when I see Mary beside you, for instance—that there are little things that they don't see. I never thought so much about it till you came, but nothing escapes the eyes of that little puss, Celia, I believe."

She laughed, but she sighed again too.

"Do not grieve over it, Mrs. Pepler. After all, if Allick is to be a learned professor, Cousin Celia's training in the days of his youth will do him no harm. And I don't think that it makes Allick unhappy."

"No, but it is a little hard when he is giving up so much for her that she should always be lecturing him and setting him right, and she three years younger, too."

"If she were older, I do not suppose she would do so," I said; "but would you like me to give her a hint about it?"

"No, no; Allick would be angry if he knew that I had complained of Celia even to you." And then the last chapter of Mrs. Pepler's history of trouble came out. "He is only a boy yet," she said, "but I can see that as long as things please Celia he does not care very much what other people think. I am sure, though, that she'll never look at him, and that's one great reason why I want to get him away to college, or somewhere, as soon as possible."

"Dear Mrs. Pepler, they are only children yet. Leave them to themselves, and little Miss Celia's airs and graces will cure Allick of any boyish fancy for her long before harm can come of it."

But the anxious mother shook her head. "He is so steadfast," she said. "With Allick it is once a friend always a friend; and sometimes I can't help wishing that we had not had to take Celia in."

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That evening I told Roger of Mrs. Pepler's troubles over her new nestling.

He laughed a little when he heard how saucy Celia was training Alick in the small courtesies of life, but he said, "I am sorry for Mrs. Pepler. Really she has had no chance with the children, as far as good manners are concerned, she has been so fearful lest she should cast any reflection on dear old Sten. And one honours her for it; but all the same, Alick may yet live to thank Miss Celia for the pains she is taking with his education. I quite agree with his mother, however, he is a fine fellow, and his prospects in life ought not to be sacrificed to the ambition of your little cuckoo, Nell."

CHAPTER X

A PILE OF STONES

IT was all very well for Roger to declare that Alick must not be sacrificed. Celia, in spite of her ill-judged pedagogical labours, was mistress of so many fascinations, and was moreover so firmly persuaded that a mighty mission lay before her, that it was not in nature that those of the opposite sex who were daily exposed to her wiles should oppose her. Neither could Mary resist her blandishments, except now and then for her mother's sake. Unselfish, simple-hearted Mary! she was always dreaming dreams for others; and to suffer misfortune was a sure way to her heart. Since the sad day which had deprived Celia and Ida of their parents, Mary could never do enough to show her sympathy for them. But she was torn in two, poor girl, between her wish that Alick's long-cherished desires should be gratified, and her anxiety to help Celia to realize her visions.

I had guessed from the first that it would not be Celia whose plans would have to be crossed. I was not, therefore, in the least surprised when I heard that Alick had decided to put off going to Haverstock till after Christmas at least. It was Celia herself who told me, and she added that "Uncle Sten had concluded that he could not spare Alick till the apples were gathered and the fall ploughing had been done."

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She made the remark carelessly, dismissing Alick's disappointment with a light word of regret, and then she wanted me to talk to her, as I sometimes did, of the great musicians whom it had been my good fortune to hear. But I felt that I could not pander to her cold-hearted selfishness. I was haunted with a memory of Alick's expressive eyes and ready smile, and I had to put a strong constraint upon myself to resist telling Celia some home truths. I longed to force her to think of the heavy cost to others by which she was trying to win her way towards fame. I made her send Alick up to take tea with me that night, whilst Roger was away holding his confirmation class at Cleeve; and it made my heart sore, knowing all, to see him smiling at my baby as if nothing had happened.

"Now, Alick," I said, when we had drawn up our chairs to the table, "tell me all about it. Why are you not going this autumn to school?"

Again I got the story of the apples and the ploughing; not a word about Celia. Roger implied afterwards that I had no right to catechise the boy; but how could I help him in any way unless I knew how the land lay?

"Father could not well spare me," he said at last.

"Why not now as well as when you leave the place for good?"

Alick knitted his brows, looked uncomfortable, and did not answer my question directly. "Do you think that I shall be doing wrong to go away after a while?" he said. "The place is too small to give us all a decent living; and perhaps we have not the gift for farming. You may laugh, Mrs. Dale, but one needs the right gift just as much to make a good farmer as a good preacher or a good poet, and I have always wanted to go to

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college since I was as big as a turkey. But this year father can't spare me, so I'll just go on studying at home. I'm lucky, you know, to have mother to help me. She's fine on geography and mathematics."

"She is a very clever woman," I answered. "What subjects shall you have to take up for the matriculation?"

He ran over the list. To me, knowing the smallness of his opportunities, it sounded formidable, but the boy, like his father, turned his face always towards the brighter side of things. "If I can't do it this year I may next," he said cheerfully.

"You are brave, Alick; and I am sure you will get on," I said. "Is there anything, I wonder, that I could help you in? I am no blue-stocking, but I got a few prizes at school for French and English literature."

Alick's eyes brightened. "Oh, Mrs. Dale," he cried, "those are just the two subjects in which I need help most of all. Mother doesn't know a word of French, and we have never had time to read much." Then he added, with his accustomed thoughtfulness, "But I ought not to trouble you. You have so much to do, with Tommy and everything. No, I am sure you cannot spare the time."

"I should be glad of the excuse to brush up my French," I said. "Go and get my old grammar from the top shelf by the door in Mr. Dale's study, and we will make a beginning to-night, as soon as I have washed these dishes."

We spent an hour very happily over the French article—not a scientific way, some critic will say, to begin the study of a language, but it was the way in which I had been taught, and Alick threw himself into the subject with delightful enthusiasm.

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We were wrestling with the first exercise when Roger came home. A few moments later, Allick carried off the grammar, like a pearl of great price, and Roger observed sarcastically, "I foresee, Nell, that we shall soon have a regular academy here—for cuckoos and others. Really these young people have a most remarkable craving for knowledge."

"It's one of their characteristics that best pleases me," I returned. "Is it the result of your fine school system? or is it the sense of elbow-room and opportunity that this great wide, half-empty country gives one? I do like the courageous way in which these Canadian boys and girls set themselves to attempt the very top-notch of the possible."

"I fear, Nell, that you have a knack of kindling their ambition, and I only hope that you won't leave some broken necks on your conscience. It is not in nature that all your *protégés* can climb to the top of the ladder."

"It was not I who first set Allick climbing," I protested. "But I do wish I were a better teacher. However, Roger, let me explain." I told him all that Allick had told me, and then my husband ceased to make fun of me.

"In all sober earnest, Nelly, I am doubtful of the wisdom of our helping these young folks away from this wholesome, happy country life into town. Will they really be better men and women for it? That's the question that concerns us. I fear not."

"Allick Pepler will find any place in the wide world good and wholesome," I answered. "Besides——"

"Oh, you little enthusiast! And 'besides'—what, lassie?"

"Roger, what chance has he at home? That

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wretched farm of theirs—I've heard you say yourself that it's nothing but a waste, howling wilderness of stones!"

"Are you sure I said that? It sounds more like Sten's poetry than my plain prose," murmured Roger; "but indeed the farm is worse than that. It's a waste, howling wilderness of thistles and mustard and ragweed, and it's mortgaged up to the hilt."

"And yet you say Alick ought to stay on the place?"

"I was discussing a great principle, my dear. Whatever may be the case in special instances, this rush of the young people to the towns is a discouraging feature of the times. Nay, it is a danger to our national life."

"Never mind our national life just now, dear. It is Alick I care about. Would you have him resign himself to starting out in life handicapped by the stones and the thistles, the mustard and the mortgage?—to say nothing of his 'unfort'net old father,' as Sten himself would say?"

"Be just to the poor fellow, Nell. He inherited the stones and the mortgage all complete from his father, and I've always heard that old Pepler was just the same kind of good-hearted, happy-go-lucky minder of other people's business as Sten himself. He would be seized in haying time with an irresistible impulse to clear up the grave-yard, or he'd go making a collection for some poor widow whose cow had been killed on the track, when his wheat was dead-ripe and shelling out. I don't know the family history any farther back, but I am persuaded that if we did we should find behind Sten a long line of ancestors all intensely interested in everybody's affairs but their own."

"Then the more reason, if Alick is really burdened

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with such a heritage of shiftlessness, that he should break away from his luckless environment," I said.

"Ah, but happily he is his mother's son as well as his father's. There is no shiftlessness in her composition, and I often think she shows herself a regular heroine, to live out her life without one word of complaint in the midst of surroundings that her soul must detest."

"She is a heroine; but, Roger—to come back again to Alick—what can the poor boy do? He tries to mend matters, he works early and late, but his father likes to manage everything, and Alick can't do much good after all. I say, let us help him away to something better."

"Well, well, lassie, I like the lad, and if you can think of any way of helping I shall be delighted."

I gave much thought to the matter, but the problem was beyond my skill, and, as it happened, just at that time my baby fell ill, and the academy had to be closed for several successive weeks. At last on a clear winter's afternoon when Master Tommy had recovered his health and liveliness, I ventured to wrap him up warmly and drive over with Roger to visit the Peplers.

As we neared their house we were surprised to see a wagon with no team attached, drawn up within the straggling snake-fence that marked the bounds of Stennett's property. Next moment, from behind the raspberry canes came an excited shout in Pepler's familiar tones, "Heave her up a bit on your side, Alick. Now then steady! There she goes. My, but ain't it a hefty one!"

These remarks were punctuated by a heavy thud, and as we came abreast of a gap in the fence we found that the Peplers, father and son, were engaged in the severe labour of hauling land-stones.

Evidently Sten hailed with satisfaction the brief respite

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promised by our appearance, and, leaning on his crow-bar, he propounded with a beaming countenance a remarkable scientific problem. "Mr. Dale, Allick and me's bin hevin' an argyment—does stones grow? He says that there's no grow to 'em, but my father watched a stone for forty year that sat under the crab tree by the creek down yonder, an' he always stuck to it that that there stone did grow anyway, fur he seed it with his own eyes. Now don't mistake me, sir. He didn't go fur to say that stones 'ud grow anywheres no more than slippin's an' seeds. Fact I guess they's more ticklish kind o' plants than green things is—leastways I never heerd o' stones growin' in a fence-corner, nor in a wall, nor in a buildin'."

"It would make a pretty upset, father, wouldn't it, if stones took to growing, say in the foundations of a house or of a church?" suggested Allick, as he picked up a huge flat piece of rock and flung it into the wagon. "Suppose they didn't grow all at the same rate, the towns would have a topsy-turvey, out-of-kilter sort of look, worse than many of 'em have now."

He laughed at the picture he had conjured up, and we all joined him; but to Mr. Pepler the little jest appeared to offer a key to the mysteries of time's ravages. "I guess you've hit it, Allick, my son. If stones does grow in the places where they was first put, as my father always said—an' he was one of the most thoughtfulest, considerin' men I've ever knowed—why shouldn't they start a-grow-in' again, sometimes, after they's bin dug up, same as taters start growin' in the cellar? An' if they does, that explains why many a buildin's comed down long afore its time, an' why certain bridges and cetera hev bin shaky from the first. I've heerd of the soft sappy little root of a tree splittin' a big tombstone,

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an' I should say that if a stone did once take to growin' it 'ud be forty times worse at shovin' than any kind o' root. I dessay now that if we was to watch careful, we'd find that some kinds o' stones 'ud root theirselves again an' grow quicker than others—same as trees. Look at them willows now, you may cut 'em to bits, an' if you stick 'em in dampish land, they'll sprout out again afore you can turn round."

"Well, father," said Alick, with a chuckle, "I wish I knew the secret of making these stones grow, and pretty quick too."

"What are you doing with them?" I asked. "Are rough stones like those of any use?"

"Yes, ma'am, that they are. These is goin' to build a foundation fur the addition that's to be put to Johnson's Mills. Alick, there, he's taken the contrack to put in thirty cord of 'em before spring, an' I'm jest a-helpin' him whatever time I can spare from chorin' round an' drivin' up an' down to town. But come right along in, Mrs. Dale; we can talk by the stove jest as good as here, an' it 'ud be a sight better fur that tender little un than out here in the wind. Alick, boy, you jest take the parson's horse, an' then you come in too. You've done enough fur one day."

"Alick looks thin," I said, as we marched in procession towards the house, Sten carefully carrying the baby.

"So he do, ma'am, an' he'll be thinner afore spring, if he hauls all them stones down to the mills. I wasn't keen from the first go off on his takin' the contrack, an' now I'm wishing I'd set my foot firm down again it, fur it's killin' work on man an' beast. It's a reg'lar impersition, in fac', but Alick, he won't give in yet that he's sorry he promised them stones."

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At that moment Mrs. Pepler opened the door, and the question of the stones had to lie in abeyance while we made our greetings. Celia was away, having gone to the "River House" to see her little sister. But, as it soon appeared, the stones lay more heavily on Mrs. Pepler's mind than on her husband's, and we were hardly settled round the shining stove in the kitchen than she asked, "Isn't Alick coming in, father? Do go out and fetch him. He's killing himself with work. Don't you think he looks ill, Mrs. Dale?"

"He's rather thin," I was forced to admit.

"And he's only just begun," sighed Mrs. Pepler, sorrowfully. "He has taken in just ten loads, and he'll have to haul at least a hundred and ten more."

"Yes, he's tuk a big contrack," repeated Stennett, smiling pleasantly, "but he always was ambitious from a babby, warn't he, Ruth? An' the others is the same—every one o' my children—less it's Jimmy, maybe—is as fond o' work as a young colt o' racin' round a pasture field. We's got to hold 'em in constant, or they'd wear theirselves to rags an' tatters. Strange, ain't it?"

"Very," assented Roger, with gravity: "but you were telling us how Alick came to take that contract."

"Oh yes. Well, it was Mary there started everythin'. You see her an' her ma an' Alick, they was plannin' on him goin' to Haverstock to High School this winter. But, what wi' losin' that hoss in March an' havin' some little extra expenses, an' bein' onlucky wi' them young beasts I were fattenin' on the grass, things were tighter than I looked fur; an' then, when Celia started in to school she found she'd jest got to hev a new dress an' coat an' a lot o' books, an' altogether the bit mother had bin layin' by fur Alick outer the butter an' eggs jest melted away."

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"What a pity!" said I. "And so Alick is having to wait?"

Pepler nodded, then, with a glance of pride at Mary, smiled round the company, but his daughter sat with her pretty head bent down over the coarse woollen mittens she was busily patching with great pieces of cloth.

"Mary, she takes after her mother," said Pepler, complacently, "an' that means she's on'y the dimmest kinder perception when she's beat. Well, thinks Mary, Alick were promisin' hisself to go to school, and go he shall, disregardless o' all impossibilities. So she lays awake nights thinkin' up a nice little scheme."

"Never mind that now, father, for you know it's all dead and gone," protested Mary.

"Mr. and Mrs. Dale ain't in no hurry," replied Pepler, "an' I guess they'd enjoy hearin' about it. You jest keep a good holt on yer tongue, my dear, an' leave yer old dad to tell the tale how he likes. 'Taint respectful to interrup' yer parents an' guardians."

"What was Mary's scheme?" said Roger.

"Oh, it was a reg'lar complercated, duplex action, double-barrel affair. She come down one mornin' jam-full of it. We was all—from me to little Jimmy—to take a hand to get Alick eddicated fur a perfessor right away. To put it short—she wanted to hire out fur the winter with old Mrs. Eddowes down to Cleeve, what keeps a boardin' house fur the woollen fact'ry hands, an' can't keep no gel, not a week together, cos her temper's so short an' her tongue's so long; an' me an' Lily an' Jimmy was to watch out same as if them goblins one hears tell of was after us, to see that her mother didn't do no more work than when she was to home. I was to milk, an' Lily was to wash dishes, an' Jimmy was

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to feed the chickens an' save his ma's steps. Oh, we was to have had a programme this winter, an' the Pepler fam'ly was to supply all the talent within ourselves! No outside help fur us! The weak p'int o' the thing was that Mary tuk no 'count o' the fact that her mother were bound to spile it all by insistin' on bein' the hull concert herself."

"Nonsense, Sten, nonsense," protested Mrs. Pepler, shaking her head.

"It's serious, sober truth," muttered Pepler, opening wide his wondering eyes. "Mrs. Sten's appetite fur work's somethin' tremenjous. Fac', it takes Mary most of her time keepin' an eye on her ma, an' headin' her off of them things she should ought ter leave undone, as the Prayer Book says. Ain't that a wonderful book, the way it puts in a bit for ev'ry kind o' folk? I've bin trying all my life, since I knowed her, to larn her not to meddle wi' what ain't her business, but I doubt she ain't got her lesson by heart yet."

"I'm afraid she never will, Sten," said Roger.

"Right you are, sir, an' it come to this. Mrs. Pepler being what she is, Alick, he sees at once that the scheme wouldn't work. 'No, Mary,' says he, 'whether I ever gets to the 'Varsity or not, you's jest got to stand by mother till Lil's old enough to watch out after her.' It really seemed a pity, though, when Mary had it all planned out so nice."

Roger looked across at Mrs. Sten, and laughed and shook his head.

"Alick he was to go to Haverstock an' hire a room at two dollars the month, if he couldn't get one no cheaper, an' he was to board hisself, me takin' him in a basket every time I went to town wi' eggs an' milk an' bread an' butter an' pork. Oh, I tell you he was to

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hev a reg'lar picnic. Then he was to get a hoss or a furnace to 'tend, an' Mary had it all figured up nice how her seven dollars a month—she warn't goin' to need a cent fur herself—'ud keep him in books and fees, an' maybe pay fur the exam. at the end. Oh, it was a lovely scheme, an' if we on'y could a counted on Mrs. Pepler's bein' self-denyin' enough not to kill herself wi' polishin' things while Mary's back was turned, it might a worked. As it was, Alick, he said, 'No, I ain't goin' to hev mother workin' herself to death here, an' Mary, what's such a home-gel, a martyrizin' herself down to Cleeve. No,' says he, 'I wouldn' do it not to be Darwin right off.'

"After that we had a reg'lar circus—Mary an' Alick an' their ma all a-shoving' an' a-pushin' different ways, an' all a-tryin' to argyfy the others inter thinkin' their own pertikler little scheme 'ud work out lovely. At last I jined in, an' then we had a big conference right here in this kitchin. We thought over everythin' on the place and tried to estermate what it 'ud fetch in the market. I were fur sellin' a couple o' cows or the big team. We'd a had the money, an' it 'ud a saved their keep till spring, but seemed like as if Alick would a felt he was ruinin' the fam'ly downright. 'Father,' says he, as solemn as a judge, 'what'll us look like in the spring a-huntin' round fur a team when we should oughter be rushin' in the seed?'"

"Alick was right," observed Roger, with emphasis.

"Well, right or wrong, I give in ter him. Then up pipes little Jimmy—an' I will say he's smart fur a five-year-old—'Let's peddle milk,' says he, 'an' hev a big top-wagin, painted red and with gold readin' on it, 'stead of the old buggy.' But mother—that night she were a bit down-hearted—she says, shaking her head

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sorrowful, 'There ain't nothin' on this old place but weeds an' stones!'

"At that Alick threw up his head an' laughs—'Stones!' cries he—the very thing! You've hit it, mother. The Mill folk is advertisin' in the *Sentry* this very week fur thirty cord. Father, will you give me thirty cord o' stones,' says he? 'I guess it'll leave plenty fur that new barn we's always a-buildin' in the air!' You see he felt that set up at the notion that he couldn't keep off of laughin' an' chucklin'. 'Yes,' says I, a-enterin' inter the spirit of it, 'I hereby give, devise an' bequeath unto you thirty cord o' the best land-stones on this 'ere property.' 'But,' says he, 'tain't an helrloom I'm wantin', father. Give me the stones now. 'Very good,' says I, 'an' I'll do more, my son'"—Pepler spoke in his grand manner—"I'll let you hev the use o' the team, an' maybe I'll give you a hand w' the loadin'; but there's one thing certain. You can't haul stones an' go to school to oncet.' 'No,' he answers, still all of a broad grin, 'it's good-bye to school this year, but I'll study nights, an' may-be I'll get to Haverstock fur a bit in the spring.'"

Pepler paused for breath, and I said, "Alick is the bravest boy I know."

"Brave," repeated Pepler, "why, ma'am, it was all goin' to be a path o' roses! That night when we comed home with the contrack in our pockets, Mary had a grand celebration all ready—fried ham an' cocoanut cake, an' the table fixed up with red geraniums same as if we was company! Then after supper we had games an' Celia played an' we all had a bit of a dance. I guess we felt as if the boy was Perfesser Alexander Pepler, D.D., an' half the rest of the alphabet—whatever it means—all right to oncet. But Alick an' me,

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we didn't feel quite so gay nex' mornin' when we got right down to hard work, an' fetched the first load o' them stones up to Johnson's Mills. As fur Mary, I believe she's been mendin' mittens steady ever since, fur haulin' stones—specially when there's frost Inter them—is death on mittens. No, no, gittin' out land-stones by the cord aln't quite a picnic, an', as I've bin tellin' Alick, I think he might a struck out a more royaller road to larnin' than through a stone-pile!"

CHAPTER XI

SHARP PRACTICE

ALL winter Alick toiled at his stone-pile, his French verbs and his mathematics, but in some mysterious way still found time to answer half at least of Celia's demands on him.

In those days I often wondered how much I was to blame for the girl's too-evident impression that the little world in which she moved had been made entirely for her benefit. I tried to cease feeding the flames of her ambition, but the mischief was done. Celia was not vain with that gay, light vanity that often seems so excusable in a young and pretty girl. She was rather dominated by some such grand purpose to succeed as moves the general and the statesman to take stock from time to time of his own powers. Words of mine were no longer needed to suggest to Celia that she was endowed with gifts above the average, but she chiefly valued her fresh young voice, her fine ear, her quick fingers as means to reach her great end. Nay, I fancy that she rated her bewitching dark eyes and her indefinable, undeniable charm of manner by the same standard, a standard which, for want of a better word, I must call half commercial. There was no doubt of it—Dr. Garnett's elder daughter was very ambitious and a little mercenary. Often I wondered how it would all end. Perhaps—and this was

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my best hope for her—some great love would come into her life and save her from herself.

In the mean time she used her fascinations unmercifully upon us all, striving to make of each one of us a step in her ladder towards fame. At Christmas, she persuaded Pepler to purchase for her—almost entirely on credit, I fear—a beautiful violin, which cost not much less than a hundred dollars, and I don't know whether I was more angry with the girl or with Alick himself, when I learned that the lad had bestowed on Celia no less than a third of his hard-earned money for the stones. It went, indeed, in paying a portion of the cost of the violin and in providing lessons for the musician. At least another third was devoted to the settlement of certain long-standing bills, which harassed Mrs. Pepler's mind as much as they disturbed her husband's little, and I could not help wondering what portion of the price of the stone-pile would remain for Alick himself by the time the schools reopened in the autumn. I was therefore proportionately relieved when I heard that Alick was to go immediately to Haverstock, where he proposed to carry out Mary's economical scheme of boarding himself, and paying the rent of his room by chopping wood and looking after a horse.

The parish, including, it must be owned, the folk at the parsonage, was sorely troubled by cogitations as to how Sten would get on without the boy, but the exercise of our wits on this matter was quite gratuitous. Pepler was quite equal to the emergency, though I must say his solution of the difficulty did not at first commend itself to us. A parson—and in some measure the same thing is true of his wife—holds a somewhat unenviable position in that he regards himself, and is often regarded, as the conscience-keeper of all his flock. he protests

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every time he sees something going wrong, it is a case of constant fightings without; if he keeps silence, it is a matter of struggles within. However, I suppose the inside view of every life shows something of its seamy side.

Once more it was Sunday evening, and Roger, weary to death with three services and four long drives through mud and rain, was resting on the lounge, when in burst Pepler, all agog with triumph over his clever management, this time, for a wonder, of his own affairs.

"I thought I'd jest run in to let you know—seein' what a interest you've always tuk in Alick an' Celia an' the other youngsters, that I've struck out a famous plan o' working the farm this year at no expense whatsoever."

Roger struggled up to a sitting posture amongst the cushions and murmured, "How is that? It sounds almost as if you were going to accomplish the impossible feat of getting something for nothing."

"It do sound jest like that," cried Pepler, gleefully, slapping his knees and exercising his ever-restive legs by ambling up and down the room. "It do sound azactly like that, but mostly with me the boot's on t'other leg, an' it's me what gives somethin' fur nothin'! Howsomedever, this year's going to square things up a bit."

"We are all impatience to hear about your scheme, Sten," said Roger, making an heroic effort to appear thoroughly interested and wide awake.

"Well, sir, 'tain't very much of a scheme after all. It's on'y that I've put in fur one o' them young English chaps, an' I'm hopin' I'll get a good few little chores out of him, an' all the while he'll be payin' a premyum that'll more than cover his board. I'y that means I'm hopin' so to fix things that I'll be able to keep the team goin' all spring, an' get a good bit o' land in oats an'

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roots, an' Alck'll be handy by the time the crops is ready to take off. Oh, I've always told that lad that I'd give him a chance when the time come, an' he's gittin' it this year, sure enough."

I thought of that huge cairn of stones beside Johnson's Mills, and was tempted to suggest that Alck's chance was chiefly of his own making, but who could grudge Sten his childlike satisfaction in his own wisdom and generosity?

"What tickles me—I don't mind sayin' it—is that there premyum!" he burst out afresh, as his restless legs took him on a sudden excursion round a little table, to the imminent danger of a reading-lamp thereon. "You see, sir—an' ma'am, that'll be clear gain, fur it'll be my own fault, if—with all my experience of youngsters an' their ways—I can't git enough out of the lad's bones to pay fur his salt. Of course he'll be as green as grass in June—they always is—but I'll hev to keep a good sharp watch on to him, that's all."

"What is the premium for?" demanded Roger, innocently.

"Why is it bein' given, do you mean? Well, I guess the boy's mother wants to make sure o' his gittin' a comfor'ble place maybe, an' Ruth she'll do all she can fur him. Then there's the teachin', you see. I'm engagin' to larn him all I can, sir, an' considerin' I've lived on a Canadian farm—man an' boy—fur the best part o' fifty year, I had oughter be able to give him a few p'inters. You wasn't thinkin', sir, was you, that it was kind o' sharp practice on my part a-puttin' in fur this premyum?" Sten asked the question with an air of painful anxiety.

"I know, Sten, that you will try to do right by the boy," returned Roger, evasively.

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"That I will, sir. To the best o' my humble powers I'll let him inter the whole art an' myst'ry o' agriculture—ploughin' an' seedin', reapin' an' summer fallerin', milkin' an' feedin' hogs. It'll be the first time as ever I've done any teachin' formal-like, 'cept odd times in the Sunday School, as you know, sir; but I'll do my level best by the lad, an' if he don't do me credit, it shan't be owin' to no neglec' on my part. No, no, we'll turn him out a fust-rate Ontario farmer afore he's three an' twenty."

"How old is he now?"

"Goin' on twenty. He left school a year ago, an' since then he's bin a-travellin' on the Continent—so his mother says, in her letter to me—a reel nice letter it is too—with a old aunt o' his, to improve hissself in the languages. He's a clcrgyman's son, but his father's dead, an' by what I can make out the fam'ly wasn't left too well off. Leastways his mother says she's doin' her best to give him a fair start in Canadian life, an' that then he'll hev his own way to make. His mother, she writes a lovely letter—a beautiful hand it is, though a mite hard to read—an' as to the paper—Mrs. Dale, I wished I'd brung it up to show you, but I'll give it you at choir practice. The paper's jest the delicatest kind o' blue, smellin' o' vi'lets, an' it's got what Alick calls cres's on it. You've seen 'em, haven't you, Mrs. Dale?—there is little black lizards wi' snakes' tongues stickin' out o' their jaws. I s'pose, sir, that them cres's means that the fam'ly's what you'd call 'ristocratic—kind o' related to a lord or somethin'?"

"Sometimes perhaps—not always," answered Roger.

"Not always? Well, that's good, for Mrs. Pepler an' Mary, they was thinkin' how they'd fix things fur the lad, not bein' used to the ways o' lords an' suchlike;

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an' we made out that them cress's always stood fur the tiptop folk in the Old Country. I told 'em I'd jest run up to-night an' arst you, to ease their minds."

"What is the boy's name?" I asked.

Pepler screwed up his forehead. "It's quite a mouthful," he said with a chuckle. "A bit 'ristocratic too, I'm thinkin'. Let's see now till I get it right. It's Mar-me-dook Reginal' Churchill—pretty an' romantic-soundin', ain't it, Mrs. Dale?"

"Very," I agreed. "Dear, dear, what sort of lad can he be, with such a name as that?"

My question was answered a fortnight later. Really it was absurd, but that "romantic" name had conjured up in my brain a vision of that sort of ultra-graceful, rather namby-pamby young man, so unctuously described for the delight of sentimental school-misses in the novels of that well-known writer, who calls herself "The Countess." I ought to have remembered that, according to the Catechism, it is our godfathers and godmothers who give us our names, and that if they neglect the duty our parents undertake it.

However, when Roger and I were driving home from Haverstock late one afternoon and caught sight of a stranger, with a bulging tan-coloured leather bag, striding along the dusty road in front of us, we both realized instinctively that we saw before us the owner of the romantic name. Nothing, however, could have been more unlike the Marmaduke of my imagination. If he was not a typical Marmaduke, the lad was a most typical "young Englishman." His jockey-shaped cloth cap, his coat of light and shaggy tweed (no doubt purchased to withstand rough usage in the colonies), his moleskin riding-garments, his russet-leather gaiters, his height, his broad back, his neck, reddened by much

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exposure to sun and wind, his swinging gait, all proclaimed him a worthy son of old John Bull, and an exceedingly new-comer to this western land.

"Roger, that is surely Marmaduke," I exclaimed, "and I don't believe that Sten is expecting him to-night. The boy will be tired out if he walks all the way, loaded with that great bag. We could carry that for him, couldn't we, even though we can't offer him a lift?"

"I suppose so," said Roger, rapidly surveying the parcels that hemmed us in, or almost crowded us out of our little low phaeton. We had been to town, and had laid in a full supply of meat, groceries, and "dry-goods," as we say here, not to mention such little incidental trifles as pots of paint, rolls of wall-paper, scrubbing-brushes and a broom, which were all to be used in the impending house-cleaning. I thought of "them cres's" on the writing-paper smelling of violets, and then of our wonderful turn-out, with that broom, stuck up between us, bristles in air, as if we wished to emulate that old admiral (I forget his name) who tied a broom to his masthead.

But by this time we had overtaken the aristocrat, and Roger was greeting him with a cheerful "Good afternoon."

The lad turned towards us a face round and red, with a wide mouth, a snub nose, and grey eyes. It reminded me of Randolph Caldecott's pictures of young squires in the hunting scenes in the *Christmas Graphics*. As I glanced at it the round face broke into smiles from ear to ear that increased the resemblance to Caldecott's jolly sportsmen, and I wondered, "Now, sir, are you laughing at our broom, or is it just the joy of seeing a friendly face in this land of strangers?"

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The young fellow raised his cap, and, though he drawled a little, responded to Roger's greeting in a manner quite in keeping with "them cress's."

"Mr. Churchill, I presume?" said Roger, tentatively.

"That's my name, sir; but how do you know it?"

"Mr. Pepler has spoken of you. My name is Dale. I am the parson of this parish, who never waits for introductions, you know; and this is Mrs. Dale. Now, allow me to relieve you of that bag for a while. I am sorry we cannot offer you a lift, but you see how we are fixed," said Roger, unnecessarily calling attention to the broom by a majestic wave of his hand.

"I beg you, sir, not to trouble yourself," protested the lad. "This bag is nothing at all, a mere feather-weight, I assure you. I should feel that I was rather discrediting my country if I could not carry a weight like that for three or four miles without fatigue. Though really I must own that these roads of yours are a trifle rough."

"Ah, you should see some of those in the new parts of the country," suggested Roger; "we always congratulate ourselves that we live on the 'Stone Road' But please let us have your bag; we can carry it without the least inconvenience."

"The parsonage is very little out of your way," I said. "Will you not come in and take a cup of tea with us before you go on to Mr. Pepler's?"

"You are very kind, but I could not think of putting you to so much trouble," drawled the lad. However, after a little further pressing, we discovered that the Peplers were not expecting him till the morrow, and, mindful of the consternation that his unlooked for arrival might create, we persuaded him to occupy our spare room for the night.

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"What sort of fellow is this Mr. Pepler?" he inquired, when we were comfortably settled in the dining-room after tea.

Roger hesitated, and I did not feel inclined to go to the rescue. "Oh, he's a fine fellow in his way—honest and truthful and most kind-hearted. Whatever you think of him at first, Mr. Churchill, you are bound to like him when you get to know him."

"He's a pretty good sort, then?"

"Yes," said Roger, "a very good sort. I sometimes wish there were more Stennett Peplers in the world."

"Oh, Roger!" I exclaimed, with that imprudence that was in those days one of my besetting sins.

Roger gave me a warning glance, but it was too late.

"What do you think of him, Mrs. Dale?" was the next question.

"Oh, he is a great friend of mine," said I, lightly, "but he is quite unique, and I can't imagine a world which could hold more than one Stennett Pepler."

"Really I am getting rather curious to see my new master," murmured the boy, with something like a grimace over the last word. "The mater liked the tone of his letter; only if his writing and spelling are fair samples of those of his class, I can't say I think much of this wonderful school-system of yours that the fellows in my cabin were bragging of all the way across."

"Pepler's spelling isn't his strong point," admitted my husband, "but our school-system—whatever its defects, and I don't deny that it has some, like all human institutions—has this great merit. It gives to clever children of all ranks a chance to rise in life, and it tends, I believe, to prevent the drawing of harsh dividing lines between class and class."

"But is that really an advantage, sir? Is it any gain

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to smooth down all sorts and conditions of men to one dead level? I am not sure that I like the doctrine you Canadians—I beg your pardon, sir, I was forgetting for the moment that you were English—that these Canadians are so fond of preaching, that Jack's as good as his master. For my own part, I believe in distinctions of rank. I don't care to be hail-fellow-well-met with every cad one happens to be thrown with."

"But, Mr. Churchill, there are two sides to this question. Forgive me for reminding you—you may reap some benefit from the notion whilst you are 'Jack.'"

The lad shrugged his broad shoulders, and his face turned a little more deeply red. "I do not know, sir, that I shall have to consider myself exactly a common 'Jack,' or it might not have been worth while for my mother to make the effort to pay that premium."

I, for one, felt convinced that the poor lady had made the effort very unnecessarily, but I dared not say so, and Roger explained, "I understand from Mr. Pepler that he intends to earn the premium by teaching you all he can about the system of farming in this country."

"Judging, Mr. Dale, from what I saw coming up, the system must be hardly worth the trouble of learning," muttered Mr. Pepler's future disciple rebelliously. "Any one, who has lived as I have in a farming district in England, can see with half an eye that these fellows must either be an idle, shiftless lot, or must be totally ignorant of the first principles of agriculture."

Alas, alas, what would he think when he saw the mustard and the thistles?

But my husband, though always secretly wishing that this man or the other would make better use of his land, acted upon this occasion as if he held a brief for all the farmers in the country—good, bad, and indifferent.

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"When you have lived in Canada as long as some of us, Mr. Churchill, I believe you will have some sympathy for the farmers whose lands are not so well cultivated as you—and they—would like to see them. The summer work has to be done with a rush, labour is dear, and most of our farmers are short-handed."

The young sage shook his head. "In the long run, slipshod farming never pays," he said. "I tell you, sir, it would make some of our Cheshire farmers positively ill if you showed them what you call in this country your finest farms. Talk of the garden of Canada——"

But Roger and I preferred not to talk of it, for our guest was as yet extremely unsympathetic in his dealings with all things Canadian.

CHAPTER XII
THE BRITISH POSSESSOR

ROGER intended to drive our guest out to the Pepler place early in the morning, but we had scarcely finished breakfast, when Mrs. Rand sent for him to see her sick mother, and so it fell to my lot to present the boy to his master.

We jogged along slowly behind old Bob, and Marmaduke gave me much information about his people and his projects, interspersed with various supercilious remarks concerning the houses and fields we passed. As we neared our journey's end, thoughts of that premium haunted me, and I felt nervously apprehensive of what my companion might find to say on the Pepler property. And I had good reason for my anxiety.

We had hardly reached the boundary line of Pepler's farm, when the lad burst into another energetic tirade against shiftless farmers, illustrating his point by references—all too apt—to the tumble-down fences, the stone-heaps, the weeds, and the scraggy, ill-fed looking beasts that we saw all around us. I tried in vain to stem the torrent of his indignant eloquence. At last I said, "Please, Mr. Churchill, be a little careful what you say, for this is Mr. Pepler's place, and there is Stennett himself in the barn-yard."

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"This the place where I am to learn farming?" gasped the lad. "Mrs. Dale, you surely won't tell me that the owner of this desolate, forsaken-looking wilderness has the impudence to imagine that he can teach any one how to farm?"

I hung my head in shame for my friend Pepler. Well, at any rate it was a comfort to think that Alick was not at home, to be humiliated also.

"Doesn't it look to you a little like an imposition, Mrs. Dale?"

"Mr. Churchill, don't do anything hasty," I entreated him, in a low voice, as we turned in at the gate. "Mr. Pepler would be the last man to wish to wrong you; but if, after trying the place for a day or two, you still feel dissatisfied, come up and discuss matters with my husband. I think I can promise that he will be able to help you to make some satisfactory arrangement."

"You are very good, Mrs. Dale. I will certainly consult you and your husband before I take any important step, but I must own that I don't like the look of this place; that is, considering it as a kind of agricultural college, in which light Mr. Pepler has presented it to my mother's glowing imagination."

We both laughed, though really there was little enough to laugh at; then Sten's breezy voice hailed us from the neighbourhood of the driving-shed, where he was engaged in "hitching up" for an expedition to town.

"Good mornin' to you, Mrs. Dale," he shouted; "an' who's that what you've got along wi' you?"

I shook the reins, to quicken Bob's laggard steps, and called back, "This, Mr. Pepler, is Mr. Marmaduke Churchill!"

Pepler dropped the shafts of the buggy he had just

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drawn out of the shed upon the back of his staid old driver, and fairly bounded to meet us.

"Marmedook Regnal' Churchill!" he shouted, holding out his hand, "well, indeed, but this is an amazin' surprise! I was jest hitchin' up to look fur you down to the station. An' how did you leave yer ma? A mighty fine woman she must be, to be sure! Pretty smart, was she? I'm reel glad to hear it. An' you looks just cut out fur farmin,' young sir, I will say, an' I hope you'll make yerself quite to home wi' us, an' I'll do my level best to learn you everythin' a born Canadian farmer had oughter know. I can't promise no fairer than that, can I?"

While pouring out these words of welcome, Stennett had possessed himself of the young fellow's hand, which he was wringing and shaking most excitedly. Churchill's face was a study. At first his expression was both suspicious and supercilious, but suddenly he was struck by the comicality of his new master's behaviour and burst into a fit of loud laughter.

It was infectious; and thus the introduction I had been dreading passed over not only safely but hilariously.

"Now," said Sten, eagerly, "come right along in, and I'll interdoose you to my missus an' the gels. Celia had a headache this mornin' an' didn't git off to school, but I guess she's comfortin' herself wi' that beloved fiddle o' hers. Listen now; don't she play beautiful, Mrs. Dale?"

We paused a moment to listen to the soft notes of a slow, simple melody stealing through the open window; and Churchill's round red face resolved itself into an expression of utter astonishment.

"That's not half bad," he whispered. "Who is the musician, Mr. Pepler? Is it your daughter?"

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"Well now, she is, an' she isn't my daughter," returned Pepler. "Yes, she has a powerful, movin' kind o' touch, hasn't she? Oncet in a while she plays on that vl'in o' hers, fit to draw tears from yer eyes; then agaln it's that gay, like as if a whole flock o' little brds were singin' their hardest to beat one another. Are you anythin' o' a musician, Mr. Churchill?"

The young man shook his head. "I sing a little, sir, that's all."

"If you's a singer, we'll hev to rope you in ter the choir right away, won't we, Mrs. Dale? I s'pose now you can read muslc, pretty good?"

But, without waiting for an answer to this important question, Mr. Pepler flung open the door and ushered us into the trim kitchen, where pretty Mary stood at the table, making up a batch of bread, and looking as fresh as a forget-me-not in her light-blue print gown. Her father, forgetting to introduce to her the anxiously expected stranger, shot through the kitchen like a cannon-ball, incidentally over-turning a pile of tin pans on his way, to roar at the bottom of the stairs, "Mother, Celia, where are you? Come right away down. Here's Marmedook! Mrs. Dale's jest brung him over."

The sound of the violin ceased at the hubbub, and at Sten's call the musician, with her instrument still resting lightly against her shoulder, came down the dark passage from the front room. Churchill, with his cap in his hand, looked wonderingly from the fair maiden at the pastry-board to the dark-eyed vision of loveliness in the doorway, and—I record it to his credit—forgot for five minutes to be condescending. Before he had fully recovered his self-possession, Mrs. Pepler, looking, in the neatness of her morning garb, a pleasant contrast to her husband, entered the room, and Churchill, I was

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glad to see, responded heartily to her quiet, cordial greeting.

"Mrs. Dale," he said, as he tucked the duster over my dress, when I was setting out on my homeward way, "perhaps I was a little hasty. It is possible that I may learn something even from Mr. Pepler. I will certainly give the situation a fair trial before I attempt to make any change."

I commended his resolution, and amused myself on the way home by wondering whether his sudden access of sweet reasonableness was owing to Mary's charms or to Cella's.

Three days later, Mr. Pepler came up to give us what he humorously described as "a emigration report."

"Mrs. Dale," he began, "I allow I was a mite disappointed in the look o' the lad when I seen him drivin' up the lane with you. Not but what he's a fine, well-set-up young man, good an' strong an' sturdy, an' all that, but he seemed to hev a kind o' way o' lookin' at you down his nose, w' his chin stuck out, as if he thought you was a curious kind o' wild animal anyway, an' he wanted to study yer habits w'out glittin' within reach o' yer claws. But it warn't long afore I made out that I'd misjudged the lad. That fust night, after the gels had gone to bed, him an' me had a bit o' talk, an' it come out, quite natchral like, that he were a-wonderin' whether he were goin' to git the wuth o' that premyum. Cur'ous, warn't it, that that there premyum was a-hantin' me at the very identical minute?"

"Very curious," said I.

"Well, it was like a storm clearin' the air—not that we had nothin' of a storm, though. We discussed things calm an' reasonable, an' finally I made him this offer—I promised I'd do my level best to teach him the theory

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an' the practice o' farmin', an' he promised he'd do his level best by me, an' at the end, if he warn't satisfied that he'd got his money's wuth in instructin' an' showin' an' teachin', he was to tell me fair an' square, an' I'd return him so much of the premyum as he thought right." Then Sten laughed uneasily, adding, "But I don't mind confidin' to you an' Mrs. Dale that, if It's on'y fur Alick's and Celia's sakes, I ain't anxious to hev to return any of that premyum."

"You must give him a good, stiff advanced course in farming," said Roger. "Keep him hard at it, and be careful to show him how to do everything, and I dare say he will not ask you to return anything."

"I hope not," muttered Sten. "I'm laying out to hev him work with me constant, an' I don't doubt he'll make a reel good farmer. I'm thinkin', spite o' his don't-care, long-drawn-out way o' talkin', he has good stuff into him, has the British Persesser."

"The British—what, Mr. Pepler?" I asked.

"The British Persesser," repeated Sten, slowly and emphatically. "It's a name them gels o' mine hev give him, in sarcasm-like, 'cause he's always a-talkin' of 'our dominions,' an' 'the persessions o' the Motherland,' an' 'the British persessions,' an' I don't know what aii I My, you should a heard him a-layin' down the law at dinner-time the day afore yesterday. 'The ingratitude,' says he, 'the astoundin' ingratitude o' the people o' the British persessions! Here goes England a-pourin' out her thousands o' blood an' treasure fur colonies what don't own her no more than if she was a stranger. They piles on their duties again her manufactures, they rares up their tariff walls again her; but let a war come along,' says he 'an' then they sings a different tune. Then they's British to the core, expectin' to hev her

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fleets an' her armies at their beck an' call. Oh, the base ingratitude!' cries he again, jest as if it hurt him bad, an' he drawed out his face so long an' solemn that Mary an' me nearly died a-laughin'. It was too ridie'lous."

Sten burst into a gleeful fit of chuckling at the remembrance. "'Yes,' says he, sorrowful-like, same as if he was at a funeral, 'our persessions is a disgrace to us, there's no gittin' round that. Somehow or other we had oughter instil inter 'em somethin' o' the true British sperit.' 'An' what's that?' says Celia, very sharp. I was a-laughin' fit to kill myself, an' so was Mary an' her ma, but Celia she got mad. She don't like bein' counted a mere British persession, not by no means. 'The true British sperit o' liberty an' loyalty,' says he; an' then off he goes again a-tellin' us how Gladstone an' this 'ere great gun an' the other would a went an' let the British persessions go about their busness, if they hadn't stuek tight on to their old Mother-country's hand, like little children afeard to run alone. 'An' a mighty good thing fur England too,' says Celia. 'Do you venture to call 'em ongrateful after that, Mr. Churchill? Does you suppose that it were anythin' short o' love fur the Old Land that made 'em put up wi' bein' called an' treated as British persessions, when they might a bin as free as the birds in the air?'

"I seen that she were gittin' reelly mad at the lad's talk. She don't reelly wanter be free of Old England no more than you or me, sir, but she hates to feel folk is takin' the liberty o' lookin' down on her, so I jest walks off Marmedook to the ten-acre field, and give him a lesson in ploughin' that soon tuk the haughtiness out o' his British sperit. Every now an' then he druv in that share so deep that the handles pretty near stood on end, an' here were he a-shoutin' to the hosses, an'

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a-perspirin', an' a-wonderin' whether no one couldn't hev the sense to invent a plough what 'ud steer straight. Now an' again he'd strike a stone good an' hard, an' oncet the plough kicked like an over-loaded gun, an' sent him a-staggerin'. 'This 'ere's the occardest thing to handle ever I see,' he says ; but when he got acrost the field I jest stopped him, an' says very quiet an' gentle, 'Mr. Churchill, look at that there furrow. See the way it goes a-writhin' and a-wrigglin' acrost the land, same as a ontamed rattlesnake?' says I. He looks again at the plough, vicious-like, outer the corner of his eye. 'Tain't the plough's fault,' I answers; 'I'm thinkin' we'd best blame the ploughman!' He give one grin, but he done better an' better each trip, an' I think he'll soon plough like a old hand. Oh, he hes good stuff inter him, has Marmedook!"

Good stuff, perhaps, but little of the saving sense of humour, thought I.

"Queer, ain't it, how his airs do aggravate Celia? Now Mary, she jest laughs an' takes his remarks philosophic. But Celia—'One would think, Uncle Sten,' she were sayin' to me on'y this mornin', 'that Mr. Churchill was hisself the glorious British Empire. Leastways, he couldn't behave hisself much different if he owned the whole country an' they that dwells therein.'"

Roger laughed. "Poor Celia! But the boy will learn in time,—we all have to go through that phase, or many of us, at least."

"Jest what I were tellin' her," returned Sten. 'Look at Mr. Dale,' says I, 'one wouldn't want a more reasonabler, agreeable man than him'"—Roger bowed—"but you should jest a see him when he fust comed out. You mightn't think it, Celia,' says I, 'but ever he were a bit bumptious in them days.'" Roger bowed

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again. "Everythin' he run up against seemed just a morsel lop-sided, so to say, an' he were always a-wonderin' whether he couldn't fix things to be right straight.' Oh yes, sir, that was a true word o' yours—nine English people out o' ten that lands in this new country has to go through them phrases, as you say. I don't know that it's true, but I've heerd that the Scotch folk don't hev such a work to settle down."

"That is strange," said Roger.

"Ain't it now? I heerd a great business man a-talkin' in the train oncet o' this very thing, an' says he, 'I can stand a raw Scotsman, but preserve us from a raw Englishman till he's got the bloom rubbed off of him.'"

"Oh, my country and my countrymen, to say nothing of the women!" mocked Roger.

But Pepler thought he was hurt. "Excuse me, sir an' ma'am. My Ruth would say, 'There, Pepler, you's put your foot inter it again.' I do humbly arst both yer pardons, an' indeed I never would a said no sich thing, if I hadn't knowed that you an' Mrs. Dale had both on you got altogether away an' beyond that phrase."

"Don't apologize, Sten. How did your business friend explain the difference between Scotch and English immigrants?"

"Oh, he jest made a joke of it, kinder takin' a shy at both. 'I s'pose,' says he, 'the English is too proud to take somethin' fur nothin', an' if any one give 'em a useful p'inter or a bit of advice, they must up an' return good measure, fourfold—an' runnin' over—o' the same coin. But the Scots—every one knows they has the repitation fur takin' all they can fairly come by—an' if any one chooses to give 'em advice, well, they ain't fool enough to fling it right back to him. No, no,

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they lays it by careful an' keeps it till they find a use fur it.'"

"And poor Marmaduke is an Englishman?"

"To the backbone, sir. I tell you he ain't goin to give me the least chance to earn that there premyum, fur if I show him one good thing, he tells me twenty. No, no, I foresee that the way things is a-goin' I'll hev a big lot o' extras to pay him when his time's up."

Pepler laughed joyously over his little joke, but Churchill, in addition to his other characteristically English qualities, possessed in full measure that objection to being beaten usually attributed to his race. Soon his wriggling furrows grew straight, and he began to pride himself on the amount of hard, steady work he could do in a day. This had a stimulating effect on Sten's labours, for he was bound that he would keep ahead of his pupil. He worked upon the farm that spring as he had never worked in poor Alick's days. In the enthusiasm of instructorship, he even made a determined attack on the mustard and the thistles, and when harvest-time came round his fields were a thought less wondrously variegated in colour than they had ever been before within the memory of the oldest inhabitant.

Pepler, who could always work better in the interests of those outside the circle naturally dependent on him, found another and a powerful incentive to exertion in Celia's demands for aid. She had set her heart on going to study in Germany, but in the mean time was straining every nerve to increase her knowledge and technical skill.

At midsummer she began to go up to Toronto by rail every Saturday to take lessons from a well-known violinist; but this was very costly, and, though she was now making something by giving lessons to beginners

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on the piano, she was obliged frequently to ask help from Stennett, and even, I fear, from Alick. She regarded this assistance in the light of loans to be repaid in the hour of success, but I could not help feeling that, to Alick at least, a dollar would never again be equal in value to what it was in those days of his struggle for education, and I wondered that proud little Celia should stoop to accept his aid.

But she was so set on success that her very judgment seemed warped. She disliked, I know, to visit Ida at the hotel, just because it was an hotel, but she did not disdain to avail herself of Torrance Dickey's generosity, and each year he gave her, through Ida, valuable presents at Christmas and on her birthday.

More than once I remonstrated with her concerning all this, but it only made us both unhappy, and did no good.

"I dare say I am very bad and mean and despicable," she would say. "But, Mrs. Dale, do you think it costs me nothing to have to snatch help from here, there, and everywhere? I can't help it, though. Pain or no pain, I must struggle on. I was born to be a musician, and the end will make up for all. It shall make up for all. When I am famous, I'll pay back Alick fourfold for his help to me, and I'll make dear old Uncle Sten rich. He shall never need to do another stroke of work as long as he lives."

CHAPTER XIII

TO THE LAND OF PROMISE

IN my recollections of those far-away days there is many a blank in my memory. It seems to me that it was months after the British Possessor settled down to act as Pepler's right-hand man before anything of note happened in or about our village. I suppose at the time life appeared to be as full as during other years. I do not doubt that there occurred amongst us the average number of births, deaths, and marriages. I am sure we must have had the usual little annual excitements connected with the church, such as the picnic and the strawberry festival; but the only event that stands out clearly against this background of probable happenings, is Alick Pepler's passing the matriculation examination.

It was I who had the pleasure of taking him the great news. Roger was away with the horse, and I, having walked down to the post office for "our mail," had intended to take a short cut homeward. But when I saw the list of successful candidates in the paper, I could not let Alick wait another night for the joyful tidings, so I set off across the country, climbed a fence or two, carefully skirted a patch of unripe oats, and soon came into the field where the Pepler family was at work.

I remember the scene so well. It had been a hot July day, but now the shadows of the stooks were

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lengthening far across the stubble, and the tops of the trees were glowing with ruddy sunset fires. The waggon, with Pepler and his boys busy about it, pitching and loading, was at the opposite side of the field from where I stood; and, eager as I was to tell my tale, I lingered for a second at my last fence to enjoy the colour and the glory of the simple scene before me. It was just one of those common sights with which God has made beautiful our common days. The great waggon, its bay horses, its load of golden sheaves, the lithe, vigorous figures of the young men, their work-a-day costume of red-brown overalls and blue shirts softened by much sunshine and washing to the pleasantest of tones, the distant trees dark against a wonder of sunset, the foreground of warm shadow and golden light—who has not seen such a picture many an evening in fair and fruitful Ontario? Who that has seen it will ever let slip from his memory this outward and visible sign of that "joy of harvest" which is not limited to the goodly harvest of ripe grain?

In haste, I scrambled from my perch to run across the prickly stubble, waving my paper like a flag, and it was Sten who, from his coign of vantage amongst the sheaves on the waggon, first caught sight of me.

Instantly he divined my news. "Hooray!" he roared, tossing up his broad straw hat. "Hooray, hooray! Alick's passed."

Alick, in the act of passing up a sheaf, dropped his fork, and demanded, "How do you know, father?"

For answer Sten pointed in my direction, and the boy sprang towards me.

"Yes, it's all right," I gasped. "You have passed in everything. It's all right. I congratulate you, Alick."

Pepler tumbled off the waggon to shake his son's

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hand and to congratulate himself, exclaiming, "Oh, I knowed what would happen when we give you that fine chance this spring. I knowed it, as I've tell Dook here many a time."

"I knew it earlier than that," I said. "I knew it that day when we first saw Alick loading stones."

Alick smiled and blushed and turned pale under the fierce sun's bronzing, and we all clustered about him, talking and laughing and suggesting and congratulating him till the boy must have been fairly dazed. Suddenly Pepler shouted, "Here, where's Jimmy? Jimmy boy, run up to the house as fast as your legs can carry you and tell the great news to your ma."

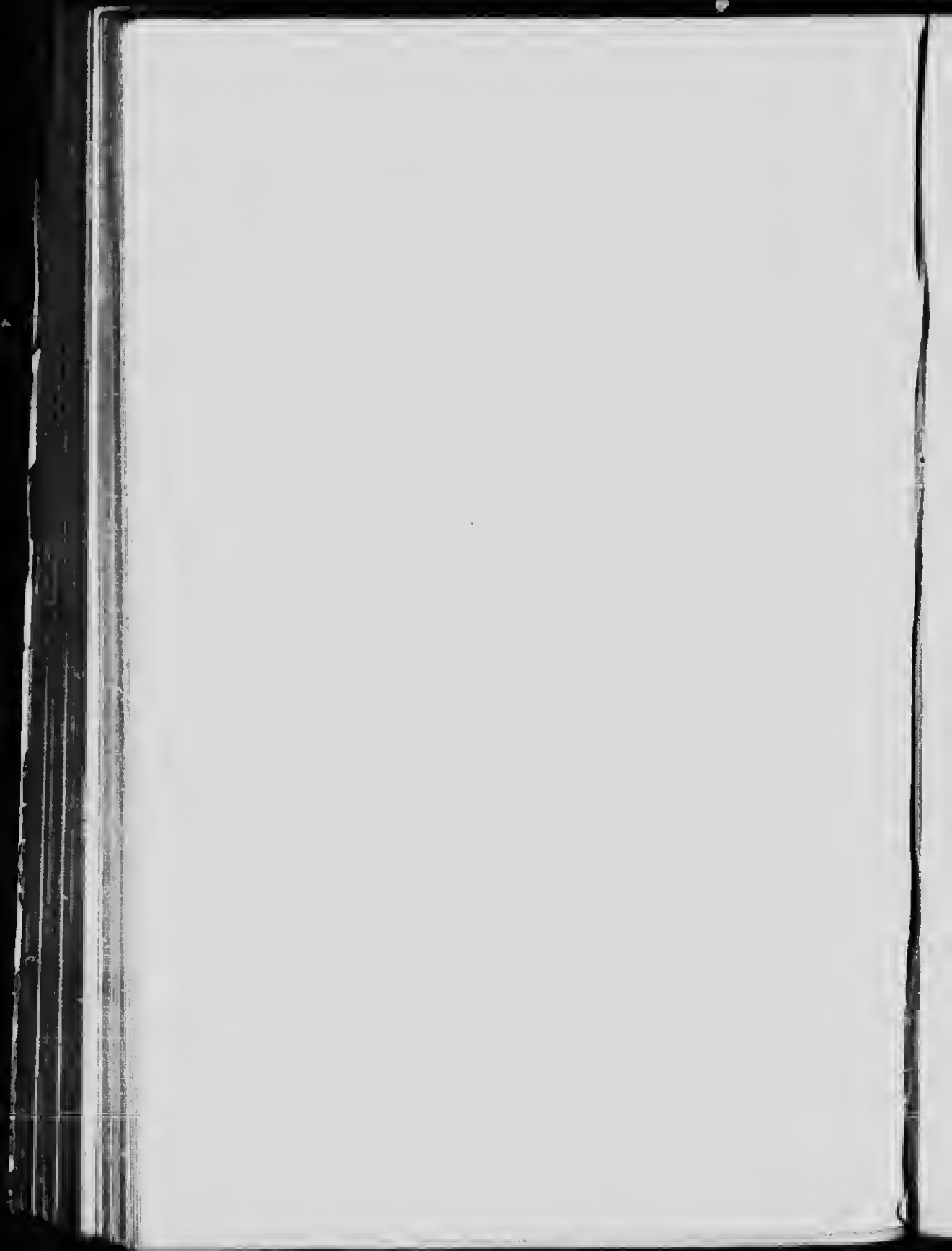
But Churchill laid a firm hand on the child's shoulder. "Excuse me, sir," he suggested, "but couldn't you and Jimmy and me pitch off this last load ourselves, and then Alick could run up to the house himself? I think perhaps Mrs. Pepler might like him to tell her."

"In course," cried Pepler, "in course. Really, Mrs. Dale," he added, "Marmedook he's got a great head on to him. 'Pon my word, he gits smarter every day."

But, without appearing to hear this compliment, the British Possessor sauntered back to the waggon. Alick was already speeding towards the house. A few minutes later we all followed him, and for an hour we held high carnival over the great event. But I could see that for Alick there was a little cloud in the fair sky. Celia had congratulated him coldly and formally, but she did not look heartily pleased nor elated, like the rest of us. Even Churchill, who had never pretended to any great friendship for Alick, appeared to feel more keenly interested in his success than Celia, and I could see from the way that Alick watched the girl that her indifference was sorely wounding him.



I RAN ACROSS THE PRICKLY STUBBLE, WAVING MY
PAPER LIKE A FLAG.



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When I set out on my homeward walk he came with me. The fields and woods were now bathed in moonlight, and if it had not been for the shadow cast by his big hat, I could have seen my companion's face as clearly as if it had been day.

Again I took alick of my gladness for him, but he would not speak of his triumph. "Mrs. Dale, why should Celia be so strange to me?" he demanded suddenly.

"I am sure she does not mean to treat you unkindly," I ventured to assert.

"She is angry about something," he persisted. "This summer she does not like to let me do anything for her, except——"

He broke off his sentence abruptly. Long afterwards I learned that the exception that he had felt ashamed to mention was that she would still condescend to take his money for her lessons.

"She does not care for me to take her anywhere, or to talk over the books we are reading, or—anything. She has been different ever since that fellow came. I doubt if he really cares a straw for her, but it is always Marmaduke knows how to do this, or will go there,—and—— Mrs. Dale, I do believe she has forgotten the happy old times altogether."

I tried, lamely enough, to comfort him; but what young lover can listen patiently to comfort in such a case as this? Of course I thought it would be fortunate for him if she should early weary out his boy's love, for I doubted whether it was in her to make him happy; but I do not possess that noble courage of the true doctor or nurse, and I can hardly bear to inflict pain on any one I love for the best motive in the world. Alas, alas! did I do anything better than lend him some

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feeble props to re-establish some of his tottering illusions? Really and truly I must confess that I don't know what I said on that moonlight walk; but I suspect I spoke as one of the foolish women speaketh.

"Of course it is quite natural, Mrs. Dale, that Celia should be attracted by that big, red, bumptious Englishman," he admitted, with a heavy sigh. "I know that women do admire that sort of man——"

"Do they?" I gasped, thinking of Churchill's jolly, man-in-the-moon kind of face, of his drawl, his noisy laughter, and his inclination to have not only the last word in every conversation, but three-fourths of all the others; and I could not help wondering by what process Alick had arrived at his amazing conclusion.

But he was quite serious—desperately serious, as a boy in his teens is apt to be over his first love affair. He became quite personal. "Don't you yourself think a great deal of Churchill?" he demanded.

"Oh, I don't know," I answered. "Yes, I like him, because—somehow one can't quite help it—but as to admiring him—— Honestly, Alick, I don't see why any girl should, though it is quite conceivable that some day some girl will."

"There!" said Alick, in a kind of desperate triumph, "but it's not only 'will,' it's 'does'! Celia thinks the world of him. Somehow, that way he has of making himself out something so much above the common—it takes with girls!"

"Celia is always arguing and quarrelling with him."

"But she scarcely speaks to me," groaned my poor young Romeo. "Oh, it's all very well for you to talk, Mrs. Dale, but you know as well as I do that Churchill has had many advantages that I haven't had. He knows how to do all those little things that girls like, helping

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them out of the rig, and carrying their cloaks, and jumping up to open doors for them."

"He has been well trained," I admitted, "and of course women do like to receive those little attentions; but, Alick, he is fast teaching you to meet him on his own ground. Your manners have improved immensely of late."

"Have they, Mrs. Dale? Really?" and for a second the lad's tone lost its accent of tragedy.

"That's right. Cheer up," I said, "and if Miss Celia doesn't choose to be agreeable, leave her severely alone till she changes her mind."

"But I can't do that, Mrs. Dale. Even if she does not care for me, I cannot let her fancy that I have grown tired of helping her. Even if she never can care for me, I shall do my utmost to help her to be all she may be. Yet, if it is only for my mother's sake, I too must try to make the best of myself."

"Yes, yes, you must think of your mother, and never consent to sacrifice your future for Celia. You may not like to hear it now, but some day you will realize that, however high Celia may rise in her chosen life, your mother belongs to a type of woman nobler by far."

"Don't, Mrs. Dale," said the boy simply. "My mother is everything that you can say of her, and more; but I love Celia."

I was vexed to hear this grave, quiet confession, vexed that I had provoked it, for, dear as Celia was to me, I never thought in those days that she could be a match for Alick. I had a fancy, moreover—I have it still—that spoken words do much to crystallize a hitherto unspoken thought or purpose into definite form.

After that we talked of Alick's studies, of the work on the farm, of the crops and the creatures; but we

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said not a word more about Cella. I knew very well, however, that I was only shutting the stable door after the steed had been stolen.

In the autumn Allick went to the Toronto Unlversity, making I know not what extraordinary arrangements with the keeper of his boarding-house to obviate calls on the parental purse. He said nothing at home of his shifts and his struggles; but I was sure that his mother at least must suspect that he could not possibly meet all his winter's expenses with the sum he had received from his father for the summer's work. To me Allick's case appeared very hard, for try as he might to get money together for his college expenses, his savings sooner or later disappeared either in that dismal swamp of a farm or in attempts to satisfy Celia's craving for more and better lessons.

When he came up for his brief Christmas vacation, poor Allick's narrow shoulders seemed to have grown perceptibly narrower and his thin hands more bony. His mother looked worried over him, and I made Roger give him a word of advice. Afterwards he began to excuse himself to me for his recklessness over his health; but I told him plainly that there was neither right nor reason in his working himself to death.

As he sat opposite to me in church, that first Sunday of his holidays, I could not help contrasting him with Churchill. Beside the broad-shouldered, stalwart young Briton, Allick's slight figure looked painfully meagre and lacking in strength; and, almost for the first time, I wondered whether the lad's desperate struggle to gain a place in the world to which he had not been born would be worth its cost. Might he not have been a happier man, would he not have been quite as useful, if he had devoted his energies to clearing

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the mustard and the rest of the weeds from the ancestral acres?

Then a sense of the folly of my questionings came upon me. If Alick Pepler was right, he had been called to leave his father's house to seek a land of promise, and woe to the man who, for love of ease, despises his God-given heritage, be it of wealth or brain or muscle.

And yet Celia made the same claim; and in her case it looked as if she stood in peril of selling her best self for success. Truly, though some of us are rash enough in volunteering to act as guides, it is really as hard, I believe, to see in advance the straight course for others as for ourselves. I do not say that there is any such difficulty in showing afterwards how they have departed from it.

Naughty Celia amused herself during that vacation by torturing Alick with her caprices and by bestowing various favours upon Churchill, who was not wholly appreciative of them. But on the last night of Alick's holiday he came to me with his face all aglow with pleasure, and I divined instantly that his lady had been gracious to him. Then—alas, poor goddess!—I caught myself hoping that she had not been scheming to get something from the lad, and his first words confirmed my suspicions. Strange that Celia should show herself so mercenary, so self-seeking, and yet hold her place in our hearts, for ordinarily there is no sin that more surely ruins friendship than the sin of meanness. Ah! but the girl was not all mean. Surely her selfish thirst to rise was prompted half by visions of real worth and glory; and though on her weaker side she was like the man who filched a birthright and a blessing from his brother's blindness, like him, she had the vision to see beyond

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the petty details of the present, which befog for ever so many bewildered souls.

Reading over these last sentences of mine, I seem to have been struggling with the old childish fallacy taught to us by our nurses, that our goodness is the measure of the love that will come our way. Now I don't seriously think that that holds. The love bestowed upon us, even by our fellow-mortals, thank God, has often little reference to our deserts, and perhaps the mystery of love is only to be matched by the mystery of life itself. We will go back to the facts, leaving the explanation of them to those who have a taste for severe mental gymnastics. Celia, with her whims and her aspirations, her selfishness and her charm, was utterly inexplicable, but was none the less lovable.

"Mrs. Dale, Celia and I had a long drive through the woods yesterday, and we told each other all our plans," said Alick, with a beaming face, as he gently trotted my second son on his knee. "Perhaps I was mistaken after all about Churchill. It is hard to tell what she thinks of him."

"Very hard," I answered. "If you wish to know my opinion, it is that Celia cares more for her violin than for any man in the wide world. Why don't you try to put her out of your head, Alick? She will not help your studies."

"She shall not hinder them," replied the lad, adding, with a blush, "Has she told you, Mrs. Dale, that she means to come to Toronto this winter?"

"No. I thought she was saving up for Germany."

"She is; but her teacher in Toronto urges her to go there, and promises her pupils, and probably some concert engagements; and altogether, Celia has made up her mind to go."

To the Land of Promise

"I am sorry. She is doing well here, and had far better have waited for Germany." I was thinking less perhaps of what would be best for Celia herself than for Alick. It made me positively angry to think of the remorseless way in which she would make use of him, and I added hastily, "If she does go, Alick, beware that she does not make a slave of you. You must set your face hard against letting her waste your time. For your mother's sake, as well as your own, you must not let Celia rob you of your chance in life."

"I think she understands better now," he said. "Poor little Celia! I am sure she tries not to be selfish."

"But she doesn't see when she is selfish," I insisted. "You must be on your guard against her. And she will think no worse of you, if you sometimes refuse her demands. I wish, I wish she was going right to Germany."

Alick looked hurt. "Am I so weak, Mrs. Dale?" he asked.

"Where Celia is concerned you are weak," I answered. "Remember, you have to answer to God for what you make of your life, and you have no right to cripple yourself in any way for the sake of Celia's fancies. What is more, Alick, unless she should change very much, she would be a sore drag on you throughout life. The more I think of the matter, the more I wish you would try to put her out of your mind."

Alick said nothing, but his lips set themselves in an obstinate line. I knew that I might as well talk to the winds, but the spirit of prophecy came upon me, and I continued: "If she ever marries, she will take a husband who is perhaps a kind, good-hearted creature, but who has neither mind nor imagination of his own."

"The British Possessor, I suppose?" suggested Alick, gloomily.

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"No. You are unjust to Marmaduke. He is no such clod, 'untroubled by a spark.' You should cultivate a candid spirit, Alick."

I pretended to laugh, but the discussion was fast becoming dangerous, and I was heartily thankful when Roger's appearance on the scene rendered further confidences impossible.

Alick went back to his studies next day; and then Celia announced to her guardian her intention of going also to seek her fortunes in the city. Her decision created quite a turmoil in the quiet waters of our village. The Pepler household, from Mrs. Ruth to little Jimmy, were for different reasons greatly excited over the matter.

"Ob, if she'd only chosen to go anywhere but to Toronto," sighed Mrs. Pepler. "It seems as if she is bound to be a stumbling-block to poor Alick. Why can't she rest at home till she has money enough to go to Germany?"

But Celia was in a mood which forbade rest.

"I must go somewhere, or I shall do something dreadful," she explained to me. "The whole Pepler family have been awfully good to me, but, Mrs. Dale, if you were me, could you live this humdrum life for years? I must run away, or do something desperate. You have your house and the parish and the babies, but what have I but my violin?"

"There is Ida," I began.

Celia shook her head. "Ida does not need me. She is quite happy with Mr. and Mrs. Dickey. And so she should be. She has only to wish for anything to get it. They are always planning pleasures for her, and she was young enough when she went to them not to feel it hateful to be dependent on—people like those. No,

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no, even Ida does not want me. Nobody wants me. If father had lived——”

I stroked her soft hair. “Celia, as it is, you have many to love you,” I said.

“Yes, yes, I know. You and Uncle Sten and Mary love me, I know; but still there is no one to whom it would make much difference if I were not here, or died, or had never lived. Sometimes I wish I were a real gipsy, as father used to call me. I should like to go wandering on, from place to place, just as the mood seized me. I long to be free. I must get out into the world and try my wings.”

Poor little Celia, still wrenching at the cords that bound her to the rest of the world, whilst crying out against their weakness!

CHAPTER XIV

THE ANGEL'S ROBE

EVEN Celia's first steps towards independence were accompanied by galling reminders of her real helplessness. No sooner was it told in Gath—or to speak more accurately, "in the store down to the village"—that "Celia Garnett was off to Toronto to fiddle for her living!" than the kindly folk of our congregation called to mind that the orphan girl was one of the Wards of St. James, and took pains to show, in practical fashion, their recognition of the fact.

"The folk are actin' as if Celia's goin' to be married," said Sten, in high delight, a few days after the news had become common property. "Presents is comin' in in shoals—collars an' cuffs an' handkerchers, lookin'-glasses an' picturs, knitted shawls, an' I don't know what all. Oh, you should jest see our best parlour, Mrs. Dale. Fur all the world, it's like one o' them Ladies' Aid Fancy Fairs. How Celia is to get all them things inter her trunk, an' leave any room fur her reg'lar trou-so, fair beats me."

I pitied Celia from my heart, but Sten did not see the real difficulty of the situation. He had called very early on a day which I had proposed to devote to the ironing of a huge basket of clothes; but when I saw him drive up with his daughter Mary, I knew that my morning was doomed.

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"There's somethin' I wanted to arst you very per-tikler," he explained, after half an hour of preliminary conversational skirmishing. "I wonder now if it's too cold to git you to do me a recl favour."

"Too cold, Mr. Pepler? I am not frozen quite stiff yet. I hope you don't think my friendship depends on anything quite so uncertain as the weather?"

"Well, no, ma'am, I will say fur you that you's willin' to fix anythin' fur anybody, in season an' out o' season. But we mustn't waste time in complimentin' jest at this junction, when there's everythin' to do. There's two things I want to arst you, isn't there, Mary?"

Mary nodded, with a look as mysterious as that of a child guarding some delightful secret.

"We all wishes Celia warn't goin'," continued Pepler, "but as she's bound to go, we mean to set her off in fust-rate style. Mr. Dickey, countin' hisself kind o' related to her through Ida, come in last night wi' a twenty-five dollar bill. Celia's out an' away the prudentest young gel I ever see, an' that bill she says she's goin' to keep fur emergencies, which is, I guess, another name for lessons. Still, in course, St. James's folk want to see her set off proper; an' Mary an' Miss Jessop from Haverstock—we hired her fur a week to put us on to the track o' the correc' styles—has been sewin' like steam injines since Tuesday, an' Celia she's bin settin' in what she calls her dressin'-sack, always ready to be tried on at a minute's notice. My, I never see sich a litter o' shreds an' pins an' needles as they've got in that there settin'-room—looks as if the woman put in her spare minutes a-choppin' the goods inter mince-meat. But to git on wi' my yarn. I was lookin' over the hull trou-so last night, when Miss Jessup was

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down to the gate wi' Jim Carroll imbibin' a mouthful of air, an' it seemed to me that Celia was hevin' more gowns than she could wear out in three years. It 'peared, though, I was mistaken. It had come over Celia that mornin' that she had oughter hev a concert gown, somethin' light an' pretty, you know, with elber sleeves that wouldn't ketch on to her vilin when she was a-fiddlin'."

"She will need something of that sort, I suppose."

"Well, ma'am, if you'll believe it, I warn't sorry to git track o' some sich little want. Most of 'em hev give her their small presents—things in the personal line, like—now, Jimmy fur instance, he give her a bottle o' shoe blackin' an' a fine handy thing that liquid polish is, ain't it?—but there was me, I hadn't got her anythin', an' I was jest wonderin' whether I'd best spend the five dollars I saved fur her out o' the last hog money, or give it to her in her hand. I want to put it, you see, on somethin' useful an' ornamental, an' it seems to me, Mrs. Dale, that the concert dress, with the elber sleeves, 'ud about fill the bill."

"The very thing," I agreed.

"Well, then, ma'am, now we's comin' to the favour. I couldn't no more undertake to pick out a gown fur a young girl than I'd up an' volunteer to make a sermon fur the minister, though I don't deny, in both cases, I think I know what's what when I run up again it. You see, the folk that can't do a job fur theirselves is always the biggest an' most pernicketty critics of the whole caboose. Well, I can't choose this gown, an' Mary an' her ma they won't, so we two has made a depitation of ourselves to arst if you'd be so good as to come down with me to Haverstock an' help me out. I want—if five dollars an' maybe a quarter or so more 'll

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do it—to git the stuff an' all the fixin's complete—buttons an' spools an' lace an' ribbons an' all. Mary, she'll stay here an' see that them young uns don't go a-gittin' inter the rain-bar'l or a-tryin' to swaller the poker while you's away ; an' incedentally she'll roast a couple o' chickens she's brung along fur yer dinners, an', if you ain't in sharp on time, she won't keep the parson an' the little uns waitin' fur you."

"You and Mary have arranged it all beautifully," I said, as Mary took off her long ulster and revealed beneath it the freshest of white aprons.

"Yes, we tried to fix things jest so. Unfort'netly the weather ain't turned out azackly to order, but Mary's got a hot stick at the bottom of the cutter, an' it ain't no great ways inter town."

I did not much relish the task before me, but I could not disappoint Sten. He was very full of his great project, and really showed remarkably good taste in his sketch of what he wanted.

"The gown I see in my mind's eye," he explained, "is jest the colour o' good new milk—not that ha'ash cold bluey white like the shadders on a snow-bank, an' not a reel yaller cream neither. Then I don't want nothin' starchy nor rough nor too flimmy. I'd like somethin' as soft an' fine as them little dresses you makes fur your babies, an' if we git the right thing I'm thinkin' our Celia 'll look jest like a angel. Oh, I can jest see her in that white dress, a-standin' up wi' her little brown fiddle on her shoulder an' her big brown eyes lookin' up as sad an' serious as if she was a-playin' to her dead mother, an' her curly hair tossed back off of her forehead. My, Mrs. Dale, she'll look lovely if we can on'y jest git the right thing."

I have a droll remembrance of how we chased that

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right thing through the town. In half a dozen shops, the obliging salesmen took down for our inspection every piece of goods that bordered on the creamy shade, but Sten, dazzled by some angel's robe of his imagination, gently but decisively rejected every one. At last, in an obscure little shop away from the main street, we found something that approximated to his ideal, and then we set off towards home rejoicing.

But when we reached our gate Sten put on his most insinuating smile and entreated me to finish my good deeds by goin' on home with him, an' tellin' Celia how she oughter hev the gown made.

By this time it was clear to me that the pattern of the garment as well as its texture had been revealed, as it were, to Sten in his vision; but I could not refuse to go with him, and I really wanted to see the end of the affair.

The whole household, Churchill included, gathered in the parlour to witness the opening of the parcel. Sten, breathing hard, took much time in untying the knotted string, while Celia stood before him nervously expectant. At last he cut the last knot, tore open the paper, and displayed the little bundle of white stuff, exclaiming, "Now, Celia, what do you think of that fur a gown to wear to yer fust concert? I hope it'll bring you good luck, my dear; an' I guess it will, fur it's full o' yer old Uncle Sten's love."

Celia glanced at the dainty present, then her bright eyes filled with tears, and she threw both arms round Pepler's neck, crying, "Dear, dear Uncle Sten, it's lovely, and it was lovely of you to think of it. You are too good. How can you be so kind when I'm such a bad, selfish little wretch?"

"Bad an' selfish? Why, Celia, you've bin a pleasure

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an' a comfort to us, a reg'lar angel unawares, ever since you comed inter this house! Ain't that so, mother?"

Celia had to make a great struggle to keep back her tears, and Pepler, trying by kindly jest to soothe her, took up one end of the dainty material and wrapped it about the girl's shoulders, exclaiming, "My gracious, the work Mrs. Dale an' me had this forenoon a-matchin' her complexion! I don't wonder women-folk find shoppin' a big business—there's so many tings to be considered—threshin's ain't nothin' to it."

Surely we had done our work well, for Celia had never looked prettier than she did at that moment with Pepler's quaint arrangement of creamy draperies setting off the brilliant glow of excitement in her cheeks. But that day her face told of something deeper and better than excitement. The look in her dark eyes was half glad, half sorrowful, all sweet and tender, and I did not wonder at Pepler's pride in his adopted child. I too felt full of hope for her.

"Mr. Pepler, I congratulate you on your taste," drawled Churchill. "This, I presume, is part of the trousseau. Is it, may I ask, the wedding-gown itself?"

This broke the spell. Celia threw off the stuff from her shoulders and turned impatiently on the young Englishman. "Don't be silly, Marmaduke," she said. "What should I do with a wedding-garment?"

"'Pon my honour, Celia, I thought it must be one. Mr. Pepler said it was for your trousseau, and if that doesn't mean a wedding——"

"You ought to know Uncle Sten by this time. It's just his way of putting things."

"Well, Celia, I beg your pardon," protested the young man.

"No harm done, so far as I see," cried the excited

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head of the household. "I guess it won't be many years afore there'il hev to be talk o' weddin's in this house. But there, my dear, there ain't no hurry—we shall see what us shall see," and he whispered into Celia's ear something that sounded like the word "Alick."

The girl blushed angrily, and fled from the room.

CHAPTER XV

DICKEY, THE INDISPENSABLE

STEN looked after Celia with wonder in his eyes. "She's jest a mite excited," he explained by way of apology for her, when we were left alone; "but, Mrs. Dale, I mustn't forget that I was to tell you that they's plannin' to hev a surprise party fur Celia down to Mr. Dickey's to-morrer night, an' they'd like to hev you an' Mr. Dale come."

"I am not sure that that would be possible," I said, alarmed at the proposal.

"We was goin' to hev it here, but Ida an' some of the youngsters fixed it all up to hev it at Dickey's. They said they could hev so much more fun in them big rooms than in this bit of a rat-hole; then, too, it 'ud be easier to make a reel surprise of it, without Celia suspectin' nothin'."

"It would have been better here," I said, with a faint hope that the promoters of the festivity might make the change, for I knew Roger would be grieved if such an affair were held at the "River House."

"Jest my opinion," replied Sten, "but you see it warn't our notion, an' we couldn't go interferin' an' sp'ilin' all their plans. We had jest to take it or leave it."

"I wish, upon the whole, you had decided against

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It," I said, speaking less strongly than I felt, for I knew that anything I said to Pepler might as well be proclaimed at once at the church door. "It seems a pity to have anything that will take the young people to the 'River House.'"

"Well, I looked at it this way," said Pepler, slowly. "Mrs. Dickey, she's one o' the salt o' the airth, an' it do seem as how, if it's fit fur Ida to be there all the time steady, it shouldn't hurt my gels to go over fur oncet in a way. Still, I kinder wisht myself it hadn't happened. Torrance on'y means to act kind an' neighbourly, but—well, Mrs. Dale, I wisht when the plan was fust broke to me—as I've wisht time an' again afore—that this 'ere was a Scott Act county. It 'ud be a sight easier fur lots o' folk to live right, if the law tuk the liquor inter its own hands, as you may say, an', to my thinkin', that there Scott Act is next best to straight abolition."

"I wish we had prohibition," I sighed, "but it's useless to talk of that now. The question is, what are we to do about this party?"

Pepler looked uncomfortable. "S'pose I run over to Dickey's an' tell him the folks had jest got to come here, that you an' the parson ain't goin' to count'nance no goin's on at hotels whatsomedever."

But, without consulting my husband, I dared not authorize Pepler to carry such a message to Dickey.

"There's one trouble," went on Sten, rubbing the wrinkles out of his forehead with a determined hand, "'tain't a good time to go offendin' Dickey now, when he's jest promised that hundred dollars to fixin' up the church. 'Twouldn't be so bad if he'd went the length of payin' it, fur then if he did rage round some an' roar that he'd never give another red cent to St. James's, there'd be a chance that he come round afore we wanted

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anythin' very pertikler. His bark's worse than his bite an' though his nat'rai temper's a reg'iar South Dakota cyclone, whlie it is a-blowin', it don't blow long, thank goodness, on'y when he's a ceiebratin' a bit too freeiy. If it warn't fur that one liddle temptation, Torrance 'ud be a mighty good sort, as Marmedook says. But say, Mrs. Daie, how wouid it do now fur me to send Jimmy up fur Ida? She's as bright as a button, an' if we oncet git her on our side, there won't be no trouble wi' Torrance. He'd fetch the huii hotel over here piece-meal, if Ida tuk a notion to hev him do it. She can twine him round her liddle finger, can Ida. The hitch is, 'tain't quite so certain we can twine Ida, fur there are times when she's as hard to holt as that oniucky beast I got through Barker's cheatin'."

"Mr. Pepier, I must go home and taik the matter over with my husband before we do anything," I said.

"Well, when you is a-taikin', put it to him, Mrs. Daie, that the foundations o' the church is givin' right away at the north end, where the wash from the huii ketches 'em in the spring, an' that the sills is rotten, and the shingies is wore out on the one side, an' ail the pews needs fixin', iess we wants to hev the congregation a-falliin' down in a heap some Sunday when there's a good crowd in. Fac', we reeiy can't git on noways wi'out Dickey's promised hundred, jest now especially. Do try now, ma'am, to make the parson see that he's what folk cali quite out-an'-out inderspensabic, an' git him to keep right sides of him, if it's anyways possible."

"I will teil Mr. Dale what you say; but——"

"But what, now, Mrs. Daie? Won't you use your vote an' inflence to keep the parson cool? After all, the p'ison that it's made of don't stick to Dickey's money, an' there's Scriptur fur sp'iifin' the Egyptians, let

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alone that it's good fur Torrance to be kep' comin' reg'lar to St. James's. How would you like now to think of his loafing round his own place all Sunday? What I'm skeered of is that the parson an' Dickey 'll git a-argifyin', an' maybe there'll be hot words, an' the hotel won't be shut after all, but maybe the church will!"

"Oh, come, Mr. Pepler, don't be so pessimistic," I exclaimed. "Do you mean to say that the church depends wholly on Torrance Dickey? Why, it's a libel on the whole congregation."

"Libel or no libel, ma'am, even a church can't be run without the dollars, an' Dickey's the only one amongst us that's both got anythin' to give an' the will to give it too. Mrs. Dale, if you was to look over that there parish account book, you'd see that for years it's Dickey what has give more to every good objec' than any other three fam'lies combined. He's the prop an' the pillow an' the mainstay of St. James's. He reelly is, ma'am. Let me tell you what he done since Mr. Dale come. He forkeu out handsome whenever we've wanted sich little items as shingles an' paint an' door-knobs—an' wi' a old church we always is wantin' them things—an' he paid half fur getting a new fence to the buryin' ground, an' he give twenty-five dollars to them sheds, and he put in new chairs an' the rails an' the communion table all complete out of his own pocket, then I see him myself put a two-dollar bill on the plate fur the missionaries, an' he always gives jest double what any person else does fur the stipen'."

All this was very humiliating and perplexing, and even worse.

"I don't want to tempt any person to go a-slopin' round behind his conscience," pursued Sten. "I've had

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my lesson on that p'int, but if you an' the parson can see your way to doin' right an' keepin' in with Dickey at the same time, why, it'll be all the better, don't you think? I wish I could a druv over wi' you now, to put it plain to Mr. Dale, but I've got a ter'ble sick cow on my hands, an' me an' Marmedook is goin' to give her a dose he's bin a mixin' up out of a book he brung along what tells you how to run a farm successful from Janu'ry to December. I'll send Jimmy along with you to open the gates, an' he'll be comp'ny fur Mary, if she don't git home till after dark. If you gits the chance, talk over this here surprise party wi' Mr. Dale, an' send word by Mary wheth'r I'm to shut down on it altogether; but please don't think me too forrard if I remind you that the conditions of St. James's is sich that it won't stand no props knocked out from under it sudden."

Pepler need not have fancied that I had no sympathy with his forebodings. Indeed, I did wish that the awkward question had never arisen, and I should have been thankful if, for a little while, I could have dismissed the problem from my mind; but all the way home Jimmy insisted on entertaining me with a flaming account of the preparations going on at the "River House" for the morrow's great "surprise."

"Dickey's arst lots o' folk out from town," said the child. "He's goin' to give Celia a chance to see what she can do, an' Ida's a-fixin' up the big parlour with wreaths an' red berries an' everythin'. Oh, I wisht fur oncet I was Celia, on'y she's missin' half the fun, fur she don't know a mite about it yet. Ida says she don't see how she is to be got inter her bestest dress, without her s'pectin' somethin', an' that 'ud spile all. Oh, won't it be great? We's all goin'. Ma she's made a big choc'late cake, an' Torrance—if you'll believe it, ma'am,

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he's ordered out a hull bar'l of ice-cream same as we had down to the strawh'ry festival. Celia is gittin' a fine send-off, ain't she?"

What would Roger think about it? Surely it was too late now to try to stop the affair. But, as things turned out, the responsibility was lifted entirely from Roger's shoulders. That morning after I had gone he had received an urgent message from a brother-clergyman twenty miles away, asking him to go at once to meet a college friend of both, who had recently returned from the foreign field. Roger had set off immediately, leaving word with Mary that he would not be back till the following evening, and I may as well confess that on this occasion I was delighted to hear of my husband's departure. It seemed as if it would save him so much trouble and worry.

I asked Mary to tell her father to use his own judgment about the "surprise party," and then I put my babies to bed with a comparatively easy mind. I was careful not to go to the village next day, for I did not wish to be consulted nor even to hear any further news of the impending festivity.

The long, quiet hours by myself, except for the children, made me think of the night when I had been so frightened by poor Sten, but everything was different now, though the snow was drifting and the wind was howling round the house nearly as drearily as on that wintry afternoon four years ago.

Then my little lonely house in the great ocean of the unknown around me had seemed as solitary as Alexander Selkirk's desert island; now, the same shabby little house was home to me, the central point of light, in an ever-widening reach of beauty and colour, peopled with friends. Then the whirling drifts had been in my

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eyes an impassable barrier; now they were but a veil hiding a world with a dear friendly face.

Within, the change was as great. I listened no longer to the grinding complaints of the trees concerning the wind's ill-treatment of them. The shrill voices of my two rollicking youngsters rang out above the moans and groans of the storm-tortured world without, and we three were as merry as sand-pipers, or "grigs," or any other jovial creatures, though our mirth was a little chastened by pity for "Papa—out in the snow."

I no longer tortured myself even on his account, however, as I had tortured myself on that other winter's day. Somehow during these years I had lost my fear of the weather, and had gained a comforting confidence in Roger's common-sense. I will not deny that after I had tucked up my boys in their little cots I began to listen with longing for the sound of the sleigh-bells; but when eleven o'clock came and Roger did not, I gave him up and went to bed and at last to sleep.

I must have slept for an hour, when I was roused by the sound of the sleigh-bells. In haste I slipped on my dressing-gown and went to stir up the kitchen fire, for I knew that my poor boy must be both cold and hungry. Now, there is nothing like a wood fire in a stove with a good draught for answering generously to small attentions, and by the time I heard Roger kicking the snow from his boots in the wood-shed my kettle was singing merrily.

But Roger was not in an hilarious humour. He answered my question as if he were thinking of something else. At length I demanded, "What is the matter, Roger?"

He answered tragically, "We are on the eve of a great fight, Nell. I doubt there is trouble before us."

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"What do you mean?"

"Did you not hear anything of the surprise party at Dickey's to give Celia a send-off?"

"Sten told me it was in the wind, and we agreed to consult you; and then, when I got home, you had gone. I was rather glad, for I was sure you would object, and Sten feared that that would have made trouble with Dickey."

"I wish I had been at home. It has been a disgraceful affair, Nell. How Sten could think of letting those girls of his go to such a thing I cannot imagine."

"How did you hear of it, Roger?"

"I met a procession of teams on the Haverstock road—the young people in the sleighs were singing and shouting all kinds of nonsense—and then, when I was close to Willow Point, Bob shied at something black by the wayside." Roger's tone was expressive of intense disgust. "Nell, I hardly know how to tell you—it was one of your *protégés*—the aristocratic Marmaduke, lying there insensible in the snow. If Bob had passed without seeing him, he would have been frozen to death before morning."

"Poor fellow, was he ill?"

"Ill!" repeated Roger. "He was dead-drunk!"

"Poor lad, poor Marmaduke! I told Sten they ought not to have a surprise party there. What did you do with him?"

"I loaded him into the cutter, like a sack of coals," said Roger, still sore and angry in his disappointment at such a thing happening at Willow Point after his long years of work. "I loaded him into the cutter and took him over to Dickey's. I meant to show Torrance the result of his work, but he had not sense to see, and I'm afraid"—Roger's tone grew gentler—"that I've

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only added another burden to Mrs. Dickey's heavy load. She says Torrance promised her that no one should touch wine or spirits that night, but when he got excited with all the company—and he had asked some fellows, Nell, not fit for any of our girls to meet—he forgot everything, and the thing ended as they should have known it would end. Mrs. Dickey sent Ida off to bed when the revel got to its height, and I hope Sten took his contingent home early, but it's heart-breaking, Nell, it's heart-breaking!"

"I wish you had brought that boy up here," I said. "I don't think it will do him any good to get more friendly with the Dickeys."

"What could I do, Nell? I am not going to let you make a slave of yourself to such young wretches. Besides, I feared the boy was seriously frost-bitten, and I was obliged to get him quickly under shelter where we could attend to him. One of his feet is slightly frozen, and Dr. Lake and I were working with him for an hour before we dared to put him to bed. It's a miserable, disgraceful business altogether, and I hope it will be a lesson both to Churchill and to Dickey."

"It may be the saving of them."

"Or the beginning of the end," muttered Roger, gloomily. "I seem to have lost all faith and hope for them."

Poor Roger, he was utterly tired out. Things would doubtless look less gloomy after a good night's rest. But that he did not get!

It was hardly beginning to dawn when I heard heavy footsteps in the porch, and I opened the door to admit Sten, who looked woebegone and crestfallen.

"Mrs. Dale, I wisht with all my heart I'd listened to you," he said. "I'll never have nothin' to do wi' another

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suprise party as long as I live—leastways to an hotel. But that ain't what I comed about. The truth is, I'm skeered a'most out o' my life that suthin' awful's happened to Marmedook."

"He is safe now," I hastened to assure Sten, "though he very nearly came to grief."

"Well, now, that is a comfort," murmured Sten, drawing a long breath; "I'd never have forgive myself if anythin' had happened to Marmedook. Where is he, ma'am?"

"At the 'River House.'"

"What! he stayed there arter all, did he? I wonder now what made old Josh go out o' the way to tell me he see him settin' off up the road towards Dodges? You see, Mrs. Dale, when I caught on to how things was goin', I sot myself to git Celia an' the rest o' my folk away; but Celia was that excited wi' the clappin' and cheerin' that she stood like as if she was in a dream, wi' the loveliest smile on her face, playin' like a seraphin. The folk from town said they'd never heerd no sich music, an' they made her play one piece after another; but mother an' me we couldn't enjoy it a bit fur listenin' to Dickey an' his lot in the big room across the hall; an' Mrs. Torrance she was fair distracted. At last she up an' whispered to Celia, 'Please, lassie, stop your playin'. I want to give the folk their supper an' git em away.' The tables was jest lovely, but Torrance an' some of the folk from town acted so foolish that we was downright ashamed. 'Pon my word, if you could a seed us, you'd a said we was a lot of emigrants, eatin' against time at a railway counter, an' mortal afeard that our train 'ud pull out afore the coffee had got cool enough to swaller. Oh, it was a gashly kind o' feast. I'm reel glad you was out of it, Mrs. Dale."

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"So am I."

"When we riz from the tables, some o' the young uns was makin' fur the parlour an' talkin' o' dancin', but Mrs. Dickey was too smart fur em. She'd put out all the lamps, an' there she stood at the door o' the dlnin'-room sayin' 'good night,' to every one as nat'ral an' accidental as you never see. But Dickey he roared out, 'Say, missis, is this what you calls hospitable? No, no, we ain't a-goin' to break up yet. Celia's goin' to play us a waltz an' a set o' lancers an' a eight-han' reel; ain't you, my dear? No, indeed, we ain't goin' to let no one off yet. You shan't "go home till mornin', till daylight doth appear." Come along, boys, if the missis won't let us dance, you've jest got to come along wi' me, an' drink good luck to our Celia an' her violin.' With that, he made fur the bar—worse luck to him—with more'n half the young fellers follerin' at his heels. It was awful! There was that fool, Neddy Clark, an' George Oliver, tryin' who could make the most noise."

"George Oliver. Oh, I am sorry for that!" I said. "He is such a nice fellow."

"You wouldn't a said so if you'd seed him last night," answered Sten, sternly. "Since Dickey got a bolt on him two years back, he's bin headin' straight fur ruin; but there was others to think of besides him. I tell you I made a jump, when I see how the land lay, to hustle off my crowd, an' mother shuck the gels an' Jimmy inter their coats as if the house was a-fire. But we was to home an' a'most to bed afore I give one thought to Marmedook. Then I would a went back fur him, on'y I thought I heard some one slammin' round in his room. Arter that Ruth got talkin', an' wishin' as how we could a kep' Celia safe to home, an' we'd hardly put out our lamp by four o'clock. I were

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dead tired, but somehow I couldn't ketch my sleep, an' when I was droppin' off I felt a kind o' wind on my face, an' had to git up to see if Marmedook had went an' left the door open. Then I see that his hat an' coat warn't where he mostly pitches 'em when he comes in late, an' suthin' made me run upstairs, to see if the boy was in his bed. He warn't, an' it give me a kind o' turn, ma'am, so I jest hitched up and druv down to Dickey's, an' old Josh stuck to it he warn't there, an' I couldn't find no track of him, so I thought I'd best let the parson know, fur I don't know how I'd break it to his ma, if anythin' happened to Dook."

"Something has happened. He might have been killed," I said ; and I repeated Roger's story.

"I guess I'd best fetch hlm away from Dickey's before the folks is up an' about," said Sten slowly. "I don't think Marmedook ever acted so foolish before, an' if we could keep it quiet——"

But that proved impossible. A garbled account of the affair was promptly sent to the *Haverstock Sentry*, and we of Willow Point hid our diminlshed heads for many a day when the words "surprise party" were mentioned.

CHAPTER XVI

OUR ROUGH DIAMOND

A FEW weeks after Celia's departure I received a letter from her, describing in enthusiastic terms her life in Toronto, and begging me to come up to hear her play at a great concert to be given in the pavilion of the Horticultural Gardens for the benefit of a certain charity. She concluded with a few words, asserting her conviction that now she must succeed ; but they lacked the calm note of real certainty, and, reading between the lines, I knew that the poor girl must have passed very recently through another agonizing period of doubt as to her vocation and her powers.

If it had not been for those last sentences I should have stayed at home. As it was, I resolved to accept a long-standing invitation from some dear old friends in the city, but I was unable to get off till the last train, and even that I nearly missed. Roger flung me and my baggage on board the rear-end platform of the last car as the train was beginning to move out of the station, and I had much ado to find a seat.

I was toiling slowly along the aisle, loaded with all my belongings, like the inexperienced traveller I was, when some one bustled up behind me and snatched my bag and umbrella from my grasp, exclaiming, "Well, Mrs. Dale, if this ain't a pleasant surprise. Let me fetch yer things to a seat."

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I turned to meet the friendly eyes of Sten Pepler, and to wonder at his resplendent new necktie, which displayed as many colours as Joseph's coat.

"So you's goin' up to T'rorter, too, to the concert," he cried, in a voice pitched even higher than usual to overcome the opposing clangour of the train. "Did Celia tell you as how she'd sent me a ticket, an' paid my return fare? I tell you, I'm feelin' as grand as one o' them railway magnets that gits checked through free everywhere. My, but Celia's a good-hearted gel, ain't she?"

By this time we had found a seat, and my companion, suddenly dropping his voice to a stage-whisper, continued—

"She's that grateful to us all for the bit o' help we've bin to her it makes me fair ashamed. When she fust writ to me to go up, I doubted that it might hurt her wi' them artis's an' musicians to hev a rough-lookin' old chap like me a-hangin' around her familiar-like, an' I made excuses. Next thing I see is another letter from Celia. 'Uncle Sten, you must come,' says she, an' she wraps the two tickets up in her letter. 'How will I ever play the "Hungry Peasant's Dance" wi'out a sight of your dear face to inspire me?' Mrs. Dale, them was her very words, an' how could I say 'no' after that? Well, I didn't say it, but I'm goin' to be a little distant-like with her, an' not let on to those reportin' newspaper fellers that I'm her old Uncle Sten. I'm a practisin', in my own mind, caliin' her Miss Garnett, fur I wouldn't injure her prospecks not fur old Mosely's bank account."

"Believe me, Mr. Pepler, if Celia's prospects could be injured by people's knowing how good you have been to her, they would not be worth much. You will grieve Celia if you are distant with her, you will indeed."

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Pepler shook his head. "All the world ain't so sensible as you an' Mr. Dale, ma'am. There is folk what think no good can't come out of a little old farmhouse. They fancy artis's, as Celia calls 'em, should be raised in the lap of luxury, with nice-fittin' clothes an' hands like flour or new milk. I'm in the same occard fix about Alick, ma'am. There's his prospects to be considered too. You see it ain't all bliss an' plain sailin' to be the parent an' guardian o' two sich extraordinary young hopefuls as these 'ere o' mine."

"Take care, Mr. Pepler, or you'll turn their heads."

"Their heads is both pretty level, thank goodness!" replied Sten, with conviction. "I ain't got no fears on that score, but what troubles me is I don't want to hurt them one mite in any way, if I can help it. I was never down to T'ronter but oncet in my life; an' then I kep' mostly down town, for I wasn't thinkin' in them days that I'd ever hev a boy a-thinkin' o' becomin' a professor. Now I'd love to see the college, an' Queen's Park, an' this 'ere Campus he talks of, but I wouldn't like him to feel that his old father were disgracin' him, wi' his country ways. I know, time gone by, Ruth's folks used to wonder how she could a brung herself to marry sich 'a rough di'mond'—that's what they call me in derision-like. But Ruth she got mad wi' 'em; an' she up an' said she'd sooner marry a rough di'mond, by a long chalk, than a whited sepulchre, an' so the affair come off."

"But I hev wondered, now an' again, whether she mightn't a had a easier time, if she'd tuk to the feller she called the whited sepulchre. He didn't fix hisself on a weedy farm. He started a hardware fact'ry down to Galt, an' got rich, an' then he mixed hisself up with politics an' got hand an' glove with all them fellers that has the givin' away o' things up to Ottawa. Now he's a

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senator, drawing his two or three thousand a year, jest as easy as if he'd fell heir to it like them English lords Churchill talks of.

"Ain't it cur'ous to look back an' see the chances one's jest missed in life? There's Ruth, you see, if she'd tuk him instead o' me, she'd a bin ridin' round in her carriage, an' she'd a hed a big house, an' two or three hired gels to do her work fur her. Yes, she'd a had a soft snap an' no mistake. Maybe it would a bin set down in the papers, how Mrs. Senator Graf—well, maybe Ruth 'ud rather I didn't tell you his name—had had a 'At-home,' an' had bin receivin' of her gues's in a black lace gown over white satin, an' how the tea-table had bin decorated tasteful wi' yaller roses an' ferns."

I had often wondered at Sten's keen interest in the "Society Column" of our little local newspaper, and now I felt that I had a clue to the mystery.

"Sometimes," he continued dreamily, "I can a'most see Ruth fixed up as fine as a fiddle, an' it gives me a feelin' that I've bin standin' in her light an' the children's—all these years. But then—that's my on'y comfort, an' I guess it's hers too—though we've had little to do on it's all come to us honest an' fair an' square, whereas if she had married his worship the senator, she'd a bin as bad off (if all tales is true) as poor Mrs. Dickey, dressin' in silks an' satins, an' livin' on the fat o' the land, an' wonderin' all the time whose pockets her husband had been a-dippin' in to get it."

Roger says I'm always ready to improve the occasion, but this time, though I longed to point out to Mr. Pepler that he might, without robbing any one, provide more liberally for his own household, I could not think of a delicate way of putting the thing till he had wandered to another branch of the subject.

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"To go back to where I started," he continued, "I don't mean to do nothin' to put a stumbling-block in Allick's way an' prevent him climbin' a bit higher than his old father, so maybe I'd best not go foolin' amongst his classmates. We didn't write to tell him I was comin' a purpose; an' I guess I'll jest leave a couple o' baskets bis ma's sendin' him at his room, when he's away at his lectures, an' then after the concert I'll put straight fur home. There's a train at twelve-forty, so I'll be up home in time to help wi' the milkin'. Yes, I'm certain that's the best way."

"Alick will be angry if you do any such thing." I protested.

"Course he will, ma'am; but old heads don't grow on young shoulders, an' he don't see the bearin's yet o' the cut o' yer clothes, an' this 'ere grammar business—as he will when he blooms out inter a perffessor. You know, ma'am," and Pepler's face fairly beamed, "I'm lookin' to that boy to make up to his ma what she's lost by me. The chance o' her bein' Mrs. Senator up to Ottawa has went by years ago, an' maybe she wouldn't a cared much fur the life neither; but, if all turns out right, she's bound to be a perffessor's mother, afore very long too. When Alick gits inter his own house, I'm tbinkin' that the fust person he'll hev to stay wi' him is his ma. I tell you, when that comes to pass, she'll hev the time of her life, reel congenial society, an' Alick's li'bry, an' the perffessor hisself! No, Mrs. Dale, I can't run the smallest risk o' spilin' that. I'll keep clear o' Alick this trip anyways."

Yet that evening, when I took my seat in the concert hall, whom should I see in the opposite gallery but Sten, side by side with his son Alick? Nor was t'his all. On either side of them was a knot of young men, evidently

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"college boys," and all keenly interested in the eager talk of their chum's father. So much for Sten's good intentions, I thought; but I learned afterwards that, as often happened, Pepler had been the victim of accidents.

It seemed that he had wandered out of the station, laden with his two heavy market baskets, and had sauntered slowly along the crowded streets, to give his son plenty of time to get away to the college. I could imagine how he must have stopped to stare in the shop windows, and to gaze up at the buildings which (even in those days, long before Toronto had been seized with its present objectionable passion for sky-scrapers) seemed very towers of Babel to country-bred Sten. He wandered thus for two hours or more, and finally lost himself. It was astonishing, however, "a'most mirac'lous," as Sten told me later, that he should "find hisself again in Alick's very street." Thinking that by this time the lad would surely be at his lecture, he decided to get rid of his heavy baskets, and was marching boldly up to No. 7, when the door opened and Alick himself appeared on the steps. Still bent on carrying out his programme, Sten made a dash for cover. He tried to hide in one of those little lanes devoted to the dustman, but it was too late. Alick had seen him, and by a masterly manoeuvre at once cut off his retreat, captured the provision train, and forced the enemy to surrender at discretion.

"Yes, I miscal'lated," owned Sten, with a beaming face, "but I don't mind confessin' that if it was all to do over, I'd be tuk captive again graceful. Alick were so delighted to see his old dad, it fair did one's heart good to see him. He has a room at the top o' the house, fixed up jest lovely fur amatoor housekeepin'. Why, I hadn't bin in his student's chair five minutes, afore he'd

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got a kettle a-heatin' on a little ile stove, an' were rum-magin' in them baskets to see what there were good to eat. My, but I was hungry, an' we did walk inter that cake o' Mary's while Alick was a-fryin' the pork. Well, arter I had rested a bit, he tuk me all over the 'Varsity and round the Campus an' everythin', an' he made me vow I'd come an' sleep in his bed all night. Then he c'lected a lot o' his chums, an' we went down to the concert; an' you know the rest."

During the concert my attention was divided between the performers and that group in the gallery. Their applause was generous from first to last, and when Celia, clad in the creamy gown, appeared upon the stage, it became positively vociferous. As for Sten, he outdid the noisiest boy in the audience, astonishing the house with oft-repeated and untimely cries of "On-core, on-core!"

Celia waited, with her head well up and a smile upon her lips, just as Pepler had fancied she would stand. Then when silence was restored, she struck gaily into Sten's favourite "Hungarian Peasant's Dance," whilst Pepler, almost beside himself with delight, kept time to the music with hand and foot and head.

Four times she played in all, and each time her friends in the gallery clapped rapturous applause. But—I suppose I was nervous—I could not help wondering what the rest of the audience thought of it all. What of Celia? What of her playing?

I believe Celia herself was satisfied. As Sten and Alick and I lingered chatting in the gallery, she sent a message, asking us to come down to her. Sten walked like one treading on air, and in the joy of his heart quite forgot to keep his distance. But it did not matter. Nothing mattered to Celia that night. Her old teacher,

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not too ready with words of praise, had warmly congratulated her on her "masterly rendering" of a difficult passage; and she fancied fame and fortune won.

Alick, knowing nothing of the magnitude of her achievement, had, like myself, been anxiously watching the audience, and somehow his face confirmed my own fears.

My friend kindly asked us all to supper, and Celia and Sten kept us amused and lively. With us went one of Alick's special chums, a boy who had been charmed by Celia and her music; and he poured into her ear the adulation for which she was longing.

Pepler went home next morning, to spread everywhere in our little circle the fame of his adopted daughter. A flaming account of the concert appeared in the *Sentry*, accompanied by a brief sketch of the history of the young violinist, and by somewhat extravagant predictions as to the future before her, and, when I returned to Willow Point a week later, I found the whole community still all agog with excitement over poor Celia and her doings.

The Possessor smiled a little superciliously over the affair. "In this great, or rather big, country of yours," he said one day at the church door, "all the geese are swans, any one who attempts to do his duty is a hero, and all the people of talent are geniuses. In England we don't talk in that way. There is nothing a true Englishman hates worse than bragging. 'Moderation in all things' is our motto."

"Even at surprise parties," put in Ida, hotly, seizing any weapon which came to hand to inflict a blow on the detractor of her absent sister.

Marmaduke bit his lip and turned away with reddening cheeks.

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"Come, come, Ida, that was ungenerous," whispered Roger.

"I don't care, sir. He has no right to belittle Celia behind her back. If he were not so dreadfully conceited, I would not have said that; but he deserved it. If he wants to say nasty things about Celia, he had better go somewhere else—that's all."

"Was Celia's performance anything so very wonderful, Nell?" asked Roger, on the way home.

"I really don't know," I was fain to admit. "I doubt if any one but Sten thought so. Oh, Roger, I shall never forgive myself if I have made that poor girl fancy herself a genius, and it proves to be all a mistake. I wish, I wish I had never encouraged her to go on with her music. I doubt she is not going to be a brilliant success; but now she is set on giving up everything else and going to Germany."

"If you are sure that she will not succeed, tell her the truth," counselled Roger. "It will be the truest kindness in the end."

"But I am sure of nothing," I lamented. "Sten may be right after all. She can touch his heart, at any rate, and her old master says she is his most brilliant pupil. I don't want to make a second mistake. I am not infallible, but——"

"What is it in her playing that seems wrong to you?"

"It's in this way, Roger—Celia can play the most beautiful things quite correctly, but doesn't seem to put any more of herself into them than if she were a machine."

"Of course I know nothing of music," replied Roger, "but what can you expect? Celia is a mere child, and a very self-centred one, who has sbut herself up as far

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as possible from all the deep joys and sorrows of this great world. You cannot force water to rise above its source ; and why should you expect even a genius—if the girl is one—to express emotions she has never felt ?”

I thought of the wonderful child-players of whom I had read—some much younger than Celia—and I was but half satisfied.

CHAPTER XVII

THE FAIR MAID OF THE INN

I NOW come again to a time about which my memory plays me false, at least with regard to most events outside my little innermost home circle. The two or three years following my brief visit to Toronto appear to have been very selfish, egotistical years, full of toil and worry and anxiety.

A few days after the birth of his twin sisters, Tommy, my bright, merry, little Tommy, fell ill of a painful and dangerous disease. For months the child suffered, and he was hardly on the high road to recovery, when Roger, worn out with hard work and anxiety, fell ill too. For weeks I feared that he would be forced to give up his charge.

The people were very good to us in those days of sorrow—that I shall never forget. The Dickeyes loaded us with kindnesses. The Peplers came, night after night, to help to watch beside my invalids; and there was scarcely one of my husband's many parishioners who did not come at times to inquire after him, to bring him flowers, or to give me advice.

It was long before Roger sufficiently recovered to take even part of his work, and for fully six months we had to get students, or superannuated men, or lay readers to take charge of the Sunday services. Of

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course, they could not begin to fill his place in the parish, and Roger, at the height of his illness, was tortured with thoughts of his neglected duties. It was useless to assure him that the sick were being visited, that the Sunday School was keeping up, that the "Ladies' Aid" was more active than ever—he still fancied that he ought to be at the helm. When his doctor allowed him to go out we all counselled moderation; but Roger flung himself into his work in a kind of nervous fury, and within a few months was ill again. Still, the congregation would not hear of his resigning; but at last we arranged for a year's holiday, which, thanks to the kindness of a dear old friend, we were able to spend in England.

This restored Roger's health in a great measure, though he has never since been quite so strong as he was before his illness, nor quite so well able perhaps to bear with equanimity the little worries of life.

During the years of which I have been writing there were, of course, many changes amongst our people, but it was not till our return from England (about eight years after my first landing in Canada) that I realized how busy Father Time had been.

Ida, for instance, had crossed the line between childhood and womanhood; and the gossips, at the corner shop and at many a little tea-party of welcome to us, whispered that Torrance Dickey was reaping an abundant harvest for his generous care of the orphan. They declared that Ida's grace and vivacity drew many a guest to the hotel; and our good old women shook their heads over the girl's free-and-easy ways. They talked of her extravagance, her love of amusement, her unwillingness to take advice. They told how she danced with this man, went driving with another, and

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sang duets with a third. They even called her a flirt and bold ; and I felt as if, like Rip Van Winkle, I must have been asleep for years, were this indeed a fair portrait of the child Ida I had known.

The gossips (to whom it really seems an impossible feat to turn, as Roger urges, a deaf ear) told too how Torrance Dickey was getting worse and worse, how his poor wife was fast breaking down in body and mind, and was leaving everything to Ida's management. Alas, when the Dickeys greeted us coming out of church on the Sunday after our return, I could see there was some truth in this tale at least. Torrance had grown redder and stouter, more blustering, and more ready to break into noisy, unmeaning laughter, whilst his wife was greyer, feehler and even quieter than of old. As they stood opposite us, arm-in-arm, with the warm afternoon sunshine streaming down upon them, the contrast between the pair startled me. It suggested to me the fancy that a coarse, high-coloured "chromo" and a dainty, faded old water-colour of our grandmothers' days had escaped from their frames and gone exploring in company. But, when Ida joined them, the group suddenly lost its resemblance to anything so still as pictures. Her vivid, overflowing life, her youthful gaiety brought me back forcibly to the present and its anxieties, though the unaffected cordiality of her greetings went far to assure me that the gossips misjudged her. It was a pretty sight in its way to see her take her adopted father's arm and smile up at him without the least sign of repulsion. It seemed to me that in the light of her love his bloated face was for the moment transfigured, and, as the trio sauntered homeward through the village, I scarcely knew whether to smile or to sigh.

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"Ida's growed inter a fine handsome gel," murmured Sten at my ear. "Ay, an' she's a fine gel in many ways beside looks. Why should folk blame her that the young men are tuk with her pretty face an' her saucy little ways? She jest puts me in mind, ma'am, o' the lady you used to tell Tommy about, 'Wi' rings on her fingers an' bells on her toes, She shall hev music wherever she goes.' I am sorry, though, I do allow, that her light's set jest where it draws all them silly young moths o' lads to singe their wings round Torrance's sperit lamps. Yes, Ida's too good fur that there 'River House.' What 'ud her poor father a thought, if he'd knowed all, I wonder?"

"It's a shame," I said hotly; "the Dickeys should not let such things be."

"Well, I've expostulated wi' Torrance twice since you went away, but 'tain't no use. He vowed he didn't want to make no profits out o' her whatsomedever. But she's the apple of his eye, an' he can't bring hisself to part with her; an' then Ida, on her side, she can't bear to be mewed up. Oh, it's reelly what folks call a problum."

"It's a problem I foresaw years ago," said Roger, gloomily. "It is impossible now for us to persuade Ida to leave them."

Sten nodded. She won't leave 'em fur a week, now that Mrs. Dickey is so broke down. She's a downright good, consid'rate gel to 'em, an' I tell you, Dickey's makin' a good thing out o' the 'River House' now. He hes all the old business, puttin' up teams an' trav'lers, an' givin' meals to Haverstock folks what want a nice drive, an' this last summer he's struck out a new line. The 'Mericans from down south hes discovered that they can't find no cooler or better place to spend a

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few hot days in than Dickey's hotel. They go out fishin' an' boatin'. (It was Ida's notion that Torrance should build a boathouse, an' set up—'Boats to let,' an' I tell you hot nights an' holidays he does a roarin' trade.) Anyway, altogether Ida's goin', I do believe, to be a reg'lar million-heiress, fur Dickey's makin' money hand over fist, an' he's give out it'll all go to his o'ny adopted daughter."

I doubt if to the very end Sten (teetotaller though he was) quite sympathized with our views as to the objectionableness of Dickey's way of making money.

"Dear, dear, it's a pity," he murmured, during which he had evidently been occupied with the contemplation of Ida's future splendours, "that liquor do hev sich a effeck on folk, fur it's a mighty good busness fur the hotel men. I was jest tryin' to figure up one day how many years it 'ud take me to make off of my farm what Dickey gets in a twelvemonth. I reckon the 'River House' is the flourishn'est consarn fur six good miles round Willow Point."

"Ah, but, Sten, that's only one side of the reckonin'," said Roger, earnestly. "Every drinking place like the 'River House' means rows of wretched, tumbledown cottages like those on Hurd Street. Every fine lady dressed like Ida from the proceeds of the liquor trade, means dozens of dirty, half-naked children. A great, flourishing drinking saloon, bigger than any other house in the place, makes me think of some hideous tumour on a half-starved body, Sten. Don't you begin to regret that you have stuck to your farm instead of trying to get rich by the ruin of other folk, or I shall feel discouraged indeed. I have always counted on you, Sten, to stand for the right and honest thing, whatever it cost."

The Trouble Man

"An', please God, I will, sir ; if you'll on'y tell me what to do."

"By-and-by, Sten. There'll soon be work for us all, for in one way or another— whoever is hurt— this accursed thing must be put down in our own village at least."

It was very cowardly of me, but I shrank from the trouble foreshadowed by Roger's words. When Sten had left us, I even went so far as to protest against my husband's doing anything rash. "Let us try to educate public opinion, Roger," I said. "There is the Band of Hope, and we might have an occasional temperance lecture in the Hall."

"Both excellent in their way, my dear ; but public opinion needs awakening before we can do much towards educating it."

"How are you planning to do the awakening ?" I asked, in trepidation.

"We must think the matter over seriously, Nell. I had not realized till I came back to our little village how this horrible traffic is threatening even us with ruin."

We were both silent for a few minutes, then Roger broke forth afresh, with a kind of passion in his voice. "Nell, I can never forgive myself. I have played the coward over this thing. I knew well enough, long before you came to Willow Point, that I was shirking my duty, but I hated to create a disturbance, and all these years I have tried to believe that quiet, gentle protests would suffice to gain the victory. Perhaps— who knows?—if I had dealt honestly with Dickey himself when Ida first went there, he might have given up the hotel. At any rate, he was no such sot then as he is now, and I behaved like a coward. I deserve to make a failure of my life."

The Fair Maid of the Inn

"You have not made a failure of it, Roger."

"Look at Sten," he continued, speaking in the nervous, hurried fashion that always made me anxious for him. "Even poor old Sten is dazzled by Dickey's wealth, and what effect may it not have on our young lads, who are just growing up and beginning to think of earning a living?"

"Poor old Sten!" I repeated. "I don't believe his two daughters would stand much chance of being million-heiresses, as he calls them, even if he did take to running a public-house. It might be a good move in the cause of temperance, Roger, to set him up in the hotel-business. Things do go 'so contrary-like' with Sten."

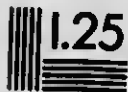
"Don't laugh, Neil. Mosey told me to-day that your old friend Marmaduke spends half of his time at Dickey's. He is danging after Ida, they say, but he is far too thick with Torrance himself. I asked Sten if it was true, and he said, 'Yes, it's altogether too true.' Well, I'm wondering is it possible that you could get hold of Ida in any way?"

"I don't know that I understand Ida," I answered, "but I'll try."



MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)



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CHAPTER XVIII

A GREAT REFUSAL

I SAT for a long time that Sunday evening by the little white cots where my small daughters were sleeping, thinking sorrowfully of the two orphan wards of our parish. The perils which beset poor little Ida's path were patent, it seemed, to all observers, and from the little I had heard of Celia during these late years I had no reason to suppose that her lot was either happier or safer than her sister's. She had spent two years in Toronto, gaining knowledge, and, I suppose, some little reputation. After that she had contrived (I did not then know how) to fulfil her long-cherished scheme of going to Germany. I guessed that her friends at Willow Point must have helped her, but it was not till years afterwards that I knew anything definite.

Perhaps I may well write as here what I do know now of this episode in Celia's history. During those two years in Toronto she had struggled and toiled and nearly starved herself in the effort to gather together a sufficient sum with which to make her journey to the land of her desires. Torrance Dickey's frequent presents had done much to swell her little hoard, and at length she decided that in the coming midsummer she would make the venture.

It was then springtime. The examinations at the

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University were almost over, and it was Alick's last Sunday of his third student-year in Toronto. It was an understood thing, it appears, that on Sundays and holidays he should be at Celia's service, and of course this last Sunday was no exception to the rule. It was a lovely afternoon, and they wandered slowly along one of the beautiful ravines of Rosedale, yet to say truth they were both so preoccupied that they were hardly conscious of the wonders Dame Nature was working all about them. Celia, indeed, was as gay as the twittering birds, but, unlike theirs, her joyous mood sprang, not from present sunshine, but from elation over vanquished difficulties, from anticipation of future triumphs. She talked vaguely but eagerly of her great enterprise, whilst Alick walked beside her silent and distrait. Poor lad, he carried with him a cloud of trouble on that glad spring day.

The thought of parting with Celia was enough in itself to darken the sunshine for him, but another sorrow threatened to overwhelm him and his nearest and dearest. Only the night before, he had heard from his sister Mary that their mother had had a sudden nervous breakdown, and that the doctor declared that the only hope for her recovery lay in complete and immediate rest and change of scene. "Without proper treatment she would be a wreck for life," was the report; and Alick had lain awake all night, trying to evolve some plan of instantly refilling his empty purse. To save his mother's reason, perhaps, if not her life, no sacrifice was too great, but it was long before he could think of any plan which promised the attainment of his end, and, when an inspiration did come, he shrank in dismay from acting on it.

That morning, before daylight, he had tramped the

The Trouble Man

deserted streets for hours, hoping to see another way of help for his unhappy mother, but no other way of speedy aid had made itself visible to him, and now, as he marched grimly at Celia's side, he steeled himself to do the thing he hated.

Suddenly, in the quiet ravine, when the girl rallied him on his woe-begone appearance, he poured out the story of his trouble. He made no doubt that to tell it to Celia was the most that would be necessary. He judged her by himself, and fancied that she would be eager in this emergency to offer help. Alas, Celia never even thought of doing so.

"I am sorry," she murmured. "Poor Aunt Ruth! why didn't Mary make her take more care of herself?" That was all.

Alick waited till he was sure that she had not understood the gravity of the case, then he continued, "The doctors say she must go away from home for treatment, and at once, but it is hard to see how we are going to raise the money for it. Those places are awfully expensive."

"Perhaps the doctors are wrong," said Celia. "I wonder if it wouldn't do for Mary to take her to visit her old friend in London for two or three weeks instead?"

"We dare not run the risk," said Alick.

There was a long silence, which Celia broke at last by saying, as she laid her hand gently on her companion's arm, "Poor Alick, it is hard for you!"

"Celia," he cried out, "won't you help us?"

"I?" exclaimed the girl, in utter amazement. "What could I do?"

"Lend us the money, Celia, to send mother away. We will surely pay it back in the fall."

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"I can't, Alick ; I am sorry, but I really can't."

Alick turned and faced her, looking into her eyes. "Celia, if I could see any other way, I would not ask you," he said desperately. "Mary says that mother sits for hours without speaking or moving. They can't rouse her at all, and if it goes on, she may never be herself again. We must do something, and at once. Will you not help us just for these three or four months?"

Celia says that that day her heart seemed turned to stone. A very demon of remorseless ambition seemed to have possessed her, and even there in the glad sweet sunshine, with the sorrowful eyes of her young lover trying to read her very soul, nothing in all the wide world appeared to be of value but success.

"I can't, Alick, I can't," she repeated. "I am going to Germany before the end of June, and shall need every cent I have been able to save."

It seemed to the lad that she did not yet understand the terrible urgency of the case ; and he made one more appeal. "Celia, it may be a matter of life and death to mother. Will you not, for her sake, put off your journey for a few weeks?" He added haltingly some reminder of the debt of kindness which Celia owed to the poor invalid, and though at that moment it appeared to fail utterly of effect, it fastened itself for years like a poisoned arrow in the girl's memory.

"I never thought, Alick, that you would be the one to cast up at me my dependent position," she cried hotly. "You shall all be paid every cent that I have had from you. But these dreadful debts make it all the more necessary that I should go at once to where I can earn something worth having. I will pay you all, principal and interest, at the earliest possible moment. Do not fear."

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"The money is nothing," murmured Alick, but his white, strained-looking face hardened as he gazed into Celia's eyes, for he was slowly beginning to believe that the girl to whom he had given his boyish love was cruel and selfish and unworthy; and there mingled with his desire to win aid for his mother a fierce determination to learn the truth, welcome or unwelcome, about his love. "The money in itself is nothing," he repeated; "a little loan now would pay back all, and more. We shall indeed be grateful to you all our lives, Celia, if only you will help us to save mother."

"Can't Uncle Sten borrow the money in Haverstock?"

"No one will lend it just now," answered Alick.

"It is very, very hard, after all my work!" sobbed Celia.

Alick thought she was giving way, and, urged by his overwhelming anxiety for "the best mother a fellow ever had," he again entreated Celia to come to the rescue.

"Don't, Alick!" she protested. "Let me think it all out. Leave me alone for ten minutes."

Alick left her, disappearing from view beneath one of the great bridges that span the ravine, but Celia found calm, collected thought impossible. It was like some horrible nightmare. Her mind, her senses seemed to be in the grip of some dreadful power, which was showing her the kingdoms of this world and the glory of them, even while it haunted her with visions of poor Mrs. Pepler, weeping, suffering, dead, and of herself as a lonely, loveless, unloved woman. Worst of all, it took away the will to make her escape from this impending doom, and when Alick came back to her she did not wait for him to speak, but flung out

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her final refusal hurriedly and angrily. "No, Alick, I cannot do it. I have made my arrangements, and must go on. If you go about it wisely you can surely get the money from some one else. It would ruin my plans for life, and I don't think you ought to have asked it."

Alick looked at her gravely and sorrowfully, but could not trust himself to speak. Without one word of farewell, he raised his hat and left her, striding down the road as if he were pursued by some terror.

Celia watched him pass out of sight, feeling all the while a horror of the vile, ungrateful creature she must seem to him; and then she went slowly home. She could not sleep that night for thinking of Mrs. Pepler, weeping in black, overwhelming misery, and of Alick, whose good opinion she had thrown away for ever. But still she had no notion of turning back. She only vowed proudly that she would make the Peplers rich, when she had won her own in the musical world.

She did not come back to Willow Point even for a night before setting out on her adventurous pilgrimage in search of skill and fame and fortune. She wrote to me, begging for news, but for weeks I had little of interest to report except the melancholy bulletins as to Mrs. Pepler's health. At last I was able to tell her that Alick, after many vain attempts to raise the necessary money to send his mother away, had succeeded in persuading Mr. Johnson of the mills to lend it to him on a short note at heavy interest. Then began a slow improvement in Mrs. Pepler's condition, and finally she returned home completely herself again. Upon this Celia wrote me a long, incoherent, affectionate letter, heaping upon herself reproaches, which for years were utterly incomprehensible to me.

At that time, Celia never told me in her letters

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what she was doing ; it was always what she hoped and meant to do, so I judged that the day of harvest with her was not yet.

Alick also wrote occasionally, but after Celia went to Germany he never mentioned her name, and I really hoped that at last he was forgetting her. He had in truth many other matters to think of. In due time he graduated with high honours ; and the prospect of a brilliant career opened before him. During his last term at college he made the acquaintance of an eminent British geologist, who engaged him to assist (I do not know in what capacity) in the preparation of a monumental work on *North American Fossils*. That took Alick into the heart of the wilds, and for weeks together he led a simple, lonely life of unregarded hardships and fascinating toil.

The people of Willow Point held various curious notions concerning the nature of his employment ; all they clearly understood was that the young man had brought honour upon his native place. Alick Pepler, B.A., was already a great man in their eyes, and, considering that most of the items of interest with regard to him reached his old neighbours through the medium of his father's active but inaccurate mind, it was not surprising that the boy was credited with many things that he had never done, and with not a few that no one could have done. However, when we of Willow Point do decide that one of our number is worthy of honour, we pay our tribute in a large, lordly, unmeasured way, and, if outsiders take our word for it, our village must soon become a little Mecca. When Alick Pepler actually gains the eminence upon which, directly he had taken his degree, his father saw him with the eye of faith and imagination, I suppose one of our most notable

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shrines will be the factory built upon the strong stone foundation of our young scientist's patient gathering.

Soon after our return home, Roger and I were driving to Haverstock, when, from a little slope, commanding a somewhat extensive view of the dusty road and of Johnson's Mills, I noticed that Alick's stone-pile still stood untouched beside the road. As we drew nearer, we perceived a figure mounted on the pile, looking like a statuette stuck on a pedestal designed for some Colossus. It was Sten, "hugging himself," as Roger said, on his son's success.

He greeted us in his usual eager fashion, and as he mounted behind us, at Roger's invitation, in some mysterious fashion on the axle-tree of our buggy, he burst into an exposition of the cause of his very evident delight.

"That there stone-pile does me good to look at," he exclaimed. "It was Alick's first chance, as one may say, an' see him now. It's the curiousest thing! It's like as if his whole fortin' was to build itself out o' stones, ain't it now? Fust there was the lucky-stones that gave him his turn fur scientifics; then there was these landstones, an' now it's stones again, ain't it, Mr. Dale? fur, by the look of 'em, fossils is stones, clear enough?"

"I suppose so; but, Sten, Alick's stone-pile didn't build itself," protested Roger, with a laugh. "Don't be too modest, even if he is your own son. You should always give honour where honour is due."

"Oh, 'tain't but what I think the lad done well; but, as I stood a-top o' that pile this mornin', it come to me this way—how was it that old Johnson should a bin tuk six years ago wi' a kind o' thirst fur them stones—thirty cord of 'em, mind you!—an' yet never hev used

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'em to this day? Well, to my thinkin', it was clear providential. We hadn't nothin' to sell jest then 'cept stones, an' though there was a plenty o' them to build a town, if we hadn't knowed jest where to put 'em we might a peddled 'em around fur months an' never a comed acrost the man what wanted 'em. There ain't many folk like old Johnson, what cares to keep land-stones in stock, as you may say. For my private belief is that, if he'd on'y knowed it, he didn't want 'em no more than I did, but then Alick he wanted the money in the worst way; an' that's what I call providential. Without beginnin' to know what he were doin', Johnson give Alick an' Celia a fine start in life, but if he had known, you may bet yer boots, ma'am, that he'd a said, 'No, he warn't goin' to lay out his money for five or six years, not to make twenty pefessors.' That's the beauty of it all. If he'd on'y bin as foreseein' as he thinks hisself, he'd a kep' that hundred an' twenty dollars tight in the bank, Alick wouldn't a got the start he has, and them stones 'ud a bin blockin' up my fence-corners 'stead of makin' a moniment o' theirselves in Johnson's driveway an' incommodin' every team that comes to the mills. Ain't it mighty interestin', ma'am, as one gits up in life jest to look back now an' again, an' see the twists an' turns one's tuk, an' how one's got switched off of one's chosen track to suthin' tee-totally different?"

Sten continued to moralize over our shoulders for the next half-mile, and his queer views of things started in my mind a whole train of reflections on the all-surrounding mysteries of life; but I was wary nowadays how I entered on difficult discussions with my husband's parishioners, especially, perhaps, in such cases as this, when my remarks would have to run the gauntlet of the said

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husband's criticisms. As we jolted over the stones, Roger's whole attention appeared to be devoted to his horse, so it fell to me to give Sten the little encouragement necessary to keep the conversation going.

"I thought Alick always meant to be a geologist from the time that he found those old thunder-stones," I said, as a protest against the conclusion towards which Sten appeared to be drifting—that the inevitable lot of man was disappointment.

"Well, yes, so he hes, ma'am. Alick's one o' the lucky ones o' the earth. He scarcely ever sets himself to do anythin' but what he gits through; while I mostly hes to double on my tracks afore I've well started. Now I set out same as Alick—thinkin' o' college, on'y doctorin' was to be my line, but d'ye s'pose I ever see the inside o' a lecture-room till I went a-visitin' Alick? Not much. Another thing I've had on my mind to do since my place comed to me from my father was to build a reel nice improved bank barn, with stablin' fur six hosses an' twelve cows—but is that there barn's foundations dug yet? No, sir; an' won't be till I gits a slice o' Alick's luck. By the way, Mr. Dale—I've bin wantin' to arst you many a time—do you believe that there's anythin' in the way of luck—in the day one's born on?"

"Honestly, Sten, I don't think there is. I thought that old superstition was quite exploded."

"Well, but it do seem to come out right pretty cften too," said Pepler. "Look at this 'ere fam'ly o' curs. There's Alick, he's a Sunday's bairn sure enough, 'happy an' lucky, an' wise an' gay,' but there's me, I struck inter this 'ere old world on a Saturday, an' if I haven't had to work hard fur every bit o' my livin'—well, I'd like to see who has. To my thinkin', there's more in luck than some of us likes to allow. Fac', I've seen it over an' over."

The 'Trouble Man

Some folk is always strikin' snags an' gittin' hard hit, an' others they takes to life as easy as a duck takes to swimmin'. Now that there Marmedook—fur all his grand relations—he's one o' the onluckiest wratches ever I see."

"Tell me about Marmaduke," I said. "I have not seen him to speak to since we came back, and I want to hear all about him."

He had stayed with the Peplers two whole years, and had worked so surprisngly well with his master that, on his departure, Sten's parti-coloured fields had borne less resemblance to a huge rag-carpet than ever before. After leaving Willow Point, Churchill had gone to try his fortune in the West, and had tossed about from place to place till we lost sight of him. Now Mr. Pepler took up his history, where, as far as our knowledge of him was concerned, it had broken off.

"Well, after makin' a rollin' stone of hisself round Winnipeg an' Battleford and them places, he tuk a notion to work his passage home to England on a cattle ship, an' while he was there a old godfather o' his fell ill an' died, an' left him fifteen hundred pound. He knowed that money had a trick o' slippin' through his fingers, so what should he do but put fur Canada again, an' arst me to look out a farm fur him. I started right in at oncet, but afore I could do nothin' he'd bought the Boswell Place up beyond us, on the other side o' the Creek. It had bin rented fur ten year anyway, an' it's seceded down as bad as my place with everythin' that hadn't oughter grow on a farm."

"I was sorry when I heard that he had taken that place," said Roger.

"So were I," said Sten. "'Marmedook,' says I, 'after all I've teached you, you had oughter hev knowed better. Look at me,' says I, 'an' be sorry fur yerself. Between

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weeds an' stones an' tumble-down bulldn's, it 'ud be a contract fur the Minister o' Agriculture hisself to make a livin' off of that place ; an' I reelly don't see what a young hand like yerself can expect. It's like dippin' up water wi' a leaky pail. I've tried it, an' I know. You may slave from dawn to dark, an' get no forrarder.' 'Oh,' says he, a-laughin' in his noisy way, 'I guess I've got a mission to go around cleanin' up dirty farms. Gi'e me a year or two, an' you won't know it fur the same old place.' 'Twenty year won't clean it,' says I ; 'if there's anythin' in this 'ere world that dies hard it's mustard an' lies, an' thistles runs 'em pretty close, Dook !' But fur all I could say he carried on as gay as a chipmunk in the spring. Fust he started fur to whistle 'We won't go home till mornin',' then he burst out, 'Do yer expect an Englishman to own hisself beaten afore the guns begin, Mr. Pepler ? No, no, sir ; I'll make a fustrate farm o' that there Boswell place or I'll die in the attempt.' Well, wicet I thought he were goin' to win, fur he worked like a beaver, as the sayin' is ; then about Christmas he tuk to goin' down constant to Dickey's place, an' you know, Mr. Dale, how goin' down to them places takes the grit out o' a man. 'How about them thistles ?' says I, on'y yesterday, when I seen him a-settin' on the stoop down to the hotel. 'Hes they give up a-growin' ?' 'Oh, Mr. Pepler,' says he, a-smilin' round at Ida, 'I'm jest a-findin' out 'that life's too short to spend on grubbin' up noxious weedsees.' Them was his very words, but I do wish, Mrs. Dale, that you an' the parson could git a holt on Marmedook again, fur he always said you was a good sort ; an' I think he feels kind o' friendless down in the bottom of his heart, wi' his owr. folk off in the Old Country an' Ida always a-pokin' fun at 'im. Do try to git a holt on to him, Mrs. Dale."

CHAPTER XIX

THE STORM-WIND

SOMETIMES, even at Willow Point, events moved quickly. Whilst I was laying my plans to gain the influence I had never had over Ida, and to regain my lost influence over her admirer, our little village was suddenly divided into two hostile camps. This time no human being caused the excitement. It was, as Sten said, "a sheer convulsion o' Natur," though not an earthquake, as that phrase might imply. It happened late in September, on one of those belated, sultry, summer days which in Canada sometimes surprise us in the early autumn.

All day the air grew more and more stifling. All day we were shut down under heavy clouds that hid the sun, but scarcely promised anything so refreshing as rain. It was an uncanny day, when the very birds were afraid to chirp, and when sensitive-natured dogs, like our children's pet, Rover, sought uneasy refuge in dark corners. Towards noon the covering over us (whatever it was) became thicker, and as we sat around the dinner-table we had much ado to see each other's faces.

"Forest fires!" suggested those happily-constituted mortals who are never at a loss for an explanation of the weather or anything else. "The Judgment Day!" whispered the superstitious and imaginative. As for me,

The Storm-Wind

the heat and the gloom at this season were something altogether beyond my experience, and I may as well frankly confess that I did not like them.

At last, just before sunset, there came a change. The heavy air began to move. The dust was caught up in whirling pillars. The murky pall that had oppressed us through the midday hours shaped itself into fiercely scudding clouds. The trees creaked and bent like reeds before the blast.

To me, the tempest appeared to be spending its fury on our little low-roofed house. It ripped at the roof and the siding, rattled madly in the outside shutters, screamed through the keyholes, stripped off great boughs from our sheltering trees, yet, when the wind died down and the rain began to fall in sheets and the lightning lit the whole wide sky, we still had a roof and our four walls to shelter us; and I wondered how so frail a structure could have withstood such an onslaught.

But the early morning brought us tidings of disaster, and we found that the parsonage after all had not had to defy the brunt of the hurricane. In the village the storm had played many an ill-natured prank. Two or three sheds had been flung down like card-houses, the roof had been torn from an old woman's cottage, several windows had been blown in, and one of the "River House" willows, the pride of Dickey's heart, had been torn up by the roots. Nor was this all. The chimney of our poor old church had been toppled down upon the ancient roof, and, ripping a great hole in the shingles, had smashed the pews below to matchwood.

I need not say that it was Sten who came out, hot-foot, at dawn, to have the melancholy pleasure of telling the tale of wreck and mishap.

His account was so alarming that we rushed off,

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fasting, to view the ruins. Early as it was, we found a venturesome crowd of men and boys investigating the shattered chimney and speculating on whose heads it would have fallen, if the wind "had struck it in service time." It was curious to note the zest with which these gruesome speculations were pursued. Indeed, St. James's folk were surely getting a measure of enjoyment out of the disaster, as some people do actually "enjoy had health," from the sense of having for once attained distinction.

Our stormy petrel, Sten, waxed positively gleeful, when it was demonstrated beyond a shadow of doubt that "one of them bricks 'ud a ketched him square on the head, if he hadn't jest happened to have hin a-tourin' around collectin' ;" and it was droll to see him rubbing the top of his skull, as if he had actually felt the concussion. However, as we soon realized, there was serious business before us.

Sten, as ever, thrust himself into the forefront of the hattle, and, with much shouting and bustle, took command of a corps of amateur salvage men. Appropriating some rough hoards that the wind had obligingly "fetched into the church-lot," he and his assistants nailed up door and windows, to prevent accidents "to them venturesome boys." Roger, meanwhile, was putting up notices at the station, and in the post office and the general store, calling a meeting of the parishioners for that very evening at our own house.

I spent a busy day preparing for this sudden incursion, and long before the appointed hour (as was the manner at Willow Point) our people began to arrive in force. We had to bring out every chair in the house for their accommodation, and even then we could not provide seats for all. It appeared that the Methodist and Presbyterian

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churches had escaped scot-free, and before the meeting was called to order we were all in a very genial, pleasant, Mark Tapley kind of humour. But I am bound to say that this state of affairs did not last.

Of course, we all agreed that "something must be done at once," but it soon became plain that opinions were deeply divided as to what that something should be. Some of our members were in favour of what one of our wits denounced as "a patch-work policy." Others, declaring that the old building was a disgrace, not only to Willow Point, but to the whole Church of England, advocated completing the work begun by the wind, and tearing the little church down to its foundations.

"It does make one feel so mean," complained Mrs. Rand, "to have to explain to every stranger that the new red-brick church by the river belongs to the Presbyterians, and that the brown frame one with that lovely spire is the Methodist church, and that it's only the old white plaster barn that belongs to us. To my mind it would be really a sin to waste another cent on that tumble-down old building. What we want is a new church from basement to tower, and there is no reason in the world that we shouldn't have it, if we all work together and do what we ought."

"That's fine talkin', Mrs. Rand," grumbled old Mosely. "D'ye know what a new church 'ud cost, ma'am? No? Well, I thought not. I hev'n't had time to go into the thing proper myself, but I can tell you this, ma'am. Lumber an' labour is both up, an' it 'ud cost us thousands o' dollars to put up a new church the size o' the old one. My judgment is that it 'ud be sinful waste to go a-tearin' down that buildin', when it can be made as good as new—jest as good as new—fur a few dollars."

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Mrs. Rand shook her head. "I don't think any one here wastes less than I do, if I do say it myself," she observed, looking sharply round on her neighbours; "but, as the Bible says, there's 'a time to every purpose under heaven,' 'a time to rend—and a time to sew,' 'a time to break down—and a time to build up,' and to my mind the time for fixing and patching has gone by when every other denomination casts it in our teeth that we are either too poor or too mean to do right by our church."

"Mrs. Rand," replied Mosely, with ponderous solemnity, "I wisht you'd jest show me the feller who'd dare to cast such fool nonsense in my teeth. There ain't neither rhyme nor reason in ruinin' ourselves with debt jest fur the say o' the thing."

"For the say of the thing!" Mrs. Rand gave a sniff of contempt. "The say of the thing, indeed! Have you never heard, Mr. Mosely, that old Mrs. Gorman hasn't dared to come to church for two years because of the draughts that work up through every crack in the floor? Do you call that 'the say of the thing'?"

"Why don't she wear thicker shoes, then? No one's feet needs be cold if they only has sense enough inter their heads to keep 'em warm."

"To my thinking," continued Mrs. Rand, in her decisive tones, "it's little better than manslaughter to beguile a poor unsuspecting stranger into that old church of ours, when the thermometer is away down somewhere near zero. I have always heard that dear good Bishop Southwell caught his death of cold, confirming our young people when it was blowing a blizzard through every one of those great staring windows; and that was ten years ago, long before the plaster cracked to pieces on the west wall."

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"Now, Mrs. Rand, don't you go fur to say we killed the bishop," protested Mosely, in a tone of irritation. "I druv him over myself, an' he was all in a shiver long afore he put his head inside o' St. James's."

Mrs. Rand sighed, and again shook her head. "I only wish I could think so, Mr. Mosely; but I always have felt and always shall feel that if St. James's folk had done their duty the bishop might have been living now. It makes my heart bleed for his poor wife."

We were all getting so lugubrious over the reflections raised by Mrs. Rand's reminiscences that it was a relief when old Joshua Smith turned the current of our thoughts, even though it was only to the contemplation of another picture of disaster. "The o'ny thing I'm afeard of is when the church is jam-full like it was last Harvest Festival," he remarked. "I guess some day the old beams 'll give way (they's half of 'em rotten an' worm-eaten) an' then we'll all find ourselves pitched in a heap down cellar. That 'ud be worse 'n bein' a bit shivery, wouldn't it, Mrs. Rand?"

"Perhaps; but that could only happen once, and we run the risk of getting our deaths of cold every Sunday through half the year."

Sten bobbed up from his seat in great excitement.

"True for you, Mrs. Rand!" he cried.

"I ain't expectin' to get my d. . . of anythin' more than oncet," muttered Mosely.

"Well," continued Sten, "if we needs a new church, we's jest got to git one. I vote that we all think it right out now what us can give, an' that we app'int a committee to see about the contrack, an' that the Ladies' Aid see what they can riz. We might even git the childern wi' them little cards that you prick holes into, to gather

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in their mites, an'— Oh, there's lots o' ways if on'y we go about it business-like."

Mrs. Rand and many of the young people eagerly grasped at this miscellany of proposals, and added to it. For some minutes the air was thick with suggestions as to ways and means. Bazaars, fish-ponds, socials, concerts, autograph-quilts, endless chains, and I know not what other ancient devices for money-making were eagerly mooted and discussed.

Often I should have found the whole scene very amusing, but that night my mind was not sufficiently at leisure from a variety of small cares and anxieties to enjoy the quaint humours of the disputants.

Roger, who had been called away early in the afternoon, had not yet returned, and I could not understand his delay, for he was always careful to be punctual, especially on such occasions as this memorable meeting. The people made many inquiries about him, which I could not answer; but they were so thoroughly interested in the matters under discussion that I think they did not realize how fast the time was passing.

In my ignorance of what was happening I felt unusually disquieted by Roger's non-appearance; but if I had been gifted with second-sight, and had known the cause of the delay, I should have been infinitely more unhappy. I did not hear the tale till midnight, but I may as well tell it here in its place. The whole thing was over in a few minutes, but even now it makes me feel almost faint to think of it. It was, however, only bit by bit that I pieced out the story from the accounts of the actors in the affair.

CHAPTER XX
AT THE FORD

ROGER had had the hardest sort of day. I have already told of its beginning, but the afternoon was far worse. It was the wife of George Oliver—once, not very long ago, our handsome, brisk church-warden—who had sent for him. The poor thing was still scarcely more than a girl, though she had three little children clinging about her skirts, and another, still in arms, upon her breast. She was worn almost to skin and bone. The children were but half-fed and almost naked. The little house was bare as a barn. But upstairs was the most hopeless sight of all. There, on a miserable straw bed, lay the prodigal—strength, beauty, sense, all gone—life perhaps ebbing also, but conscience suddenly and fearfully awake.

What is the use of dwelling on such a scene? Afterwards poor Lily Oliver moaned out hints of fearful midnight hours of watching beside one who fancied himself in the lowest depths of hell. When Roger saw him that afternoon his furious fit had spent itself, but the poor wretch was haunted with an awful horror of himself and of the ruin he had brought on the fair girl who had once believed him a very tower of strength. He was tortured with remorseful agonies over the little children to whom he was bequeathing a heritage of shame and weakness and peril. Nothing Roger could do or say sufficed to

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lift him from his despair, but the miserable wretch clung to my husband, as if he could stand between him and the awful harvest of his reckless sowing.

It was dark before Roger could tear himself away. Indeed, he delayed as long as he dared, in the hope that a friendly neighbour, who had promised to pass the night with Lily, might come before he left. It seemed to him wrong to leave the young wife and her little ones at the mercy of a raving maniac, but Lily, with tears, assured him that even yet she could manage George better than any one else, and so at last he left her, just about the time, I suppose, that the earliest of our guests arrived at the parsonage.

Roger had to go back on foot a quarter of a mile to a smithy, where he had left his horse to be shod, and, though he would not stay to take the tea kindly prepared for him, it was so late before he could get away, that he began to fear that it would be impossible for him to reach home by eight o'clock. As he left the smithy, he saw Churchill lounging out of a little post office just opposite, and called, "Are you not coming to the meeting, to help us to get our poor old church roofed in again?"

"I have heard nothing of any meeting," replied the young Englishman. "What is it all about?"

"Get in, and I'll tell you," said Roger, and he gave Marmaduke a succinct account of the disaster. "I ought to be at home now," he concluded. "I suppose the ford across Severn Creek is all right?" he added, as they drove past Oliver's little dark house.

"I guess so," replied Churchill, carelessly. "The water must be a bit high after that storm, I should think, and it's rather dark, but I suppose Jess knows the way through all right, let alone you, sir?"

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"Yes, indeed; there's no danger of old Jess's losing her head. I don't call it very dark to-night. It's a little misty, but I can make out Sten's place from here, can't you?"

"You must have good eyes, Mr. Dale, better than mine," was the reply.

"I have crossed," continued Roger, "when it was hard to see the length of one's own arm, but the creek was not so high then. It will save us over a mile, and that's a consideration, when one knows a meeting is waiting for one. You are not nervous about crossing, I hope?"

"I nervous!" laughed Churchill, with a touch of scorn.

"Where you'll lead, I'll follow, sir."

So they took the road to the ford, but Churchill told me that he had his doubts as to the time that it would save, for the way to the creek was at the best of times very rough; and the heavy rain of the previous evening had cut it into deep ruts and holes.

"Whew! the water is high, and no mistake," said Roger, when at last they reached the brink of the stream. "I have never, even in the spring, seen the water up to that basswood before. Still, I think we can get through."

"All right, Mr. Dale. You know best," returned Churchill, cheerily.

The water had been still higher. For some distance the road going down to the ford was a quagmire of churned-up mud; but Roger, getting out of the vehicle by way of precaution to examine the ground, was lured forward by the sight of deep wheel-marks leading on into the water.

"We are not the first to venture through to-day," he announced. "A heavily-loaded team has evidently made the passage since the rain."

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Churchill whistled in his careless fashion; but Jess betrayed some uneasiness when her master drove her into the water. Roger still urged her forward, but owns that they had hardly got into the stream before he regretted it, for the first jolt took in the buggy over the axletrees, and long before they were half-way over the carriage was afloat. Still, it was easier to go on than to turn back, and my husband cheered Jess on.

Suddenly Churchill exclaimed, "What's that? I fear some one is in trouble higher up!"

"I did not hear anything," said Roger, intent on the movements of his horse. As he spoke, a shrill wild cry for help rang out of the mist, and Roger tried to check his beast, in the fiercest wash of the current. For once in her life patient Jess rebelled, and there was a moment, Churchill says, when it looked as if they would both be shot into the muddy waters.

Still came those sharp cries for help, mingled with dreadful shrieks of pain or rage or terror.

"It's Mrs. Oliver!" cried Roger, suddenly. "I doubt that wretched creature is trying to murder her. Marmaduke, can you swim? If we try to turn back we may upset, but I left that woman alone with a maniac."

"Don't mind me," replied Churchill. "Yes, I can swim after a fashion," and he began to drag off his wet boots, still whistling.

As Roger, in his effort to turn, got Jessie's head up-stream, the shrieks, which had not stopped one instant, sounded nearer, louder—then from the mist something white flashed into the water.

I never properly understood what happened next. Roger says it was Churchill who played the hero, and Churchill says it was Roger. I fancy both made a desperate struggle to save the drowning man, who

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was swept down towards them by the swiftness of the current. At any rate, for some minutes—or only seconds, perhaps—they were all in the water together.

I don't understand the details—neither do they—but one of them clutched at poor Oliver, and then Churchill "made a grab at the buggy," which Jess was touring about at her own sweet will. Somehow they hauled Oliver into it, and Roger roared out, "All right. Don't be frightened, Mrs. Oliver. We've got him."

He could not catch the reins, but Churchill says, "It was pretty to hear him talk to Jess that night, just as if she was a human being."

All the same she missed the proper landing-place, and "it was more by Providence than good management," according to Marmaduke, "that they made port at Sten's place, where he used to water his horses."

I can't bear to think what would have happened if they had missed that. They would all have been lost, I am certain—and Sten says the same—for the banks are quite high and steep, and there is no landing-place for another half-mile. Churchill laughs, and says, "No one, in all history, was ever drowned in Severn Creek;" but the storm had turned the creek to a river, and had filled it with floating logs and uprooted trees, and, as all the lads who bathe in it know, the creek is full of holes and snags and pitfalls. To me, Roger, too, makes light of the danger, but I heard him afterwards telling Churchill that he blamed himself for trying to cross that night.

However, they did get to shore, and who should they find there but Alick, labouring with might and main to get Sten's old leaky boat afloat, to set off to the rescue. He had come home unexpectedly for a brief holiday. He had his hand on the lock of the door, when he

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was startled by those frightful outcries from the opposite bank, and of course he ran for the boat. He helped Churchill to carry up Oliver to the house, while Roger freed Jess from the battered buggy; then they and Mrs. Pepler, who had happily decided not to come to our meeting, got Oliver to bed and worked over him for half an hour.

As soon as they were sure he was not dead, Alick crossed the creek in that leaky boat, to comfort poor Mrs. Oliver with news of the rescue; but he flatly refused to take the risk of bringing her back with him that night.

Meanwhile Churchill and my husband had had a race by the short cut across the fields—the one to send up the doctor to the most hopeless kind of case doctor ever had, the other to habit himself hastily in dry garments, and to come down to preside over the most tumultuous church meeting that it had ever been my lot to witness at Willow Point.

The churchwardens, seated behind a small table with pens and paper before them, symbolized order and decorum; but, long before Roger took his seat between them, our enthusiasts would have had the church built and paid for, if they had not been delayed by a somewhat warm dispute as to whether it should be erected on its old site, "at the other end of nowhere," or on a new one, nearer the centre of population.

Whilst this question was being debated, I could hear Roger overhead, overturning things and racketing amongst the furniture. I should have liked to go to his assistance, but dared not leave the combatants, lest they should be at each others' throats even before the meeting was formally opened.

CHAPTER XXI

THE PARSON OR THE MONEY?

WHEN Roger at last came down, I was alarmed by his haggard looks. His cheeks looked grey and sunken, his eyes heavy, his very hair unnatural. After a hasty and somewhat inadequate apology for his unpunctuality, he called the assemblage to order and for a few minutes all went well, though, whenever he was not bound to speak or rouse himself, the chairman sat like a statue, with his head bowed down on his hand.

Presently there was a knock at the front door, and Churchill entered. He too puzzled me, both by his behaviour and his attire. He looked extraordinarily grave, and, oddly enough, was dressed in a complete suit of black. I was surprised that I had never seen him in it before; and yet it was not new. Of course the doctor had made the young man change his wet clothes for some of his own, but in all my trouble about Roger, who, I was firmly persuaded, was on the brink of another illness, this absurd little mystery quite worried me. The slight interruption caused by Churchill's entrance loosed all the tongues again, and each man discoursed volubly to his neighbour on the matter in hand, though a moment before every one had been extremely backward in offering his ideas to the meeting in general.

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Happily, by this time Roger was recovering his self-command, and, by dint of judicious questioning, presently succeeded in getting Mrs. Rand to restate her reasons for thinking a new church desirable. Then Mr. Joshua Smith went so far as to make a formal motion to the same effect, and Pepler, who, in his rôle of general utility man to St. James's, was always ready to second anything, did so on this occasion with peculiar zest.

Upon this Mr. Mosely rose in his place, and with ponderous gravity proposed an amendment, declaring the scheme impossible. "We're all poor folk, and it ain't no use our hangin' mill-stones o' debt round our necks. I say, an' I know, it can't be done, an' I ain't goin' to put my money into any sich wild-goose plan. It can't be done, an' it won't be done neither."

Sten jumped up to face round on the last speaker. "Why can't it be done, Mr. Mosely? S'pose that's in order, ain't it?"

"It can't be done, 'cause we're a poor lot."

There was an indignant howl of derision at this equivocal description of our little community; and the boys, who had bubbled over into the hall, clapped sarcastic applause.

But the old man was not to be put down.

"And if we warn't poor, Stennett Pepler, still it wouldn't be done," he persisted. "If you really want it done, this is no way o' beginnin'. We ain't a lot o' dumb beasts to be stampeded into a action. No, nor we ain't sheep to foller every critter what thinks he's got a call to lead. If we could order a church built, or wish a church built, or even explode a church built, why, then, Sten, you'd be the very man fur the job, an' I'd vote fur givin' you the contract. But buildin's too like learnin' a trade or cleanin' up a dirty farm"—there

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was a suppressed giggle from the young folk in the hall, but Sten looked hardily across at Marmaduke, and showed no sign of discomfiture—"or doin' anythin' else worth doin'. Stick-to-itiveness is the one thing needful, an' I tell you plain, Mr. Chairman an' friends, that I ain't goin' to put one dollar o' my money into any scheme till I sees a way clear from the foundation stone to the roof."

"A reg'lar outside stair jest like them city fire-escapes," irreverently interjected a travelled youngster from outside the door.

"Perhaps," suggested Churchill, loyally coming to the aid of his former master, "Mr. Mosely would prefer to give his donation towards the furnishing?"

"Oh, ay, yes, an' time enough fur that when the walls is up an' the roof on," agreed the old fellow.

"Ah, but on your principle, sir, we ought to make sure of the furnishing before we draw the first load of stones for the foundations. Come now, Mr. Mosely," continued Churchill, "do try to give us a little encouragement."

"No, sirs, you don't need to look fur no encouragement from me."

"What, do you mean to do nothing whatever?" repeated Churchill.

"This here meetin' was called, as I understand, to settle about repairs, an' all this talk of a new church is mere foolishness and waste of time. I tell you, we can't do it. Any kind o' new church 'ud cost us hundreds an' thousands o' dollars, an' I never has bin one to go mixin' myself up with undertakin's that from the first start-off is bound to be a failure."

"It ain't goin' to be a failure. It'll be a grand success!" shouted Sten. "There ain't no reason but

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jest niggardliness why this congregation o' St. James's shouldn't have a church worth callin' itself a church, same as the other d'nominations. Fac', it should be the best in Willow Point, fur if we ain't got the two richest men in the place with us, I'd like to see the others, that's all. Course, if we can't make out to pull together, it'll spile all, an' I wonder at you, Mr. Mosely, not settin' a more better example to the young folk."

Never in all my experience of church meetings had I attended one quite so uncomfortable as this. I wondered that Roger did not put a stop to the irritating and useless discussion, but he had an absent, far-away look through much of the talk, and once more I feared that he must be ill.

"Well, I'll tell you what I will do," said Mr. Mosely, magnanimously, breaking in on a brief and welcome pause in the strife of tongues. "I'll give you the last hundred on the contract, if you can pay up the rest in five years. Now then, don't say I won't do nothin', Sten! That's a fair offer, ain't it?"

"Oh, it's a mighty fine offer, Mosely," sneered Dickey, "an' it's so encouragin' I dare say you'll excuse me if I go one better. We's bound, friends, to put our best foot forrard, if St. James's is ever to get the benefit o' this generous donation. I believe in supportin' one's own church an' one's own parson, an' I do like to act up to my beliefs, though it ain't always easy to men in business. Givin's somethin' I can do, however."

Roger leaned forward with the look of one suddenly awakened. "Please, Mr. Dickey, wait a moment," he said.

But Dickey only raised his loud voice a little higher, and shouted, "I can give——" (Again the lads in the passage applauded.) "An' so, fur me an' Mrs. Dickey

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an' Ida, I'll give, dollar fur dollar, jest as much as the folk can collect in other ways. An' I won't wait neither till you've borne all the burden an' heat o' the day. I'll make it payable once a year or twice a year or four times a year, just as you please." He paused, but no one broke the silence of utter amazement into which we had fallen, and looking round with a broad smile, Torrance added, "An' now, lads, I think we're pretty sure o' Mr. Mosely's hundred fur the weathercock on the steeple."

Then our old house was shaken with a storm of applause, and Ida, grasping Dickey's big hand with both of hers, smiled proudly upon the rest of us. But the strained look in Mrs. Dickey's face never relaxed.

When the hubbub had worn itself out the shrill voice of Mrs. Rand struck in sharply on the last belated murmurs of astonishment and delight. "It's a big promise," she exclaimed. "But let us be quite sure, Mr. Dickey. We have got to get together half of the price and you'll do the rest, is that it?"

Dickey nodded. "Yes, me an' Mrs. Dickey an' Ida—the 'River House,' as you may say—'ll do the rest."

He spoke simply and gravely, without any covert meaning, I am sure, but the name of the hotel smote on Roger's ears like a challenge. His white face grew whiter. He sprang to his feet, and, stilling the people with a gesture, said slowly, "We all thank you for your generosity, but, in the name of the congregation of St. James's—in the name of the Master we serve, I must decline to accept your offer."

There was a painful hush for some seconds after Roger had spoken, and we looked furtively and stupidly at one another, as we began to realize what had happened.

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Suddenly Ida rose, and her clear young voice rang out with a wild note of indignation. "Father, let us go home!" she cried. "We are not wanted here."

"Wait a moment, lassie, wait a moment," said Dickey, laying his hand on her arm. "I must understand this once for all. Do you say, Mr. Dale, that you do not want my money?"

"We dare not build God's house with money earned by liquor-selling," said Roger, "though indeed we thank you most heartily for your generous intentions."

"It would not be the first of my money that you have taken," said Dickey. "I don't know how much of the roof and walls of the old church would be left, if you took out of it the lumber and the nails I have paid for."

"I know—to my shame—that the church owes you much, very much," muttered Roger.

If ever any one could have been withered with a glance, the scorn in Ida's eyes would have struck Roger down. "Father, come," she repeated.

"Be still, Ida," answered Dickey, then he turned again on my husband. "You have taken money of mine ever since you came here, whenever the old building needed repairs. You take it every year fur the Sunday School Treat, an' the Christmas Tree, an' the li'bry. An' that ain't all. If you was to calc'late it out, Mr. Dale, I guess you'd find that in the twelve year you've bin here, you must a lived fur better than two on the money that came out o' my pocket. Ain't that so, sir?"

Dickey was speaking in an undertone. The rest of us were silent and motionless as stones; even Ida made no further effort to interfere. But, as the big hotel man stood confronting Roger, she clung with both hands to his arm.

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"Is it not so, sir?"

Roger bent his head, and his cheeks flushed.

"Then, sir, take time to think over it. Where's the difference—in principle—'twixt proppin' up a fallin' buildin'—not to mention anythin' more—an' raisin' a new one?"

"I never thought o' that now," muttered Sten.

"In principle there is no difference," admitted Roger.

"Then there shan't be one in practice," said Dickey, still keeping himself well in hand and speaking with careful distinctness. "Take my money or leave it, build the church or not, as you choose—only understand, if I ain't good enough to write out a cheque fur the new church, I ain't good enough to chuck a five-dollar bill into the collection plate fur repairs, an' not another cent will I give to the li'bry, or the sal'ry or the Sunday School. Is that clear an' plain, sir?"

"Quite clear," said Roger, "and though it grieves me to seem careless of the feelings of a supporter so kind and so generous as you have always been, Mr. Dickey, I am growing more certain, as time goes on, that we who call ourselves Christians and profess to love our fellow-men have no right to use for the support of the church money which, as far as we can see, has been won by imperilling our weaker brethren, body and soul."

"And yet, sir, for these twelve year, you have always been glad to take all I offered you!" Dickey spoke like one in great perplexity, more in sorrow than anger, and Sten was moved to grasp his hand.

"You have a perfect right to reproach me," returned Roger. "For many a year I have felt doubtful about using this money, but—God forgive me!—I have never spoken out plainly. Henceforward, so far as it rests

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with me, we will not lay ourselves open to this reproach. Better have no church than build one on the sins and the shame of the victims of drink!"

"That's what it'll come to, sir. You will have no church, if you wait till you can build it with money from the perfect. I've heard o' folk, outside hotel-keepers, whose money ain't none too clean. No one ever said yet that I don't give honest measure an' honest goods, an', though I don't profess to be better than my neighbours—'less it's one here an' there—I can't see that I'm so much worse. Besides, money is money, wherever it comes from, an' I don't see but what mine may buy as good bricks an' mortar as if I'd got it by sellin' sugar or Prayer-books."

"There's sound sense in that," said old Mosely; "but afore we goes further in this matter, there's one thing had oughter be made clear. Excuse me, Mr. Dale, but business is business, even if it does mix itself up with Christianity, as one may say. Now, sir, this here's my question—has you the right, same as if you was his worship the German Emperor, to up an' say off-hand fur the whole congregation, we won't have Mr. Dickey's money? I dare say you can give us the law on that point now?"

The old man thrust his hands deep into his pockets, pursed up his mouth into a hard straight line, stuck out his chin, cocked his head sideways like an impudent sparrow, and waited for Roger to reply to this poser.

Roger looked at him with anger blazing from his eyes. "Whatever the law may be, Mr. Mosely, I am determined that I will no longer remain in charge at St. James's to act against my conscience!" he burst forth.

"But s'posin' the wardens was to take all care of

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these money matters off of yer hands, an' leave you quite free to 'tend to your visitin' and preachin'—what then? You wouldn't even need to arst no questions about money."

"That sounds right an' fair an' reasonable," murmured Sten.

"I have shut my eyes long enough, far too long!" cried Roger, with vehemence, "and to-day something happened to open them to this evil for ever, I think. No, I can't thrust my responsibilities on the wardens or any one else."

"But what I'm tryin' to get at ain't no matter o' sentiment," roared old Mosely. "I want to know—hasn't us folk that's got to raise the money the right to say whose money we'll take an' whose we won't take? To my thinkin', sir, with all due respect, you're takin' too much upon you. Mr. Dickey wasn't offerin' you this here handsome sum as a personal gift."

Dickey caught at the suggestion. He was nothing if not friendly and sociable, and he did not wish to cut himself adrift from all his old cronies at St. James's. "No, no, Mr. Mosely is quite right," he cried. "Mr. Dale has no call to make a personal matter of it. He has nothin' to lose or gain by it. Look here, I make my offer to the wardens and congregation o' St. James's, and I'd like 'em not to be too hasty in decidin'. Remember, friends, if you refuse my offer now, I shall take it that you don't want no more of my help in any way. Consider well of it before you say 'No.'"

"Very well," said Roger. "You hear, ladies and gentlemen, you are to decide this matter for yourselves, but, if you accept Mr. Dickey's gift, I shall understand that you are willing also to accept my resignation."

"We'll take that into the account, sir," answered the

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official Mosely, then I heard him whisper to his next neighbour, "It do seem to me that it would be a sight easier to git another parson than to raise all that money."

Ida, too, caught the whisper, and smiled proud defiance at Roger.

"Yes, friends, it's come to this," said Dickey. "You'll have to choose between us—me an' the parson! If you take the parson, I guess it won't be no great while afore you come to me a-prayin' an' a-beggin' fur me to help you out; but you'd best be careful, for this offer won't be held open indefinite. Now that is my last word fur this time, so good night all!"

It is useless for me to try to describe the scene we had when the Dickey's had gone. Any one who knows Willow Point and its dear delight in a local sensation can paint it for himself. Roger made an heroic effort to act as if nothing had happened, but the attempt was a transparent failure, made worse by Sten's blundering endeavours to second his chief. No one did or could or would talk of anything but Dickey's generosity. Our people were all so excited that they simply forgot that they ought to go, and all the usual signals that the meeting was at an end failed of their effect.

At last I got Sten into a corner. "Mr. Pepler, all this excitement is making my husband ill again. Look at him. Cannot you get the people away for me?"

"Why, yes, ma'am. The parson do look deathly, to be sure," agreed Sten. "I'll fix 'em, Mrs. Dale."

Upon that he charged with joyful alacrity into a knot of eager disputants, loudly exclaiming, "Now then, you folks, it's time we was off. Mrs. Dale says that we're makin' the parson ill again with all our row an' noise. Hustle up, you boys there, an' git the rigs. Gels,

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you had oughter be ashamed o' yourselves settin' up scandalmongerin' like this. Dear, dear, what a awful rumpus that there storm-wind has fetcht up! It couldn't hardly a bin worse if it had upended the old church out an' out."

CHAPTER XXII

ASHES TO ASHES

THE wardens made arrangements for us to hold our services temporarily in the Town Hall, and for a week the burning questions of the old church or the new—my husband or Dickey—hung in abeyance. For Roger's sake, I felt that I should not be sorry if we had to leave Willow Point, though to go in such a way would hurt his feelings sadly. He appeared to be utterly worn out, but still would not spare himself. Whilst George Oliver lived he spent hours every day at his bedside, and I was heartily thankful for him as well as for the poor little wife that the Peplers utterly refused to allow the unhappy wretch to be taken back home.

Sten, dear, kind-hearted old Sten, was in his element, acting as head-nurse. I don't think it is wronging him to suggest that he found a kind of fearful pleasure in his unaccustomed work of watching beside the delirious man. At any rate, years later, he frequently recounted with bated breath narratives of Oliver's singular and horrible delusions, and to this day he uses his recollections of him as "a parable," when warning "the boys," as he is fond of doing, against the evils of intemperance.

To the rest of the household—Mrs. Pepler, Alick and Mary—Oliver's presence was surely nothing but a burden, bravely endured for the sake of the dying man's

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injured wife and babes, and in hope that something might be done even at this eleventh hour to save and soothe the poor sinner himself.

But it was not only the Peplers who were kind to the Olivers in this extremity. Many of our people, poor, tollworn, and often far-distant as they were, claimed to be neighbours of this poor fellow who had fallen amongst thieves. Even Dickey made more than one surreptitious journey after dark to Pepler's little house, to press his help upon those caring for his victims, as Roger called them.

If human kindness could have saved or comforted poor George Oliver, he would have been restored speedily to health and to his right mind, but he was far beyond the reach of human aid. Some said he had passed beyond the reach of God's mercy, but who is sufficient for these things? We only know that, in spite of all any of us could do to hold up the Light before his darkened eyes, he was swept from us into a Hereafter, curtained from mortal sight by an impenetrable gloom. As yet we do not know what—of hope or of fear—lies behind that curtain.

Roger told me that never in all his ministry had he felt so utterly hopeless and helpless; and I knew that if at any time he had faltered in the conflict with the hideous dragon that vexes our land in these latter days, he would henceforth falter no more. However, one gleam of light shone suddenly on our gloom.

All the countryside attended George Oliver's funeral, to pay, according to the *Sentry*, "the last tributes of respect" to a man who had forfeited all respect, and yet to the end had retained something of the love of his neighbours.

It was a long, long funeral, and I think its length

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was a crumb of comfort to the little widow in her agony. It was a long funeral, and the mourners who followed George's misused body to its last resting-place were mourners in more than name. So many of us were haunted with memories of the gay, strong, hearty, genial young man Oliver had been six—nay, but four—years ago. As we stood about the grave on that dreary autumn afternoon, many sobbed aloud, and a stranger would have thought we were burying one of the best and noblest of our community. But we had deeper cause for mourning over this lost sheep, this wandering brother, who might have been saved, perhaps, if we had done what we could.

Roger—wrongly, some will say—left out here and there a word from the dear old familiar burial service, and, without the comfort of those last words, I dreaded to go back to try again to lift the thoughts of the widow to Him Who "was acquainted with grief." Yet, if "sure and certain hope" was too strong a word for us, still, around and above and beneath us all stretches like the mysterious ether, the larger word that "God is Love."

Such was not Roger's text that day. His mind was full, not of the perfections of God, but of the imperfections of man, and beside that open grave he cried aloud, like the sternest of Hebrew seers, against that vile love of sensual pleasure that had brought George Oliver to his death. Many of the listeners shuddered as he spoke thus of the still unburied dead, but Roger was not in the mood to defer to such a sentiment. He knew that even amongst those decorous mourners were many men—perhaps even some women—who were trembling on the brink of the pit into which Oliver had fallen.

To this day I remember the look on some of the

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faces in the throng. There was soft-hearted Sten's, with eyes from which tears were falling; there was Dickey's, frowning and set, as that of a man enduring some painful operation; there was Churchill's ennobled with the light of a new purpose in life, a light like the clear grey shining of early dawn, and I knew, as I looked upon that face, that even in the dark hour of confessed failure Roger had something new for which to thank God.

But at that moment he did not know it. He had turned from the sin of the victim to the sin of those whose greed smooths for many souls the road to ruin. I suppose he was bound to speak as he did. I think the terrible words came to him, as they came of old to God's prophets in Israel, but they were dreadful to listen to, doubly dreadful, when you knew that they were cutting deep into the quivering heart of a living man—a man who felt for the hungry, who loved children, who was by no means all selfish. Surely, surely Dickey would never hold to his cursed trade after this.

I scarcely dared to glance at him, lest I should seem to be glorying in his shame, but when I did look, I saw that his face had grown harder and more obstinate. And when all was over, when most of the people had left the cemetery, when the grave-digger was filling in the earth, Dickey strode to meet us, half-blind with passion, stumbling in his wrath upon the low green mound which marked the resting-place of a little child.

"Roger Dale, till a week past I counted you my friend," he said. "From this on—I give you fair warning—do your worst, if you like, and I promise you I will do mine! Willow Point is too small to hold us both."

Roger tried to make him hear reason, but Dickey would not listen.

"You might as well call me a murderer at once!"

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he cried. "It is not true that I tried to force Oliver to drink. When I saw what a fool he was, I did my best to stop him, and I am no more to blame for his death than you are, Parson Dale. I tell you I would have given anything to save him."

"At last, yes," said Roger. "But don't you see, Mr. Dickey, that while you keep that place open in the village, you are doing the tempter's work for him?" Then, earnestly and solemnly, beside that half-filled grave, Roger once more urged the man, for the sake of his wife, of Ida and of himself, to give up his perilous trade. But Dickey had hardened his heart like Pharaoh, and in his rage he took an impious oath, "that, whatever it might cost him or any one else, he would never close the 'River House' to please any brain-sick parson who ever walked the earth!"

CHAPTER XXIII

IN HEAT OF BATTLE

OF course Roger and I did not attend the congregational meeting called to decide about the acceptance of Dickey's offer, but in due time we received so many full and circumstantial accounts of it, that I suppose we have a very good idea of all that happened on that momentous evening.

The meeting was held in the Town Hall, and was as well attended as that held at our house. Parties were pretty evenly divided, and it was impossible for any one to foresee whether the decision would be for "the old parson" or "the new church."

At times the debate was acrimonious; and I am thankful that Roger was having a good rest on the old lounge at home instead of being mounted on that high platform, trying to impose order on an unruly and tumultuous assembly. The arguments appear to have been nearly as monotonous and scarcely more convincing than the outcries at that memorable gathering of craftsmen at Ephesus, who made silver shrines for Diana; but I am bound to say that the report of the proceedings would not have suffered by some such severe condensation as that undertaken by the author of the "Acts." The accounts of our meeting were indeed so prolix as to become confusing; still, there was no room for doubt as to the final decision of the people.

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Dickey did not stay away. He entered the hall early in the evening, and made an eager speech, urging the congregation almost piteously to accept his offer. Alick said the people applauded him, and for a moment it seemed that he would win; but Sten, who in Roger's absence had taken on himself to act as his advocate, sprang to his feet and pronounced such a loving eulogy on "the most earnest and faithfulest of ministers," that the doubters were half-won over. Of course this speech had no effect on the opinions of those whose minds were already made up, and for an hour the debate raged hotly.

Evidently Dickey felt himself on his defence before the little community whose good opinion meant so much to him, and again and again he set forth how careful he was to carry on his business in such a way that it should harm no one.

"What about George Oliver, Torrance?" shouted some one at the back of the hall.

At the question Dickey lost his self-control, and burst into a violent tirade against the hypocrisy of temperance-workers in general and parsons in particular.

This brought Sten again to his feet, and in graphic fashion he told the story of how poor Oliver had sought relief from his agonies in Severn Creek, and how the parson and Churchill, at no small risk to themselves, had snatched the poor wretch from death! I was glad that this incident should be known (though I knew that Roger would have been very angry if I had ventured to tell it), for it seemed to me to make plain that it was no mere caprice on Roger's part that had made him, as Dickey put it, "go so sudden against him."

Told as it was at the right moment, the story

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turned the scale for Roger, and when the vote was taken, St. James's folk, by a clear majority, declared for "Mr. Dale and the old church."

Bitterly disappointed, muttering threats of "getting even" with every one concerned, and prophesying that it "wouldn't be long, all the same, afore the wardens of St. James's 'ud be hangin' round the 'River House,' beggin' and prayin' for help to build the new church," Dickey rose to leave the hall.

"Don't you flatter yourself, Mr. Dickey!" shouted Joshua Smith. "We shan't never arst you fur another cent. We may not, most of us, hev as big accounts to the bank as you, but we ain't so mean as you think for, an' we'll get along some way or another without beggin' for any man's ill-gotten gains. Mr. Dale is quite right, —the sooner the 'River House' is levelled even with the ground the better fur all on us."

I am sure that Roger had never used those words, but of course Dickey accepted the statement as accurate. "Talk o' levellin' buildin's!—that old church is a cryin' disgrace to Willow Point, an' the sooner it's levelled down the better, if you will. I wish it had bin struck with lightning the other night, that I do! It ain't scarcely fit for kindlin' wood. Fact, it's nearly as rotten as the hypocrites that go there every Sunday to pride theirselves on their goodness an' to sling mud at their neighbours. However, if you won't take another church, when you can get it so easy, the more fools you—that's all there is to it. Maybe the old place is good enough for them that uses it."

Dickey reached the door, and some people, marking his rolling, staggering gait, declared that he had fortified himself for the contest with a large dose of spirits. Ten minutes later he burst again into the hall, and, stumbling

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up to the platform, cried out, "Maybe I spoke a bit hot, friends. Well, if I did, I don't mind sayin' so. Torrance Dickey ain't the mar to pretend he never makes no slips; but, what's brought me back now is this—I've bin thinkin', if you choose to take a gift from me, I'll do a little better than I said at first. Yes, I'll build you a bran'-new church from cellar to tower—chancel an' vestry an' all complete—an' I won't arst none of you to raise a cent for it. Not one cent. Surely now, Mr Chairman, an' ladies an' gentlemen, you won't be fools enough to say 'No' to this offer?"

"His voice was so soft an' insiniatin'-like," said Sten, "that half the folk felt reel mean to hev to go again him, but there was others that wasn't so tender-hearted, though."

"Torrance Dickey," shouted a harsh voice, "we don't want no churches built on rum!"

"It's a clear temptation of the evil one, makin' out he's a angel of light," cried another.

"If you don't take this offer, you'll show yourselves a set of sanctimonious, outrageous fools!" bawled a third. "What difference does it make to bricks and mortar where the money to buy 'em comes from?"

"Well, I don't think you'll ever have another chance to get a bran'-new church for the takin'," said Dickey, smiling. "Think a while, now do, afore you say 'No.'"

"It 'ud be a sin to throw away such a chance!" exclaimed the master of the corner store. "I move that we accept Mr. Dickey's offer with hearty thanks."

"I sanction that!" cried one of our old farmers.

"Oh, ay, hurry up, your vote and influence fur the new church, what's to be the ornament of Willow Point," sang out one of the irresponsible young lads at the back; but Sten bounced on to the platform.

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"If we didn't see our way to buildin' half a church on liquor, how is it goin' to be a improvement to build a whole one on it?" he demanded.

"It might stand more even-like on its foundations," suggested a wag.

"It wouldn't stand at all, an' it wouldn't have no foundations worth callin' so," roared Sten. "I tell you, the parson's right! If we give in to any sich plans o' runnin' the church by the world, as you may say, this here little candlestick of ours 'll soon be moved altogether off of its place, and there won't be no English church down to Willow Point. Build it on whisky, would you? Well, I tell you it's bounder to come down than the house on the sand, and great will be the fall of it."

"Don't you listen to him. He can't even run a fifty-acre farm, let alone a church," was one of the sarcastic comments on Sten's little speech.

"Take the buildin', friends, all complete, as a free gift," entreated Dickey.

"No, that indeed we won't"—this from Mrs. Rand, in a voice sharp and shrill with excitement. "Why, poor George Oliver is not yet cold in his grave. No rum churches for us!"

That was the final verdict, reached after immense toil and confusion. It did seem to me, however, that it was hard on Dickey to talk as if he alone were responsible for Oliver's fate. After all, if the young man had had any real principles, he would not have fallen to such depths, had there been twenty "River Houses" to tempt him instead of one.

Yet even Roger did not seem to see the thing quite in that light. In those first days of the contest he blamed Dickey, as if the hotel-keeper absolutely forced

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his poisonous draughts down the drunkards' throats ; but the fact was that Dickey never pressed a man to drink, if he thought he had had enough.

It was a most unhappy time for us all. The village was split into hostile camps, and woe betide the man, woman, or child who tried to act as mediator. Had all this happened when I first came to Willow Point, I imagine that I should have felt especially troubled on Mrs. Dickey's account, but nowadays nothing seemed to make much change in her still life. Evidently she hardly grasped the cause or the meaning of all the trouble.

Not so Ida. She—dainty, delicate in all her ways—upheld Dickey through all. At least, if she ever paused or faltered in her eager partisanship, she did not let outsiders know it. She treated those who sided with Roger as her adopted father's enemies. She would hardly speak to Alick when he called, and she sneered openly at Churchill upon his refusing to drink with Dickey, as he had been used to do.

Poor, hapless Churchill! there was a tragic element in it all, but when he came to me, with his round red face drawn out to twice its usual length, and began to pour into my ears a long story of some little act of petulance on Ida's part, I tried to laugh him out of his melancholy. I did not know then how much he cared for the little gipsy, and there are times when a laugh does any one good.

But Churchill himself was so dolefully in earnest that he soon forced me to regard the situation from his point of view.

"I am afraid for Ida!" he cried passionately. "Her very noblest qualities may bring about her ruin. She loves Dickey. She never forgets—never lets any one else forget how much he has done for her. I honour her

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for it, but, oh, it is going too far for her to think that gratitude demands that she should stand with him, shoulder to shoulder, through all this hideous nightmare of a business.

"Mrs. Dale, she knows I love her. Lately I was beginning to think that she cared for me a little, but now—she will hardly look at me. She counts me one of 'her father's enemies,' when, God knows, I have little enough reason to put on righteous airs with regard to him or any man. Through it all, I like Torrance Dickey; and on many points I have a great respect for him, but it is intolerable that he should carry down with him a girl like Ida."

"What do you mean?"

Churchill looked at me with a world of trouble in his blue-grey eyes. "She is so loyal, so true," he said, "and she does not see what she is doing. Mrs. Dale, since this trouble began, Ida has been straining every nerve to make the hotel a success. Of course all last summer, and, I suppose, the year before, she took charge of things in the house to save Mrs. Dickey, and tried in her pretty way to make things gay and pleasant for the summer visitors, but I know she used to despise the fellows who hung about the bar. That offended her taste, of course. What lady could like it, Mrs. Dale?—and Ida is a lady in all her ways—even my mother, who is fastidious enough, could find no fault with her on that score. Ida hated that bar and all that went on there. Once she told me that she could not endure a man who had so little sense as to go there, but now—I believe in her heart she feels that I am false to Dickey, because I am trying to turn over a new leaf."

"Poor child, poor little Ida!" I said, but I felt quite as uneasy about this luckless lover of hers, and, after a

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moment's anxious reflection, I made an awkward protest. "Mr. Churchill, Marmaduke, don't ever let her have it on her conscience that she has influenced you for evil," I entreated him.

The young fellow blushed. "You may well doubt me," he said. "I know I have given you good cause, but, please God, I will never, even for Ida, break my word; and the other day, when your husband was speaking by Oliver's grave, I vowed to God that I would never again let a drop of the stuff that ruined him pass my lips."

Surely I ought to have been satisfied, but the thought of the perils of that place, with its horrible odours of the forbidden thing, and lovely Ida playing temptress, was strong on my mind. "Marmaduke," I whispered, "I wish you would not go there. It is courting danger, and only the foolhardy do that."

"I cannot help myself," said he. "Mrs. Dale, you don't know what it is like for Ida. While she is there I cannot stay away."

"But she will not let you help her?"

"She may, she may! As long as I do not seem to turn my back on Dickey, there is hope. I can't help it, Mrs. Dale. Must I leave her, when I might be of use, to take her chance, just for fear of risking my own miserable soul?"

Was he right or wrong? How could I judge for him? At any rate it was clear that I could not control him.

"But—forgive me—how does your going there help her?" I protested.

Churchill blushed again. "In half a dozen ways," he answered slowly. "For one thing—Dickey is not what he was when I first knew him, and now he lets

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things go on there that, three years ago, he would never have allowed. Sometimes I can stand between Ida and —what no lady should have to bear. In some ways she is well able to take care of herself, but at least I can make things easier for her. Then my great hope is, that—if she sees that I am true, through all, to her and hers—she may let me take her away. Sometimes, I am sure Dickey himself sees that the 'River House' is no place for her. Once he told me that he would give her to me, but Ida, just now, is determined to stand by Torrance; and who can wonder at it, Mrs. Dale?"

"But I am afraid she is only hardening him in his evil way."

"Can love—true, deep, unselfish love—ever harden, Mrs. Dale?"

It was a question over which I pondered for the rest of that day.

"Perhaps you are right," said Churchill, after a pause. "Oh, if only it were possible to make Ida see it! Mrs. Dale, do you think she would listen to you?"

"I am afraid not," I said; and yet I consented, very foolishly, to make a pilgrimage to the "River House," and try what I could do.

Alas, I can scarcely doubt that I did more harm than good. I endeavoured to show Ida that she was upholding Dickey in a wrong and dangerous course, and she tried to convince me that Roger's position was equally uncharitable and unchristian. I entreated her to be careful, at least, not to throw stumbling-blocks in the way of those seeking to escape from the horrible snare, and she insisted that the people who caused most trouble with stumbling-blocks were the bigoted and the intolerant. I must say that I think to this day that on

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that occasion the girl was very unreasonable, and I fear, when I saw how much she misjudged Roger, I got a little hot. In fact, we both lost our self-command, and for many a day afterwards Ida and I studiously avoided one another.

Roger blamed me for going to the "River House" at all. He fancied that my action might be misunderstood. But the hardest thing of all was the telling Churchill that I had failed so miserably.

Meanwhile the trouble over Dickey was producing a whole crop of minor worries. Most of the people were behindhand with their contributions to all the church funds, and Dickey's defection was certain to cause a serious falling-off in the total receipts. For instance, it seemed quite impossible that Roger's salary—never munificent—should be paid with the usual promptitude, and it would be the same with all the current expenses of the church, to say nothing of the large outlay for inevitable repairs. It made matters more discouraging that the people, while upholding Roger in the main, no sooner set about trying to raise the necessary money than they began to look back towards the fleshpots of Egypt. I am very much mistaken indeed if some of them did not murmur loudly at their Moses, who had so rashly led them into the wilderness.

I told myself that, if Roger only kept well, I cared for none of these things, but really it was not quite the truth. It was a daily fret and annoyance to be met, whenever we went amongst our people, by black looks from those who sympathized with Dickey, and by whining complaints and doleful prognostications from most of those who were supposed to sympathize with Roger.

It was trying, too, to have to pare and cut down all

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our little expenses, and even to deny ourselves and the children things that I had always counted amongst the necessaries of life. It was still worse to look forward to a future of increasing poverty and embarrassment, and once, in a cowardly mood, I begged Roger to resign.

"My dear Nell," he answered, in that tone of much-enduring patience that one usually reserves for an utterly unreasonable child, "consider a moment. I do not see how I can possibly resign for years to come. As long as the people will stand by me, retreat is impossible. I have led them into this fight with the drink evil, and, please God, I must see it through."

It did look as if retreat was impossible, but to go forward appeared not less so, and I must say I shrank from the prospect before us.

"Nelly dear"—and Roger spoke in a gentler tone—"don't lose heart. I had counted on you to help me whoever failed, and I know that, whatever it may cost us, you would not like me to be false any longer to my convictions."

"Roger, you have never been false to your convictions!" I cried.

Roger shook his head. "Before God, Nell, I dare not say as much for myself. I have let things drift. I have made no protest against our using Dickey's money, when I saw clearly that I ought to speak. I believe now that, if I had done the right thing years ago, the fight would not have been so hard. We can't alter the past, unhappily; but, Nell, my brave little girl, help me now to be true and faithful to the end."

How could I fail him or seem to blame him? Coward as I was, I pledged myself to the fight; but, oh, I felt in my heart like Lot's wife, for all the time I was looking back to the ease and comfort we had lost.

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In my more cheerful moments I often hoped that we had reached that darkest hour that precedes the dawn, but in reality we were long in attaining that pitch of blackness. Every day through those last months of the year, it became increasingly difficult to provide our four little folk with nourishing food and comfortable clothing. Yes, I knew what it was to be obliged to keep restless little Tommy indoors, because his boots were unfit for him to go out in, and that winter we lived almost entirely on milk and eggs, apples and potatoes—all the products of what we should call in England the glebe.

I am almost ashamed to think how much we enjoyed certain gifts of pork, poultry, and other eatables that from time to time came our way. To this minute I remember the intense delight which I felt on the morning of Thanksgiving Day, when I discovered in the woodshed two huge market baskets, labelled in roughly printed capitals, "With love and good wishes." I was so poor-spirited indeed as to enjoy the contents none the less because they proved to be a kind of spoiling of the Egyptians. A huge bag of crisp cookies, of a kind especially delighted in by the children, at once betrayed Mrs. Dickey's hand in the affair. But it is really surprising how quickly such supplies disappear, and it was not many days before we were again in dire straits.

"Nell, there is a way of raising a little money that I never thought of till this moment," said Roger, one morning when we were in committee on ways and means. "We must sell my father's old books, and perhaps Uncle Will's cabinet of specimens, if we can get anything worth having for them."

"I should hate to do it," I answered, "but the

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children are almost in rags, and the flour is running out, and the potatoes won't last much longer, and we can't live entirely on apples and milk."

"Well, I'll write about the books to-day," said Roger, with a sigh; but even this was disappointing, for, though the dealer to whom he wrote encouraged him to hope for a fair price for his specimens, he would only undertake to act as his agent with regard to them, and he insisted on seeing the books before he would make any definite offer even for the few rare old volumes which my husband prized so highly.

"There is just one consolation, Nelly. Old Mackay has the reputation of being a very honest fellow, so we are quite safe in trusting to his honour. We had better pack the things up to-day and get them off at once, for we cannot go on much longer without money from somewhere."

"I dare say Mr. Mackay is honest enough," I said, "but I don't like leaving the matter so entirely to his discretion. Why not get Alick to look after the matter for us? He must know so many bookish people that he surely might have a good chance of disposing of them."

"The very thing," replied Roger. "I am sure Alick will do it."

It was a doleful business, packing up those dear old books. Roger pretended to be in good spirits as he nailed up the cases, but it made me think of the hammering down of coffin-lids, and when they were gone I felt much inclined to sit down in the midst of the dreary waste of tools and sawdust and empty shelves and have "a good cry."

But when, ten days later, we received a cheque from Alick for a hundred dollars, we agreed that we ought not to regret the sacrifice.

CHAPTER XXIV

FIREBRANDS

AS the weeks went on, the dispute between the two factions in our congregation became hotter. Soon several families withdrew from the church, and one-third of our original congregation would not speak to another third. There remained but a feeble minority who continued to be on speaking terms with the extreme partisans, and of these, unhappily, not a few occupied themselves with carrying tales between the other divisions. In fact, it seemed to me that Roger had nearly as much need to start a crusade against back biting, clamour, and evil-speaking as against liquor-selling. Now and then, indeed, there was a brief respite in the war of words, but we were rarely suffered to remain for above a day or two even in comparative peace.

When things are in such a combustible state, it hardly needs a spark to start a conflagration, yet it is just at such times that every one takes to playing with fire. After living through that year, it no longer surprises me that some governments have an inveterate objection to public meetings, for, for weeks, we never knew what might not come of the chance meeting of two or three people in the street or at the door of our temporary church. Positively, I used to dread the assembling of the members of the society known as the

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"Ladies' Aid," for many of them had a kind of perverted gift of tongues, and I could not always trust even my own.

"A storm in a teacup," some folk may say, but if you chance to be one of those little people who have their living and their interests at the storm-centre in the said teacup, it scarcely lessens the danger of shipwreck that the whole affair is so very small. Besides, it is a truism that greatness and littleness are largely matters of proportion, and, judged by some standards of comparison, the fight going on at Willow Point was a very Waterloo in magnitude. Roger said the strife was for souls; and did not the Master Himself demand, "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul" ?

I know, however, that some onlookers were interested in our struggle, for presently it came into the minds of certain leaders of the great temperance movement in Ontario to come down to Willow Point and give us a help against the mighty. Frankly, I for one wished they had stayed away, for if anything were needed to add bitterness to the contest, it appeared to be the coming of some of these strangers.

They did not offer their swords to serve under Roger's captainship, but they first organized a grand crusade, and then asked Roger to join them and to arrange to let them have their meetings in the hall which was still our Sabbath Day's refuge.

The meetings were well attended. The speakers were enthusiastic, but none, in my humble judgment, could compare with Roger for power and passion, though he never insulted the reasoning faculties of his audience, as one or two of the others did. I have not a doubt that much good resulted from that week of fervid eloquence

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and infectious enthusiasm, but it did not tend to heal the divisions amongst our people.

Dickey not only refused to be drawn by any blandishments within the circle reached by the winged words of the orators, but ostentatiously set to work to improve his hotel. He hung out flaming advertisements, like flags of defiance, in his windows, and threatened to bring against Roger an action for libel, on account of words which my husband was reported to have used on the platform. Assured by his lawyers that he had no case, the inn-keeper threatened to take the law into his own hands, and for days I was in terror lest he should make some brutal attack on his whilom friend.

I was not in the least surprised, therefore, when, early one afternoon, our newsmonger, Sten, came tearing up from the village with the excited announcement that "Torrance done it now. He's ahavin' his revenge, as he always said he would."

My first thought was for Roger, who had just gone to Willow Point. "What has happened?" I gasped out.

"The worst thing that could a befell us, an' the church so hard up!" exclaimed Sten. "Where's the parson, ma'am? Where is Mr. Dale?"

"He has gone to the village," I answered, with a great sense of relief. "But tell me quickly, Mr. Pepler, what is it?"

"Well, the old church has went afire, that's all, an' I thought the parson had oughter know it as soon as any one; but maybe, as he ain't on hand, you'll come down wi' me, an' say what we's to do about things!"

"I will certainly come," I said, running for my hat.

"It's a reel mean trick o' Torrance's, I'd never a thought it of him," said Sten, as he tried in vain to persuade his old horse to emulate the speed of a city

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fire-department animal. "Git along, Sue. Hustle up, old gel, or it'll all be ashes afore we gits down!"

As we dashed through the village we saw people running madly hither and thither, and when we came in sight of St. James's the flames were grasping our poor little church with the murderous clutch of an octopus. A company of men with buckets and a hose, and an odd-looking engine with a huge handle worked by human power, were toiling like heroes to get the conflagration under control, but they knew that with their feeble appliances it was useless to try to save the old church. In the line of dirty, smoke-begrimed, coatless men who were passing the splashing buckets from hand to hand, I soon discovered my husband and Marmaduke Churchill.

A fresh wind was blowing from the church towards the village, carrying great embers far and wide, and every now and then there rose a cry of dismay from the watching crowd, as one of these embers lighted on the shingles of some neighbouring roof. Men, women, and children were labouring in breathless anxiety to save their little homes from destruction—only Torrance Dickey and his satellite, feeble-minded Edmund Clark, seemed unable in the wild press of business to find anything to do.

With a cigar between his teeth, and his fingers in his waistcoat pockets, Dickey looked on, grim and stolid, but Clark was as excited as a schoolboy over a bonfire—more excited than any child in the crowd. As sparks and blazing shingles flew over our heads, carrying the danger we knew not whither, the ne'er-do-weel shouted and snapped his fingers and laughed in uncanny glee. At last in a rage, one rough fellow, breaking from the line of bucket-passers to rush towards a cottage, from

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the roof of which curled a grey wreath of smoke, threw over Clark a pailful of water, crying, "We will spare you that, you fool! Go home. Get out of the road, if you can't do nothin' else."

After that Neddy kept at a safer distance from the perturbed men, but still he could not forbear to shriek and clap his hands whenever a falling beam shot skyward a great shower of sparks.

With these two exceptions, and that of the very little folk, there was not one of us who did not do something to help, if it was only to bring pitchers of fresh spring water to the thirsty men at the pump, or to carry to safety the household goods of some one of our neighbours, whose smoking roof threatened destruction to all it covered.

The men made a gallant fight to save the house next to St. James's, but in spite of them the flames reached over from the church and locked the cottage in a deadly embrace. The heat had long been so intense that its inmates had saved scarcely anything but themselves, and even the poor sticks of furniture that they had dragged into their little garden served only to make a new bonfire.

By this time half a dozen fresh fires were starting, and our people were almost in despair.

"There won't be none of Willow Point left by night!" cried Sten, in a frenzy, hurrying vaguely hither and thither with a great bucket, from which, at every step, he splashed water over himself or his neighbours. "The place will be swep' fair out of existence afore mornin'. It's awful, jest awful! There's the hoss-sheds a-blazin' like mad, and Joshua Smith's is alight, an' old Sarah Grant's cottage is smokin', an' the corner store's bound to break out in a minute, an', in fac', I jest tell you,

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Willow Point's ruined an' done for, an' that's what comes o' squabblin' 'bout church affairs! I always knowed it 'ud bring us to a bad end."

"Hush, Sten!" I said, "don't discourage the workers."

But Sten shook his head so energetically that he administered a liberal sprinkling of water to my thin slippers from the bucket he was carrying towards the doomed horse-sheds. "I tell you, ma'am, it's comin' true what I said about our candlestick," he muttered dolefully. "It's bein' took, sure enough, off of its place, an' you an' me, Mrs. Dale, we'll never live to see another English church at Willow Point."

"Don't be so sure of that. This misfortune may turn out a blessing in disguise. I dare say it will help, not hinder, us," I said, thinking vaguely of the insurance, and anxious to administer what consolation I could to our much-tried people. "Good often comes from what looks like evil, and many a town flourishes better than before after a big fire. Now, at any rate, we shall be obliged to make a fresh start."

Dickey, standing close by, still idle, suddenly faced round upon me with a strange, questioning look in his black eyes. It was an evil look, and never, even on that dreadful afternoon in the graveyard when he had called down curses on my husband, had he seemed so repulsive to me as at this time. Till now I had always insisted that there was much good in Dickey; but what could one say for a man who, when the whole community was in such distress, would stand nursing his wrath and refusing to put out a hand to save his old neighbours from ruin? I did not hear till afterwards that, at the first alarm, Dickey had rushed to take his place in the line, and that some of the men (our people,

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more shame to them!) had refused to let him touch a bucket.

Suddenly, whilst I was still gazing at Dickey, there was a rush and a roar. The church roof and the walls fell in, sparks and smoke and flames leaped skyward, and dear old St. James's was nothing but a heap of blazing ruins.

As the crash came, a long, low cry rose from the lips of the onlookers—a cry of despair. But it had hardly died away when it was answered, or rebuked, by a cheer from a knot of small boys stationed in a watch-tower in the branches of a tall tree. It was taken up by the men in the line, and a moment later, with noise and rattle and dust unspeakable, came the engine from Haverstock. With this good help our amateur fire-brigade saved the village, though not without much loss and damage. Two families had been burnt out, many a roof was charred and injured, and our poor old church was a mass of smouldering embers. But the damage did not end there.

Like every other event that happened about that time, the fire served to embitter the feud that was raging amongst us. In the first place, no one doubted that it was of incendiary origin. Soon after noon some children had discovered smoke pouring from the cracks of the doors and windows, but, boylike, had waited to make an exhaustive investigation before giving the alarm, and they all insisted that they had seen through a broken window a quantity of straw and paper against some of the pews. They also asserted that they had smelled the fumes of paraffin.

It was not only Sten who suspected Dickey of being the instigator of the crime, and when some bold person ventured to tax the big inn-keeper with it he refused either to confess or deny his responsibility in the matter.

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In fact, he did nothing but laugh, and ask, "When the depitation 'ud be along to arst fur his subscription fur the new church?"

After that, who could doubt that he had had a hand in it, but as it turned out, the disgraceful stories that got about added grievously to our difficulties.

When we claimed the amount for which the church was insured, the company demurred, talked of suspicious circumstances, insisted on investigations, and, at last, sent an agent (professing a desire to make clear our claim for compensation) to cross-examine me! It appeared that some busybody, Dickey most likely, had reported my luckless observation to Sten that the fire might prove a help to us rather than a hindrance. The agent professed to be satisfied with my explanations; but that did not prevent ugly whispers going the rounds of the neighbourhood that "the parson's folk knew more of the church fire than they cared to tell!"

Now, it was Roger who in a weak moment suggested that perhaps our opportunities for usefulness at Willow Point had come to an end. He spoke of our returning to England; but I was determined not to retreat till we knew the truth about the paper and the paraffin and all the rest of it. It would never have done for the honour of our church, to say nothing of our own, to allow the dreadful slanders to gain importance from our sudden departure. No, there was nothing to be done but to insist on a thorough investigation of all the facts, and if we could not thus arrive at the truth we must live down the lie.

Of course Roger agreed with me in his heart all the time, but he was worn out with the struggle, and I did wish that it had been possible for him to give up his burdensome charge without delay.

CHAPTER XXV

THE SOLUTION OF THE MYSTERY

INTENSELY and painfully as the mystery of the fire interested us, we could not give up to its investigation all our thoughts. I need not dwell on the numberless vexations and annoyances of this troublous time. We were forced now to devise measures for the building of a new church, and some of the weaker brethren urged that we should make terms with Dickey.

I am quite sure that Dickey himself expected that we should humble ourselves to accept his bounty. At any rate, he took pains to conciliate different members of our flock, and one day Sten reported that the inn-keeper had sounded him as to the advisability of starting a round-robin requesting Roger to resign.

But a remnant of the congregation was still doggedly loyal, and of the others, many had joined themselves either to the Presbyterians or the Methodists before the fire. The suggestion of the round-robin was therefore received with the scorn it merited, and in a mood of grim determination our people set themselves to the task of rebuilding the little church.

Slowly and painfully, by little and little, as their fathers had cleared their fields of stumps and roots and stones, they set to work to gather funds, and I will say for them that, in this matter at least, they showed themselves worthy descendants of the rugged pioneers. They

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displayed, too, an ingenuity in their money-making that would have done credit to those early settlers, who could wrest from their own woods almost all the necessaries and not a few of the luxuries of life.

When we were making our usual round of visits in the country, Roger and I were frequently introduced to the "church calf," or "church pig," blissfully fattening in field or sty, all unconscious of its high destiny. "Bulldin' butter," and "Buildin' fowls," to use Sten's phrase, were commodities that in those days often found their way to Haverstock market, and I imagine there must have been keen competition for these articles, for it was only the best that were thus devoted to the church.

During the early part of the winter our supporters also drove a fine trade in balls of carpet-rags ready sewn for weaving, and in hooked mats, adorned with wonderful conventions that stood for dogs or cats or maple leaves. They did even more than this. They begged diligently, particularly the children; but with all their efforts the Building Fund increased extremely slowly, and some pessimists amongst us expressed doubts as to whether the church "would be up by the end of the century."

In the meantime, Torrance Dickey circulated the information that "the church would be give for the askin', if the folk could persuade Mr. Dale to make a move." Later, when our difficulties seemed to be still thickening about us, he changed his terms a little, and now it was in the mouths of all the gossips that "Dickey said he'd get the contract drawed up at once, if only Mr. Dale 'ud say he'd like to have it done."

But Mr. Dale was obdurate, though the dispute with the insurance company was still dragging its slow length along, and our overburdened people could hardly

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make up half the usual contributions to the church funds.

Suddenly our affairs took a new turn, which resulted, of course, in a general revival of the flagging interest of all the gossips for ten miles round Willow Point.

One Friday morning, when Roger was busy with his sermon in his dismantled study, and I, like the woman in the parable, was sweeping the house diligently, I heard a squeaking of ungreased wheels in the lane, and guessed that it was Sten, bound on some errand of more or less importance. The buggy stopped opposite the kitchen door—as was the way of all buggies, for our front entrance (according to a Willow Point custom) appeared to have withdrawn itself from the world to the peaceful contemplation of our little flower-garden, and by this time I had almost forgotten the days when I tried to train my visitors to make use of that formal but roundabout way into our abode. According to another custom of the neighbourhood, I went promptly to the window to discover (if I could) what had brought us the honour of Sten's visit.

Usually he came alone, but this time, rather to my dismay (for the dinner hour was very near), I perceived that he had not only brought with him his son Jimmy, but also Neddy Clark, who was sitting in the rig in a most dejected, tumble-down attitude. Sten, as often, was evidently excited, and I did hope he had not come to report fresh disaster. Alas, that seemed only too probable, however, for, though a stranger might have been forgiven for judging his expression to be one of unalloyed pleasure, I knew that Sten's delight in being able to obtain news of any sort equalled that of the most accomplished special correspondent, and that it was

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therefore impossible to forecast from his expression the character of the intelligence.

Upon this occasion indeed Sten's behaviour was more inscrutable than usual. Whilst his son was tying the horse to the post he stood on guard beside the buggy, then he suddenly flung himself upon the abject Neddy, and hauled him down, limp and unresisting as a sack of flour, seized his coat collar and drove him before him to the door.

"Sten, what are you doing?" I demanded.

Evidently the man of many rôles was now acting the part of county constable. But of what crime poor, half-imbecile Neddy was supposed to be guilty, and why he should be haled to the parsonage, did not as yet appear.

"Is the parson to home?" gasped Pepier. "Weil, I'm glad to hear it, fur here is a most important case what demands his investigation. This here scamp, this rascal, this drunken good-fur-nothin'"—and at each opprobrious epithet Sten gave his captive a shake, which caused his teeth to chatter in his head—"this wretch—I can't call him nothin' better—has confessed to a awful crime! Yes, an' I've brung along a witness what's ready to swear—same as me—to the very words out of his mouth. Jimmy, boy, come along in, will you? Maybe you'll be wanted, an' anyway you might jest give a hand in gittin' this here stoopid, low-down critter up to the parson's study."

I saw it was useless to protest. Indeed, I could not even contrive to give Roger a word of warning before Sten, dragging his nerveless prisoner after him, had rushed at the narrow stairs. Gaining the landing, he gave such an energetic knock at the study door that it flew open as of its own accord. Then I heard him proclaiming joyously, "Mr. Dale, sir, here's the

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solution o' that shockin' myst'ry that's bin perplexin' of us all fur weeks. Here's the solution, an' folks is quite right—Dickey's hand is in it as plain as day."

The unhappy "solution" showed such a tendency to slide into a heap on the floor, that his captor, after a futile effort to straighten him up to a proper attitude of respect and attention, jerked him into a wicker armchair. Still, however, he kept his hand on the poor fellow's collar, as if he might possibly gain courage to make a dash for liberty.

Roger, sitting at the other end of the room, behind a table covered with books and papers, possibly suggested to Neddy's feeble mind some awful recollection of a judge. At any rate, he began to cry out piteously for mercy.

"Sit down, Sten," commanded my husband with severity. "What has happened?"

Pepler obeyed, but was careful to back his chair against the door—a precaution which reminded me of that memorable evening years earlier, when he had been the prisoner.

"Mr. Dale an' ma'am," he began, "Jimmy an' me was drivin' from Haverstock this morning, when who should us see but Neddy here, settin' by the road an' beggin' every one that passed fur a lift. Fust I says, 'No'; then thinks I, he's but a poor critter, an' it's right to give a hand to the weak, so I pulis Sue up, an' tells Neddy to git in between us. Well, he don't say much till we come to the church—or rayther to the place where the church had oughter be—then he falls a-laughin' an' a-chucklin', fair ridic'lous. 'What's the joke, Neddy?' says I, humourin' him a bit, same as one does to a baby. Then off he goes 'bout the fire—a-braggin' that he knowed more about it than folk thought for, an' that he

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warn't goin' to tell. 'Oh, hoi' thinks I, 'this here's gettin' ser'ous,' an' I puts a question to him, now an' again, cautious-like, jest to keep his tongue a-waggin'. Well, when we comes in sight o' the bridge, he lets on he'd ilke to git out; but Jim an' me, we had him tight in between us, an' we teil him, 'No, we's a-goin' to take him a bit furdur.' Fac, Mrs. Dale, I rayther think to keep him quiet through the vlliage, I did promise that I'd arst you to give him a bite—ain't that so, Jimmy?"

Jimmy confirmed the statement, and I promised to honour the draught on my iarder, though we had not yet worked through Sten's circumlocutions to any comprehensible conclusion.

At this point Pepier signed to his son to take his place by the door, and came forward to the table to continue his narrative in a stage-whisper, supposed to be inaudible to the culprit. "Well, sir, as soon as we had a fair field an' no favour—meanin' by that, no danger o' eavesdroppers—I begun to talk casual-like 'bout what I've heerd o' the jails, an' I may say that—without sayin' positive one word that warn't true—I managed, wi' 'perhapes' an' 'I've-heerd-tells,' to work him up pretty good, an' now he's that skeered that I do believe he'll tell all he knows, sir."

"About what?"

"Why, the fire, sir! Didn't I teil you that comin' along he let on that he were workin' the best part o' one night, puttin' through them windows paper an' straw, what he stole—yes, stole," repeated Sten, in a loud voice for the wretched Neddy's benefit. "He stole 'em from Joe Sandford's, then he got Torrance to give him money fur a gallon o' coal-oil, an' he tipped it through them same windows on top o' the straw an' the paper

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fair into the pews. Last of all, he got a box o' matches an' struck 'em all together, an' flung 'em blazin' inter the old buildin'. In course, when it ketched, he was skeered an' runned away, but he done the deed all the same, an', in my opinion, he didn't do it outer his own head neither. Fac', as you may see, he reely ain't got no head wuth speakin' on to do anythin' outer, an' that business—done so open in the broad daylight—was pretty well planned too."

I couldn't see the matter in that light. If Sten were right, it was, in my opinion, a singular piece of blundering stupidity on Dickey's part.

With much pains, Neddy was induced to repeat to us the account he had given to Sten, and two points came out very clearly. He insisted that he had started the fire, and that he had obtained from Dickey the money for the paraffin.

"What made you think of burning the place, Neddy?" said Roger, gently. "Come, now, tell us all about it, and then you shall go down to the kitchen and have some dinner."

Neddy's dull face brightened. Roger's method was better than Sten's, for severity only scattered his poor wits further afield than usual. "Come, Ned, tell me truly. Why did you throw matches through the church windows?"

"Well, sir, I guessed it 'ud make a fine blaze, an' the place warn't no use to nobody, you see. Mr. Dickey said so, an' he knows. He said it 'ud be better for every one if the old church was burned up, outer the way—that's what he said."

"There!" exclaimed Sten, triumphantly. "What did I tell you, ma'am? Now, Jimmy, listen out wi' all yer ears, for us may hev to swear to this."

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"Yes," cried the idiot, suddenly, clapping his hands as he had done when the sparks flew skyward, "I knowed it 'ud make a lovely fire, an' Dickey, he wanted it outter the way. Yes, he wanted it done bad; an' next day he give me a coupie o' dollars."

"Well, sir, what'll us do?" said Pepler, when Neddy had been fed and sent on his way, with his weak mind divided between dim fears of punishment and joy at his present escape from the dire things Sten had threatened.

"We must think the thing over. This story may not be true," said Roger. "We have no right to condemn Dickey unheard."

"That's right, sir," said Sten, briskly; "but what I say is he should be took up an' made to say his say to a judge an' jury. There had oughter be a searchin' investigation, fur, I suppose, till the truth's out there won't be no chance of our gittin' our rights from the insurance comp'ny."

"Do nothing hastily, Sten," counselled Roger. "I do wish this story had never come up. The quarrel is quite bitter enough as it is, and the more I think of it, the less probable this tale of Neddy appears to me. It is not like Torrance, Sten. He strikes hard, if you will, but not in the dark."

Pepler looked crestfallen. "I thought I'd unairthed something that was a-goin to help us git the insurance," he muttered, "an' I don't think, sir, we owes much consid'ration to Torrance, neither."

"That is not the question, Sten. If Dickey were our worst enemy—which he is not—we have no right to tell against him a story resting on such evidence as this."

"Seems to me, sir, it fits in so neat with all the facts," said Sten, regretfully.

"To me it looks very like a lie," replied Roger.

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"Take my advice, Sten—tell Jimmy to hold his tongue, and let it go no further."

But it was too late to hush up the matter.

Neddy had already posted off to the "River House," and had given to his master his version of this latest chapter in the Willow Point scandal. The next news was that Dickey was inveighing against the meanness of Mr. Dale in trying to make Neddy swear that he had been bribed to set fire to the church.

"It's a foul lie!" roared Dickey. "When I fight, I fight fair; but these parsons—they'll do anythin' to get ahead of a fellow."

"It's a base lie!" echoed Ida. "As if father would stoop to do a trick like that. He does not make pretences, like some people, but he never plays any man false. He is the soul of honour."

It was Churchill who told me of Ida's hot indignation.

"After this I will never forgive the Dales!" she cried. "They make such professions, but when it comes to a test they are all hollow. Fancy their descending to such a lie to blacken father's character!"

"Are you sure they ever said it, Ida? Who told you?" said Churchill, man enough not to allow even his lady love to traduce in his hearing an absent friend. "Who started this lie?"

"Go and ask them," said Ida, "whether they did not have Ned Clark up in the study for an hour yesterday, making him tell lies about father?"

"I will ask them," replied Churchill. "There is some mistake somewhere. I am as certain that they would not spread such a lie as that Torrance would not do such a deed."

We told him how the thing had happened, and Churchill went back to Ida.

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"Mr. Dale does not believe the story," he said.

"Then he should not let people spread it!" cried the girl, passionately. "Oh, surely, they don't know the harm they are doing;" and suddenly she drew Churchill into another room, to show him Dickey, lying stupefied on a lounge. "If he ends like Oliver—and who can stop it?—his blood will be on the heads of those who have driven him to it," she whispered.

"Ida, Ida, you must not blame other people for all this!" cried Churchill, impelled, I suppose, to utter disagreeable truths by his troublesome sense of justice. "You know, even when I first came to Willow Point, he used sometimes to——"

"He has been ten times worse since that miserable meeting," she answered. "His old neighbours treat him like an outcast, hardly fit to live—the hypocrites!—and he feels it, for he is the most tender-hearted man who ever breathed. He feels it cruelly, and it is driving him to ruin."

"Ida, could you not persuade him to give up this place before it is too late? Think of Oliver."

"I do think of him, every day of my life; and if father loses himself like that wretch, I will never forgive the self-righteous people who drove him to it. I hate them!"

"Ida, don't," entreated Churchill; "I can't bear to hear you. Oh, if not for Torrance's sake, for your own persuade him to give up this place."

"Not until the Dales own that they have slandered him," said Ida. "He will never give it up till he has won the battle, and I will not ask him to go. He shall never have reason to think that I have turned against him too. Whatever happens, whatever he does, I will stand by him. I owe to him everything I have or am,

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or can ever hope to be, and I will be true, whoever fails him."

After that Churchill came to me in a state of desperation, but I could give him no comfort. Leaving me he fell in with Alick, who had just arrived to spend his Christmas holidays at home, and he poured his woes into the young scientist's sympathetic bosom.

Sitting on a snake-fence, overlooking the spot where Alick, long ago, had ploughed up the "thunder-stones," the two young men laid their heads together to devise some scheme by which they might save Ida from herself. The problem was even more baffling than the researches upon which Alick had recently been engaged, for it involved the overcoming of a perverse human will, and the plan which they worked out was anything but hopeful. Alick, though shadowed in the eyes of the Dickey's with his father's sins, was to penetrate, if possible, into the hotel; was to give a word of brotherly counsel to the girl herself; and was to persuade Mrs. Dickey to use her influence with her husband to induce him to change his business.

CHAPTER XXVI

A CHALLENGE

ALICK duly went to the "River House," though, as I could see when I chanced to meet him that morning in the village, he by no means enjoyed his errand. He went; but was unable to carry out the programme laid down. Ida had gone to town, but he saw Mrs. Dickey, and appealed to her to send the girl away, to make some determined effort to save her. He only succeeded, however, in frightening the poor woman into hysterics. Mrs. Dickey's distressed exclamations brought her husband to the rescue, and Alick, being his father's son, narrowly escaped the ignominy of being turned into the street with violence. Fortunately the sick woman pleaded for him, and Torrance, mollified by his earnest apologies, condescended at last to admit that "a man could not fairly be held responsible for his father's sins, specially when the two fellers is as different as chalk and cheese 'cept for their love o' meddlin' wi' other folks' business."

Alick was retreating, having done more harm than good, as he sorrowfully confessed to Churchill, when Dickey gave him "a chance in an unexpected quarter."

"Come out into the yard, lad, and let us talk this thing over from beginning to end," said the inn-keeper, vaguely hoping perhaps that "the professor," as Alick

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was called in the village, might find a way for him out of his troubles and back into the good graces of his neighbours.

Pacing up and down beneath the willows, Dickey told, from another standpoint, the story I have written here, and demanded Alick's sympathy.

Alick gave it readily enough, and then tried to execute Churchill's delicate commission in the spirit, if not in the letter, by endeavouring with desperate earnestness to make Dickey see the terrors of the whirlpool towards which he was drifting.

Dickey listened patiently, but insisted that he was in no danger. His head was strong; he was not like that poor fool Oliver, he knew when to stop, and he never pressed any man to drink more than was good for him. Alick could not make him see that he was in the least peril, but before he took leave ventured on one last appeal, for the sake of Ida. "Mr. Dickey, think of Ida," he entreated. "Do you know what people are saying here in the village and at Cleeve, and even at Haverstock?"

"Lies, of course," answered Dickey. "What is it now?"

"That you are using Ida to make money—that she serves you as a decoy to get young fellows to your place to drink. Oh, sir, if you cannot bring yourself to give up this dreadful trade, at least send Ida away."

"Where?" muttered Dickey.

"Anywhere. Send her to study something—music, drawing, whatever she chooses—in the city, send her travelling, or, if she is willing— You know, sir— Churchill told me that you knew—that there is a new home waiting for her, close to the village."

"Did Churchill put you up to this?"

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"No, sir ; not to speaking to you ; that was never mentioned between us. Only do send Ida away from here, if possible."

"She is the light of my life, boy. You don't know what you are asking."

"I do, sir. Because she is so much to you that is not a reason, with you, for risking her ruin. You love her too well for that."

"You are right, Alick. I would not harm her for the world, but she is taking no harm. I tell you, though she has grown up in this sink of iniquity—this gateway to hell, as those temperance fellows call it—I tell you there is not a girl in the village, not one in Haverstock, that can compare with my Ida. Look here, lad, I promise you this—she shall go the moment you can show me that she is really taking harm in this place."

That was the utmost Alick could get from him ; and perhaps, under the circumstances, it was a good deal.

Torrance held out his big hand at parting, and clasped that of the young student warmly, saying, "You are a good fellow, Alick, and I've always been proud of you as a Willow Point boy. I know you mean well both by me an' Ida, but the trouble is with you scientific chaps, you don't see the real world as it is under your nose. Call a place a hotel, an' it stands in your mind for everythin' that's wicked, no matter how decent it is, an' how well kept. Call a place a church, an' you fancy it a little heaven, though the folk that go there, from the minister down, may be hypocrites as double-dyed as him that, when he wants to git his claws into some poor wretch, pretends to be an angel of light. Yes, though professin' Christians may lie an' backbite an' slander like serpents, you young people in your innocence think a church is bound to be a good place.

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Now I've lived long enough to get a glimpse now an' again at the under-side of things, an' let me teil you that when you've oncet got a good look at the wrong side of 'em, the nice, pretty, comp'ny-manner kind o' goods, all fur show, don't ever seem so fascinatin' after."

When Ida came home, Dickey promptly reported to her all that had passed between Alick and himself, and, needless to say, she hotly resented the young men's interference. But Dickey, sitting cosily over the stove in his special den, with his pipe and a glass of hot whisky and water, took a more lenient view of the affair than he had done in the morning. He was even a little sorry that he had done anything that might set Ida against her English lover.

"Don't take on so, lassie. They don't mean no harm, and they both think a heap on you, that's plain to be seen. You see, Churchill ain't used to seein' ladies doin' the things you does here."

But Ida refused to be mollified by such suggestions. "It isn't that," she cried. "Marmaduke is quite content that I should scrub and make beds, and even black stoves, once in a way (though his fine sisters in England don't do it), but I believe he is afraid that I shall get to like wine and whisky myseif. They don't trust me, and I hate them i"

Something in the girl's manner frightened Dickey. "I wonder," he said slowly, "if that's what them fellers really has in their heads, when they talk of my ruinin' you?"

"I dare say," said Ida, tossing her pretty head. "They have impudence enough to say anything, but I'll teach them not to interfere."

The girl stitched furiously at the cushion-cover she

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was embroidering, while Torrance meditatively puffed out clouds of smoke.

Suddenly Ida startled him with a question, "Do you believe, father, that there is anything in this notion of heredity that they talk so much of nowadays in the magazines? Do you think that a man gets from his parents a wish to steal or a liking for drink, in the same way as he inherits dark eyes, or a long nose, or a squint?"

"I don't know, my girl. Maybe Alick Pepler could tell you."

"I don't want to talk to Alick Pepler about anything, father. But, think now, have you ever seen it yourself? You knew Oliver's father, didn't you? Did you ever see him the worse for drink?"

"Once in a way, maybe."

"And Neddy Clark's people?"

"Neddy's a fool," muttered Dickey. "He don't count."

"Answer me, father. Try to think. Of the people who come here—which of them had fathers the same as themselves?"

I fancy that at first Dickey felt some relief in this suggestion. Perhaps it seemed to lift from his shoulders a portion of the responsibility which his neighbours were so anxious to fasten upon him; but Ida's last question gave him "the horrors," as he confessed later, and somehow fixed the whole conversation in his memory.

"You knew my own father, didn't you, daddy?" she asked. "Tell me, is it true, as Ceilia once said, that he had been drinking before he borrowed that dreadful horse from Sten? is it true that he often took too much? Speak out, father—I do want to know."

"About him? Well, lassie, haven't we always told

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you that he was one in a thousand? The best doctor I ever saw, an' so good an' kind an' patient."

"But did he ever take too much? I want to know what is behind us—Celia and me. Tell me the truth plainly."

"He was no one's enemy but his own," sighed Dickey.

Ida was answered. "Then Sten's tale was true?"

"Yes, I s'pose so, more's the pity."

"And that is why Alick is afraid for me?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe it's only that he don't think very much o' me fur a parent and guardian." Then, after many more slow whiffs he added, "Ida, if you are afraid for yourself, I won't say another word to keep you here. Maybe you'd like a trip to England now—jest for a change? How would it be to drop down on Celia an' take her to them Swiss mountains, an' to It'ly, an' to all them fine places you was reading of the other day? You reelly are lookin' a bit pale an' it 'ud be a lovely trip for you. I can spare the money easy, since they won't come on me fur the church."

"I'd love to go, dad, if you'd go too."

"No, no, little one, that 'ud never do. I'm past the travellin' age, an' if I did, the folk 'ud say the parson had bested me after all. No, no, I can't go."

"Then I won't either, dad. It would be no fun to go travelling alone."

"But you could go straight to Celia—or—what would you say now to takin' Marmaduke along? He'd go gladly, for half a word from you."

"What do you mean, father?"

"Come now, lassle, don't pretend to be too blind. Churchill's a fine fellow, an' I'd as soon trust you to

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him as to any man I know, for it's not in nature that I can keep you always."

But Ida, sore and angry at the thought of being the subject of discussion for all our gossiping village, cried pettishly, "What, father, you surely don't want me to marry him? You must be anxious to get me off your hands."

"That I'm not, my dear. Time enough yet for your marryin', but I don't want to stand in your light. You've paid us back double for anything we ever did for you, Ida, an' I'll never forget how true an' faithful you has stood by us in these last few months, but, fur all that, I won't stand in your light, lassie—not if I know it."

"You are not standing in my light. I am going to stay here with you as long as you will let me. People may say what they choose. My place is here, and here I'll stay."

"Then you don't care about Churchill?"

"Not a bit. He isn't fit to black your boots, father. That's what I think of him."

And right upon this uncompromising avowal of contempt, who should enter but poor Churchill himself—anxious, eager, hopeful for a kind word from his capricious lady.

"I've bin speakin' to Ida about her goin' away fur a bit," began Dickey. "From what Alick said this mornin' I made out that you two fellers has been talkin' the idea over, but talkin's no use, fur Ida ain't fur goin'."

"I am sure, Ida, that you really ought to go away for a little while at least," counselled the young man.

"You certainly need a change."

"Physically, mentally, or morally?" queried the girl,

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with a look that might have warned the rash adventurer that he was on perilous ground.

"It would do you good in every way," he returned.

"I am not sick. Why should I go?" insisted Ida, with a frown.

Cautiously, in disquieting fear of mortally offending Ida, Churchill stated his reasons for giving this advice, but it was like dropping a lighted match into a powder magazine.

"No, I intend to stay at home," she answered. "Until father wants to go away, I will not go either, and I should thank the Willow Point folk very heartily if they would give up meddling with my affairs."

Churchill would have done well on this occasion to take her "No" for an answer, but he was not so prudent. Instead of doing so, he once more rehearsed in her ears all the arguments and objections that she found so irritating.

Ida persisted that her place was with the kind protectors who had taken care of her for years; then suddenly accused Churchill of want of faith in her power to resist temptation. He blushed, stammered, but could not deny the charge; and in anger Ida told him that he had not the shadow of a right to interfere with her or advise her.

Churchill still pleaded and argued and warned her, and blundered generally, I suppose; and Ida, determined to assert her independence, snatched up Dickey's glass, still half full of whisky and water, and, in a kind of bravado, drank it off.

"There, that shows you how much I think of you and your warnings," she said. "I am not afraid for myself, and you have no right to worry me with your silly notions."

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Though unspeakably dismayed by her reckless mood, Churchill, English fashion, stuck doggedly to his guns, and still tried to reason Ida back to a right frame of mind. "Promise me, oh, promise me," he besought her, "that you won't take that stuff any more."

"I shall promise nothing. I shall do what I choose," she answered. "I am not accountable to you for my actions, and I think, with my father—what you used to think not so very long ago—that there is no harm whatever in the moderate use of stimulants."

She put out her hand, as if to mix herself another glass, but Dickey rose, in evident alarm, and carried the stuff away, saying, with an uneasy laugh, "No, no, little woman; you have had enough for one night."

I am sure she only did it in teasing defiance of Churchill's assumption of a right to advise her; but she had taken enough to make her cheeks flush and her head swim.

"Go!" she said excitedly, when Churchill continued to protest and remonstrate. "Go unless you really wish to worry me into the ruin you are always preaching about. I don't want your advice, and I won't have it. No; nor your love either! You may give up coining here, for I shall never change. I won't have anything to say to a man who is hand and glove with my father's slanderers and traducers. I tell you once for all—his friends are my friends, his enemies are my enemies, and what is good enough for him is good enough for me."

CHAPTER XXVII

A DEEP CONSPIRACY

THUS dismissed, Churchill, late as it was, hurried off to see Alick. He found him hard at work with his books and specimens in the little old bedroom which they had shared during Churchill's first summer on the farm.

The young Englishman flung himself down on the bed, in the midst of the papers and minerals, and Alick, rescuing half a dozen sheets of closely-written manuscript from Churchill's boots, inquired, "How did she receive your suggestions, Marmaduke?"

"Wouldn't even listen to 'em. She's bound she'll sink or swim with Dickey. She is enraged at our meddling; but I don't care—even if she won't look at me—she shan't go straight to ruin, if I can help it. Things are getting worse and worse. She was in a reckless mood to-night. Do you know what she did? She suddenly laid hold of Dickey's glass of whisky—you know how stiff he makes it—and tossed it off like— God help us all, Alick! If she begins that, there is no hope for her."

Churchill jerked himself to a sitting posture to gaze at his friend with despairing eyes. As for Alick, he flung his precious papers from him into a corner, where his mother found them in the morning, and turned

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round to exclaim with decision, "That will never do. We must stop that somehow."

"I'd like to know how. She will not listen to you or me. What can we do?"

"Perhaps she only did it out of bravado, just to show her independence," suggested Alick, more quietly.

"Perhaps. But, Alick, you don't know how easy it is for some of us to get a taste for it. Even now there are times when I can hardly pass it; and—and—it seems sickening to mention such a thing in connection with Ida, but—even women like her do sometimes fall into the way of craving for it. It's maddening to think we can't get her away from there. Alick, you're cleverer than I am by a long chalk—can't you plan out some way of saving her?"

Alick frowned and rumped up his hair, as he often did when thinking hard, but he "could see no way out."

"I'd give anything to save her," groaned Churchill.

"I'd even give up the chance of ever seeing her again, if that would do any good; but, Alick, I have a horrible feeling that she is doomed. Why do the people allow such places to be built?"

"It's a bad business," admitted Alick; "but, after all, no great harm has been done yet. Perhaps nothing worse will come of it than a headache, which will teach Ida by experience the folly of touching the rubbish."

"I should not feel so bad about it," muttered Churchill—"though I hate somehow to see a lady drinking spirits—but some one told me Ida's father ruined himself by drink. Is that true, Alick? Surely you know."

Alick told him what he did know, and Churchill was by no means reassured.

"Is there not any one belonging to Ida who might

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have power to get her away from Dickey?" he asked, after a pause. "Didn't Celia ever talk of any aunt or uncle—any one who might have some control over her? Think, Alick, think!"

Alick shook his head.

But in a moment Churchill's face brightened. "There is Celia herself," he cried. "Of course, she is a long way off, but surely, surely—if she only knew—she would come home. She must come and try what she can do. Where is she now, I wonder? Does she write to Mrs. Dale or to your father? How can we get at her, Alick?"

"She must be at sea now," said Alick, slowly. "She is due to play at the Astell Hall in New York at the end of this week."

"That's luck!" cried Churchill. "Then surely she will be able to do something."

"I expect that she will be very full of engagements," said Alick, drily. "Perhaps she may not see that she can come."

"But surely—her only sister. She would not let anything stand in the way of coming to her when she needs her so badly."

"Ida would say that she did not need her."

"Of course, of course. Ida must not know that she is coming. Can't we get Mrs. Dale to help us to plan this thing out?"

They came to me next morning, and sat for over an hour in the kitchen all amongst the flour, while I made up my bread. Churchill wanted me to go myself to meet Celia at New York, and to bring her off by force (if need were) to Willow Point; but Alick was not quite so unreasonable. He admitted speedily that it was quite impossible for me to go, so close on Christmas

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too, and presently he magnanimously offered to go himself, declaring that he had had some thought of spending his holiday in New York (for the benefit of his work) instead of coming home. I could see that Churchill had no great confidence in Alick's influence over Celia, but, since this seemed the best that could be done at such short notice, he gloomily acquiesced in the plan.

I was at first surprised that Alick should know so much about Celia's movements, and then I was sorry, for I saw it meant that he still cherished hopes that might only lead to his undoing. However, the presence of the other disconsolate lover made it impossible to discuss Alick's private affairs, and I did not see him alone till after his momentous journey to New York.

Sometimes Roger says I am a born conspirator; at other times he declares that I ought to have been a novelist, because I love so dearly to manage other people's matters, especially their love affairs; but to have these two sighing lovers on my hands at once was a little too much even for me. Besides, I had very little confidence in their judgment, and could not heartily wish either to succeed. However, neither Alick nor Marmaduke wanted advice; all they desired was assistance. They asked me to write "a nice friendly letter to Celia," for Alick to deliver, pressing her to come at once to her sister, and I am sure I did my utmost to put the case strongly without telling any untruths. They asked me also to give Celia an invitation to visit me, so as to obviate her possible objection to making such a sudden descent upon her old friends.

At last Churchill and I thought everything had been planned out, but Alick suddenly remarked: "What is to be done, if I can't persuade her to come?"

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"Telegraph to me, and I'll send your father down," said Churchill, promptly. "She'll come to please him, if she will for anybody; and get her we must, if we have to bring her by force."

Before the young men left, I drew Churchill aside, and told him that he really was too free with his advice, and that he was going the very way to drive a high-spirited girl like Ida into mischief. He was much distressed, and promised that he would go that night to beg Ida's pardon; but once more, alas, I soon had cause to regret that I had meddled.

Late that evening, when it was nearly time for all sensible people to be in bed, Churchill rushed in again wild-eyed and despairing. "I went to Dickey's as you said," he cried, "but I could do no good. It was dreadful! Celia must come, Mrs. Dale, and quickly. It is our only hope of saving Ida. Surely Celia will be able to get her away from that vile den. If you had seen her to-night——"

He did not finish his sentence. He broke off with a hot blush that told me what he was ashamed to put into words, and made my heart sick for our bright, beautiful Ida. Alas! if the best chance of saving her rested with Celia, what real hope remained? Was she not indeed doomed, as Churchill said?

"She says she will stand by Dickey to the end. She pretends to think he can do no wrong. It is horrible! What will become of her? What will become of her?"

He sat with his head bowed down upon his hands, and I could do nothing but listen to his half-inarticulate lamentations. "It is such a dreadful thing for a girl," he sighed, adding hastily, "Now you must not think it was worse than it was."

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"No," I answered at random, "we must not make the worst of things. Ida loves to tease."

"Yes, that's all right," he answered quickly. "Half the girls do—it's their nature, I suppose; but, Mrs. Dale, it is madness for her to—to—act as she does. I can forgive her for anything but that."

I really thought that Churchill's round face was growing long and pale with the labours and anxieties of these days, but that night I could not get him away from our house till close on midnight, and I know that he was up long before dawn, to make sure that Alick should catch the early train for Buffalo. I counselled him now to keep away from Ida, and during the time of Alick's absence he obeyed my behest. I could not in common humanity, however, forbid him our house too, and every night for hours we had him on our hands, sometimes sanguine and talkative, oftener lugubrious and grimly silent.

Meanwhile Alick had set forth on "his adventure, brave and new," with feelings scarcely more enviable, as I guessed, than those of the tortured lover he had left behind.

He had not seen Celia for over three years. He had never even had a line or a message from her, though he had contrived by some means best known to himself to keep informed as to her whereabouts and her doings. From this knowledge of the current of her outer life, I suppose he had gained, by the sympathy of love, some inkling of what her inner history might be. Yet—he told me himself—that when at last he stood waiting on the wharf at New York for the "Cyprian" to come in, he was so doubtful as to her reception of him, that he felt sorely tempted to run away.

But his first sight of Celia conquered that impulse

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once for all. As she stood on the deck high above him, amongst the impatient crowd of her fellow-passengers, all eager to land—to clasp hands with some waiting friend—to accomplish some pressing business—Celia looked indifferent, impassive. But her stately height, her dark, radiant beauty, forbade that even strangers should pass her by unnoticed, and Alick felt a kind of uneasy pleasure in hearing her admired.

“Who is she?” asked one.

“Oh, that is Sandford’s new violinist. She plays to-morrow night at the Astell Hall, and if she is half as clever as she is beautiful—which, by the way, some people are unkind enough to doubt—she’ll make a brilliant success.”

“What, is that Celia Garnett—the Canadian?” (The speakers, who had come down to meet some members of Sandford’s company, were evidently well up in all the gossip of the musical world, and Alick listened to their idle talk with painful interest.)

“Yes, that is Celia herself,” murmured the second speaker again—“at least, it should be from the pictures. They say Sandford is mad over her—and it looks like it. There he comes now.”

Listening to all this, trouble and anger gradually took possession of Alick’s heart. This man Sandford—who was he? To look at—alas for poor jealous Alick!—“a very parfitt gentle knight,” with regular features, broad shoulders, and graceful carriage. He was, in fact, strong in the points where Alick was conscious that he was most weak, and—he was always at Celia’s side.

Alick, watching the girl intently, as Sandford bent towards her talking with earnestness, thought he read love in her face, and he declared afterwards that if it had not

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been for Ida's sake, he would have gone away without making his presence known to her. As things were, he had no choice but to speak to her; so he waited and waylaid her, with awkward abruptness, as his father might have done, just at the moment she stepped off the gangway.

He spoke her name—her Christian name—as she was passing him, and Celia started and turned towards him a face from which the warm colour suddenly faded. Then, in her pretty, impulsive fashion, she gave both her hands to her old friend, and I doubt not that it was Sandford's turn to be wrung with jealousy of this stranger, whom he probably did not venture to set down as a rival beneath contempt. There were people who refused to call Alick plain, and I do not suppose that he looked his worst at the moment when Celia was thus claiming his friendship before all the world.

"This is kind," she said. "It is a most unexpected pleasure to have an old friend to meet me on my landing—after all these years. When did you come up to New York? Where are you living now? and what is your last discovery? and how are they all down at dear old Willow Point? After all, there is no place like it in all the wide world. But I am forgetting—let me introduce Mr. Sandford, Alick. Mr. Sandford, this is my old friend, Mr. Pepler."

As they stood in the jostling crowd she asked Alick about all her home friends, while Sandford stood by pretending, I imagine, not to be annoyed. As for Alick, it appeared to him that she had forgotten altogether their miserable farewell, or perhaps she wished to go back beyond it to the pleasant old times, when they had been boy and girl together; and at the thought Alick felt as if he were walking on air. Before they

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parted he promised to go to her concert on the morrow, and to call on her that evening at her hotel, and he fancied that all was to be plain sailing, that she would go down with him at once to Willow Point and save Ida, as Churchill hoped.

Till the appointed hour of seeing her again, he tried to calm his nerves by the contemplation of certain models of antediluvian monsters in one of the great museums. There he fell in with an American savant of world-wide fame, who was pleased to be complimentary ; but I fear Alick's conversation on this occasion can hardly have sustained his budding reputation. However, there are great moments in our lives when we rise superior to all such petty considerations, and Alick, tearing himself away from his learned brother's lucubrations unnecessarily early, paced the streets for an hour before it was time to make his call on Celia.

When at last he entered the hotel, she came to him at once, robed in a light filmy gown, with a deep blush rose in her hair ; and to this day I believe Alick likes to dwell on her in thought, as she then appeared, with gracious promise in her eyes of tenderness and kindness.

"Alick," she said, not waiting for him to speak, "I am so glad that you are trying to forgive me. I understand better now ; and I can never think of that day—in Rosedale—without growing hot with shame. For a year afterwards the thought of your mother was a torture to me. I don't know how I could have been so selfish—so cruel."

Alick would have stopped her if he could in this hasty, impulsive confession, but he read in it a good augury for his present errand. He thought—he would have us all think—that in that moment she showed

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him her real self. Yet it was but a few minutes before this fair promise was grievously belied. Celia, alas, was the same Celia still, with the old haunting, remorseless ambition.

Plainly as he was wont to speak, Alick told her the errand on which he had come. In simple, forcible words he painted for Celia the gulf that was yawning at her little sister's feet. He told her that she was our last hope of saving Ida, and then he waited for her answer, the more hopefully because Celia's confessions of penitence for her refusal to help his mother still rang in his ears.

But for many seconds Celia sat like a statue—pale and still—though doubtless a conflict was raging within her heart. "Alick, Alick, I wish you had not asked me this just now," she sighed. "I hate to refuse a second time to do what you wish; but just now it is utterly impossible for me to go to Willow Point. We are engaged for weeks to come, and I cannot upset all Mr. Sandford's plans. It would not be fair."

"Could you not get some one to take your place for a few nights? Perhaps if you explained something of the circumstances, Mr. Sandford would try to arrange to let you go."

"Alick, it is not as if I could do any good. Do you really think I have any influence over Ida?"

"I do not know. She is very affectionate, and it might be worth trying."

"She is all you say, Alick, but we have lived our different lives for years, and I have no right to hope that I can influence her now."

"Believe me, Celia, it is at least worth trying. Think of the horrible peril she is in. Surely, surely it is worth some sacrifice. You would never forgive yourself if——"

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Celia stopped him with an angry gesture. "It is unfair, Alick, to try to twist what I said just now against me in that way. This time—whatever might be the case years ago—I cannot do what you ask. For half my life—or nearly half—I have been toiling and struggling and giving up things to get what is now in my grasp. I have waited for years for this chance, to crown all my work. It is in my hands at last, and I dare not let it go. Don't speak—let me tell you what it means. If I succeed—and this time I am bound to succeed—I shall be able to pay back all I owe to every one at Willow Point. I will make your father's old age easy, Alick. He shall never need to do another stroke of work; and I will try to make up to your mother and Mary—dear, unselfish Mary—for all they did for me. Oh, I was not quite so blind as you used to think. Then I will take Ida away from that wretched place for ever. Give me but three months—perhaps even two—and then all will be well."

"But, Celia, in three months Ida may be beyond your help. She is in a strange, reckless mood, ready to go all lengths to prove her loyalty and gratitude to the Dickeys; and the fear is that she may get a taste for the stuff herself. As yet, I hope, she has no great liking for it; but who knows how it may end?"

"Have you tried reasoning with her?" said Celia, frowning.

"She will not listen to us. You see you are the only person in the world who has any right to interfere between her and Dickey."

"I will write to her," proposed Celia.

"I am afraid that would be worse than useless."

Celia bit her lip. "Alick, you are very unkind!"

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she protested. "It seems to me you are always trying to make my way harder than it need be. Why did you come just now to take all my happiness and pleasure out of this tour? You won't understand what it means to me, and yet I can't help thinking that you and Churchill are making mountains out of molehills. I dare say it is half pretence on Ida's part—more than half. Ida always was a little mischief, and Marmaduke is so easily teased."

Still Alick, with the same pertinacity that had carried him triumphantly through the struggles of his youth, pressed his point, though he had grave doubts that he might thus forfeit Celia's favour for good. "Will you not at least ask Mr. Sandford to spare you for a few days?" he said. "By the way, Mrs. Dale gave me a letter for you."

"Much ado about nothing," said Celia, impatiently. "Alick, don't press me to go! Can't you see that you are asking me to throw away the best chance I ever had for what is most likely nothing but a fancy of Churchill's? I should have thought that you would understand. After this long, long struggle up the ladder, to turn back at the top! After all, I owe something to myself as well as to Ida."

Still Alick did not give way. "Forgive me, Celia, but will you not call Mr. Sandford into the consultation?" he said.

With an impatient exclamation, Celia swept from the room, to return, ten minutes later, with the young manager.

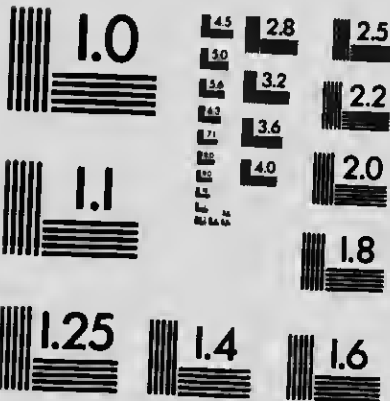
"Please, Mr. Sandford, explain the situation to Mr. Pepler," she commanded.

Sandford explained with animation that it was absolutely impossible that Miss Garnett should visit



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her old home before the end of March, as she had engaged to make a long tour with his company in the Southern and Western States. Positively—though he did not like to speak harshly—he would be obliged to regard her leaving him, even for a time, as a culpable breach of contract.

"You hear, Alick. I am sorry, but you see your plan is impossible," said Celia.

"Clearly impossible," echoed Sandford. "In fact, I must refuse my consent to Miss Garnett's doing anything of the kind."

With that he took his leave, and Alick, grieved and nonplussed, rose to follow his example.

"Good night, Alick ; don't think too ill of me," said Celia, offering her hand, "Only wait a few weeks, and I will do anything you ask of me ; but no friend of mine, who really understands the case as you do now, could wish me to throw up my whole career at a moment's notice."

Alick went out, to wander along the crowded unfamiliar streets, oppressed by a crushing sense of defeat. For this, rather unreasonably, he blamed the manager. For a little while he was tempted to let things drift ; but when did a Pepler give up on account of difficulties a task to which he had pledged himself? As he walked aimlessly on, jostled by the hurried and the careless, he thought again of Ida's danger, of Churchill's disappointment, and resolved to make at least one more effort to alter Celia's resolution. Surely in some way his failure must have been due to some blunder on his own part in presenting the case! She had been so kind, so cordial, so disappointing, it must surely be that he had failed to make her realize the greatness of Ida's peril. He had asked of her a hard thing, but if she had a heart at all——

A Deep Conspiracy

Ah, that was the problem that had a trick of rising like a spectre to distress and disquiet Celia's friends. Once, long ago, in the Rosedale Ravine, he had decided that the girl was heartless, and then somehow the kindly touch of old Time had softened down that harsh judgment, and his memories of Celia had been all fair and gracious.

As he walked on, his tumult of hope and trouble over Celia herself drove from his mind the thought of his unaccomplished errand. He did not realize that it was close on midnight; he neither knew nor cared where he was going till, as he hastily and carelessly turned a corner, he tripped and almost fell over a recumbent figure lying across the damp and miry sidewalk. It was that of a woman—not old, not ill-looking in the dull lamplight, but stupefied with drink, unkempt, dirty. Half roused by the involuntary touch of Alick's foot, she cursed him loudly for his carelessness, then struggled, with his help, to her feet, and reeled off down a dark entry, where she was met by a shrill-voiced child, who called her "Mother," and seemed to be on the watch for her.

With a vague hope that he might be of use, Alick tried to follow the wretched pair; but they quickly disappeared from his sight into some shadowy doorway, and thoroughly awakened now to the present and all its sad realities, he turned back towards the lighter streets. With him he carried the picture of that poor, mud-stained, bedraggled wreck of a woman, and it made in his thoughts a ghastly pendant to a vision of lovely, dainty Ida. How angry the girl would have been could she have guessed it! but to Alick the link between them seemed so real, as well as so fearful, that, disregarding Celia's sure displeasure, he turned into a telegraph

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office and wired to Churchill to send Sten down without delay.

That far-seeing youth had made special arrangements to have a message sent out to him at any hour of the night or day ; but it was a singular combination of circumstances, on which I need not dwell, that rendered it possible for him (by dint of almost super-human exertion indeed) to get Stennett off by the same morning train which had borne his son up to New York forty-eight hours earlier.

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CHAPTER XXVIII

THE PRAISES THAT CAME TOO SLOW

PEPLER was somewhat mystified by Churchill's hasty and guarded explanations, but that did not prevent his enjoyment of a mighty sense of importance lent by this sudden call "on urgent business to New York." Indeed, the name of that great city stood vaguely in the minds of our untravelled villagers as the symbol of "rush," immensity, and iniquity.

Sten enjoyed also, like a child, for its own sake, the feeling of being in a whirl and a bustle. The peremptory fashion in which Churchill knocked him up at half-past four in the morning, hurried him into his best clothes and packed for him in his own well-worn valise a puzzling variety of "necessaries for the journey;" the excitement of Mrs. Pepler as she prepared breakfast for him and put up a vast lunch; the wild drive to the station behind Churchill's little "blood-horse;" the flying glimpses of Niagara, of towns and villages innumerable; the breathless speed of the Empire State Express; the noise and turmoil at the great New York station—all these things gave to Sten a blissful sense of being keenly alive, and to crown it all he had the pleasure of being welcomed at the end by a dear familiar face.

"My, but New York is a wonderful place!" he cried out, as he clasped Alick's hand; "but now, lad, where's

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Celia? I'm dyin' to see her after all these years. How does she look? Has she growed any?"

"I think, father, we must not go to her till after the concert. You see, if she was excited by seeing you, she might not be able to play so well. Don't you think we must wait?"

"Yes, yes, of course. It would never do fur me to drop on her suddint an' git her worked up an' spile her playin'. No, indeed, we must give her the best o' chances, an' then I don't make no doubt but what our little Canadian gel 'll astonish these proud New Yorkers. But now, lad, what's yer programme?"

"Dinner first, father. I know a nice quiet little place where we can get something to eat; and then we'll go to my room, and you shall have a good sleep, to be all fresh for Celia."

Sten never had that promised sleep, however. In his state of excitement, sleep was impossible. Between his wonder at the crowds, the elevated railroads, the skyscrapers, and the extraordinary toys sold in the streets; his alarm over Ida's strange behaviour, now first disclosed to him, and his efforts to perfect himself in the part he was to play after the concert, his mind was in a whirl, and Alick began to think, too late, that it had been a mad idea of Churchill to send him.

Pepler and his son went very early to the concert hall, and the former had plenty of time to gaze his fill at the great auditorium, with its gorgeous decorations, and at the remarkable and splendid costumes of the slowly gathering assembly. These things permanently enriched the quaint picture-gallery of his unsophisticated mind. In fact, I believe that the lights and the music, the soft raiment of the people, and the wonderful gilding of Astall Hall itself (mixed as were all the glories with

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very earthly dross) helped Sten to a dim realization of the glories of that Holy City, hinted at in the Revelation of St. John ; at least, more than once afterwards, I heard him holding forth to a class of round-eyed children in the Sunday School on "them gleamin' pillars an' arches o' gold."

The concert was a notable one, for almost all the performers had already won their way into the front rank of their profession. Of them all, Celia was the only one absolutely unknown to a New York audience, and with regard to her the musical critics were full of eager speculation and curiosity.

Alick, troubled and pre-occupied, scarcely heard a note of the opening numbers of the programme, but the sweet fresh voice of one young singer lifted him, in spite of himself, above the smothering clouds of doubt and anxiety. For a few brief moments he and all her audience listened spellbound with pure delight, and even when the last soft notes had died away they scarcely dared to breathe. But the hush was followed with a wild storm of applause, and the pretty girlish singer was overwhelmed with tributes of sweet flowers.

A few moments more, and it was Celia's turn to appear. She swept on to the stage, a striking figure, in a rich-coloured crimson gown ; and, as she stood before that great house full of critical people, there was something like a challenge in her bearing. She stood there, proud, tall, and self-possessed, but her cheeks and her very lips looked white in contrast with the deep red of her dress. Sten says that "Alick, too, turned as white as paper, when he see her," and owns that "his own heart went pit-a-pat, same as if Celia were standin' lookin' inter the eyes o' some wild beast ;" but at last she began.

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What she played I do not know. No one ever chanced to tell me, and I have never dared to ask questions about that evening. I am only certain that it was something ambitious, like herself; probably something which forced comparison of her playing with that of all the most famous masters of her art. Surely, too, it was something which should have spoken to the hearts of the listeners, with its power and passion, if not in the sweet simple way of the simple song that had come before.

The musician's fingers flew, but her white face grew whiter; and there was a stir of impatience through the great hall. Sten told me, with wondering admiration, that he had "never heerd any music like that last piece o' Celia's, fur softness an' loudness, fur quickness an' slowness. No, sirree, I never would a thought that one woman's hands could a drawed sich a crowd o' sounds out o' one single fiddle, an' that not a very big affair neither! Why, them notes they fair toppled over one another, like a crowd o' boys scramblin' fur candies at a picnic. I wisht then you'd bin there to hear fur yourself, ma'am; an' if I'd on'y knowed, I'd a wisht it more than ever."

But I am glad I was not there; for I judged, as much perhaps from Alick's silence as Sten's talk, that that night Celia's music was all of the fingers—nothing of the soul; and—those people, who knew, would have none of it! Her last note was followed, like that of the singer, by silence; but, alas, this was no hush of breathless delight, it was a cold, stony stillness, strained, tense, horrible.

For a second, Celia stood, not comprehending, facing the hundreds of curious eyes and opera-glasses levelled at her. Then she saw the truth, bent her proud head

The Praises that came too Slow

before her hostile judges, and was turning away when there broke aggressively on the dull quiet, from the back of the lower gallery, a fierce, wild clapping—the clapping of a single pair of hands—whilst one solitary high-pitched voice shouted, "On-cor, On-cor!"

The musician hesitated, trembled, and glanced, with an air of bewilderment, towards the gallery. But the hot blood came surging back to her cheeks.

"On-cor, On-cor, I say!" persisted the one voice. "Ain't you goin' to thank her, you folk? Is this yer New York manners?"

Alas, the well-meant rebuke raised a laugh, which some kind folk tried to cover by belated applause; but it was too late to hide from Celia the terrible fact that she and her music had been weighed in the balance and found wanting. Letting her beloved violin fall with a hollow thud on the stage, she groped her way, shamed, heart-sick, dizzy; towards shelter from those cruel, watchful eyes. Before she could find the exit, Sandford sprang forward, drew her hand within his arm, and led her from the stage.

In a frenzy of sympathy and rage, Sten rushed to the front of the gallery, and leaning over the gilded balustrade, electrified that cultivated audience by shouting, "Shame on you all! You've broke her heart! I thought you'd a knowed good music when you heerd it, but, in spite o' all yer grandeur, playin' to you is worse 'an casting pearls afore sassy, overfed swine—that's what it is!"

Again there were confused sounds of laughter, ironical applause, and cries of "Silence!" and "Sit down." In the midst of it all, Alick succeeded in dragging off Celia's doughty champion to a place behind the scenes, where his transports of indignation would

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at least be harmless. But once out of sight of the audience, a softer mood came over him, and he cried, "Where is my poor girl, Alick? Let me go to her."

They found her in a little dressing-room, with the manager at her side, vainly pouring consolation into her unheeding ears.

"Don't grieve, Celia; it's all right. You played well," murmured Sandford. "These New Yorkers are a set of conceited fools—that's all. But I must go to set things going again. I'll be back in a moment."

The young fellow hurried away to face again that critical throng, with apologies from Miss Garnett, "who was very ill, and ought not to have attempted to play that night at all." Then the concert went on as if nothing had happened, only in the second part of the programme Cella's place was left a blank.

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ONE SOLITARY HIGH-PITCHED VOICE SCOUTED
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CHAPTER XXIX

BAFFLED TO FIGHT BETTER

AS soon as he could escape from his onerous duties, Sandford hastened back to Celia, to find Sten on his knees beside her, holding the girl in his arms and pouring out loving words of comfort and gladness at seeing her again; but the much-tried manager turned on Pepler in a fury, exclaiming, "I suppose it was you who cried out and made an uproar! You fool, could you not see it was making things ten times worse for Miss Garnett than they need have been? The scene will be in all the papers to-morrow."

Sten rose and confronted him. "Where I was riz," he said, with dignity, "we was t'ought to say 'Thank you' to any one what does somethin' fur you, whether it's cuttin' you a slice o' bread or playin' you a tune; but it's easy to see that this here city o' New York, fur all its bigness, an' all its amazin' grandeur, ain't the place to larn no one manners. The folk is too mighty hurried, I s'pose, to stop to be perlite."

"At least I have no time now to discuss the question," said Sandford, haughtily. "I have something to say in private to Miss Garnett. Mr. Pepler, if this old man belongs to your party, as I presume he does, please take him away."

"Excuse me, sir. We too have something to say

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to Miss Garnett," said Alick, hardly knowing how to begin. "Or perhaps, Mr. Sandford, you would be kind enough to spare me a moment or two of your valuable time, and I will explain our connection with Miss Garnett."

At this Celia, looking almost grey in the dim light, sat straight up. "Wait a minute, Alick, I have something to say first. Mr. Sandford, I suppose this hopeless failure of mine terminates my engagement with you?"

"Miss Garnett, please let us discuss that in private."

"There are reasons why I must know at once," said Celia, glancing towards Alick. "Tell me the truth as plainly as you can. After this, I suppose you will feel it necessary to engage another violinist in my place?"

"What do you think yourself, Celia?" inquired Sandford, in a tone that betrayed both amazement and disquietude. "Surely you would never choose to face another ordeal such as that of to-night?"

"Never?—then I am answered," said Celia. "In your judgment I have failed irretrievably."

"This will at least make success for you infinitely more difficult," muttered Sandford. "It will create a prejudice with which you will have to reckon. I do not say more than that."

"But I want you to say more," cried Celia, impatiently. "Tell me the truth, the whole truth, Mr. Sandford. Tell me, do you think it is in me ever to succeed?"

The manager blushed and looked away. "I am not infallible," he said slowly.

"The truth, the plain, bald, ugly truth, if necessary," insisted Celia, rising and fixing her sombre black eyes on his downcast face.

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Still Sandford evaded giving her a direct answer. "As you very well know, Miss Garnett, you have many, many gifts," he said earnestly. "If you should not choose to continue your musical career, there are other avenues open to you, which may still lead you to success and fame and happiness. Give me five minutes, only five minutes, alone with you, and I am sure that I can show you that this evening's disaster may be a blessing in disguise."

"Such blessings are not to my taste," murmured Celia, rebelliously. "I am in no mood for riddles to-night, Mr. Sandford. Tell me, in plain English, how do you see any possibility of good for me in this miserable affair?"

"Is it not always best to know exactly how one stands?" said Sandford, faltering and hesitating.

"Then you were flattering me, when you encouraged me to hope for success?" exclaimed Celia.

"Not deliberately. On my word of honour, I did not deliberately deceive you," protested the unhappy Sandford. "I thought—I hoped—till to-night, at least—it seemed possible that——"

Under the gaze of the girl's angry, sorrowful eyes the young man looked like a convicted criminal.

"I did it just to please you, Celia. I hoped for the best. You were so anxious to get a hearing, you know, and I was able to give you that. You were so certain yourself, and—it is so easy in such a matter to misjudge any one. I hoped that all would go well. I believed that—that—you might please them."

"Ah, well, I understand at last," said Celia, with a heavy sigh, "and talking will not mend the matter. It is time to say 'Good-bye,' Mr. Sandford, and—I thank you for what you tried to do for me. I hope, sir," she

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added stiffly, as an after-thought, "that 'this disaster,' as you call it, will not damage your reputation in addition to ruining mine."

"I don't know, I don't care about that!" exclaimed the young fellow, hurriedly. "Don't say 'Good-bye' in such a fashion, Celia. Give me one word before you go. Mr. Pepler"—he turned in desperation to Alick—"I beg you to leave us for five minutes."

And Alick took his father away. A quarter of an hour passed, then Sandford rushed past them out into the night, like a mad creature, and Sten, guessing at last how matters stood between him and Celia, grew pitiful. "The poor wratch!" he said afterwards, "when I see how he loved her, I felt reel mean that I'd bin so hard on him. I was labourin', you see, under the delusion that he'd jest hired her to make money outter her, thinkin' an' carin' nothin' about her feelin's; but the best o' us makes mistakes sometimes—yes, even them grand, larned, swagerin' New Yorkers. Folk may say what they choose, Mrs. Dale, but nothin' 'll ever make me believe that they's good judges o' music, an' I'll tell you why, ma'am, too. Celia she played jest as good as she used to play in the old hall down to Willow Point—jest like a seraphin, in fact. Then there was Sandford, he evidently done his best—poor feller!—to give her a good send-off—a-hirin' that golden hall an' gittin' all them other first-rate artis's to sing an' play, but the hitch was that them New Yorkers hadn't ears to hear. I misdoubt whether they'd even a heerd the music o' the spears that the parson used to talk of, though you'd think that must be kind o' powerful too."

But we must return to Celia. They found her dressed in her wraps, ready and eager to be gone. "Let us make haste, Alick," she exclaimed. "I must get away before

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the performance concludes. I don't want to meet those people. I can't talk to any one yet of this night's work."

Alick took a railway time-table from his pocket. "We could catch the night train home, if we could set off in an hour," he said tentatively, not knowing whether Celia would still refuse to go with them.

Instead of making any objection, she said, "Uncle Sten, will you take me home with you, till I can decide what to do next?"

"Why, my dearie, what I comed all the way from Willow Point fur, was jest to take you right home," he said. "I tell you, it'll rej'ice all our hearts down home to hev you with us fur a spell. I can't begin to tell you how we've all on us missed you since the day——"

"Father, the train starts in an hour, and there will be plenty of time to talk on the way."

"Well, Alick, it won't take me long to get ready," said Celia. "I have some things at the hotel, but fortunately I have not unpacked much."

Professedly eager to see more of New York and "them sky-scrappers," but hiding a simple plot within his breast, Pepler mounted the box of their carriage, and deputed the care of poor Celia to his son. "When one's in trouble," he explained, in giving me a detailed relation of that day's events, "then's the time one vallies one's friends, an' Alick's one o' the friendliest critters goin'. 'Comfort her up a bit, boy,' I whispered, as I shet the door on to 'em, an' poor Celia, she looked as if she did need comfort. But, as fur as I could hear through all them distractin' city noises o' cable-cars, an' elevated railroads, an' bootblacks an' I don't know what all—'twas precious little they was sayin' to one another on that there ride."

And yet something was said. "Oh, Alick!" cried

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out Celia, bitterly, when they had driven on for some minutes in silence, "why were you there to-night, to see me disgrace myself and every one that ever tried to help me? It made it ten times worse to know that you were there. I wish, oh, I do wish that I had died before to-night!"

"You must not say so, Celia. You must not think it. It was no disgrace."

"It was, Alick, it was, and it means ruin!" she moaned. "I was counting on this tour for the means to pay back all those dreadful debts—to your father and to you—and now I shall have to begin all over again."

Alick's heart sank, but he answered bravely, "Please, Celia, don't talk about debts to us. Father is very happy as he is, and I have enough and to spare for all I want. We all like to think, dear Celia, that you belong to us so truly that it is 'all in the family,'" he finished, trying to speak lightly. "Please let me help you—if I ever can—as Mary would, or Lily. Did we not agree long ago that you were my third sister?"

Now, though he was only quoting her own too-well remembered words, in that spirit of self-effacement which he had inherited from his mother, Celia, no less capricious in her trouble than in her prosperity, took this phrase as a new grievance. So low she had fallen, it seemed, that even Alick (on whose constancy she had somehow counted, in spite of her own disregard of him) no longer felt for her anything but pity. Well, it was fair enough, she admitted. She had disdained his love when all was bright and hopeful, she had cared for nothing but her music, and now she had no right to complain because he had taken the first opportunity to make it clear that she must count only on his compassion.

"Thank you," she answered stiffly, "but I must learn

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henceforth to depend solely on my efforts, for I see that the chances of success are too doubtful to justify me in involving any one in risk of further loss through me."

"Then," said Alick, "you still mean to go on with your music?"

"Yes. It is only a coward who, when he gets a hard blow, runs away from the battle. In my place, Alick, you would not give in?"

The young man did not accept this challenge to argument. "Are you sure, Celia, that the victory will be worth the cost of its winning?" Perhaps he would not have said that, if he had not been still smarting with angry resentment at the remembrance of the half-smothered laughter—the cruel, disdainful remarks, which had reached his ears, though happily not Celia's.

But the girl cried out unhesitatingly, "Yes, yes, Alick, the victory is worth winning. Don't ask me to-night to see the uses of adversity. Whatever I am, I am no hypocrite, and I won't pretend that I am satisfied to be beaten. No! after that awful ten minutes to-night, I am more than ever determined to conquer or die. Besides, Alick, why shouldn't I wish to win? The life I want to lead is not in itself poor and base and ignoble. You should talk to Mrs. Dale about it. If I could lift such people as those who filled the Astell Hall to-night—commonplace, ordinary people, taken up with little cares, little anxieties, little frivolities—if I could lift them through my music to see visions of higher things, would not the work be worth doing? Forgive me, Alick, but can you learned professors with all your researches do more for the world? Can you win any such help and comfort for the sore-hearted men and women of to-day from your ancient rocks and long-vanished monsters as there is in music?"

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At that moment Alick was not concerned to defend his own profession from the altruistic stand-point. "If you look at it in that way, all must be well," he said gently.

"Ah, but you don't understand," cried out inconsistent Celia. "It is very hard to have such a setback as this. It is maddening to think of going back to the drudgery and anxiety that I had imagined was passed by for ever."

"Don't grieve over it, Celia. You are still young, you don't know what of good life holds for you, and I believe you will come to be thankful even for this."

"It is easy to talk," she answered. "You should have been a minister, Alick. You naturally good people don't understand the feelings of a poor wretch like me. I have given up everything most girls live for, for the sake of music—and success. Yes, I will be honest, though why I should force you to be my father-confessor I don't know. Perhaps just now I was telling only half the truth. I did want to do some great thing for the world with my music, but I wanted too to win a great name, I wanted to be famous. I tell you I have given up everything for the sake of becoming a great musician, and if I fail, there is nothing left for me."

"No, Celia, that is not true."

"It is true, Alick, or worse is true. I have just climbed high enough to make myself ridiculous before all the world. I must succeed now, or I shall be disgraced for ever. Yes, I will never, never rest till I have forced even these supercilious New Yorkers to admit that I can play the violin as well as the best of them. Whatever Harry Sandford says, it is in me, Alick. I know it is, and I will succeed."

At that moment the carriage stopped at the door

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of the brilliantly lighted hotel, and Pepler, tumbling down from the box, jerked open the door.

"That's right, lassie," he murmured, with a glance at her flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes. "You're the very bravest gal I know, an' you'll win out yet, fur there's no beatin' any one what don't feel beat."

"Thank you, Uncle Sten, thank you. You are a good comforter. No, I am not beaten yet," she whispered, then she hurried up the steps into the hotel.

But Pepler laid his hand on his son's arm. "Is anythin' settled yet?" he inquired anxiously.

"She means to try again. She says she is going back to study."

"Well, if I was you, I'd stop that short off," was the paternal advice; but Alick, a chivalrous gentleman by nature, thought he knew better than to press his suit on the disappointed girl just then. Moreover, it occurred to him that at some of the German universities excellent post-graduate courses in natural science might be obtained, and he too dreamed dreams, as he helped Celia to make arrangements for her sudden journey. There was need for haste, but all was duly accomplished, and by the time the rest of the company left the concert hall Celia Garnett was speeding out of the city by the night express.

CHAPTER XXX

A DARK NIGHT'S JOURNEY

ALICK and his father, sitting up all night in the day-coach, rested better than poor Celia behind her shifting curtains in the sleeping-car. As the train plunged forward through the darkness, she toiled in anger and bitterness of spirit at the disheartening task of rebuilding her ruined "castles in Spain."

Doggedly and fiercely she tried to make her plans, haunted all the time with a sense that she was arraying her feeble forces to fight against an overmastering fate—or God. Again and again she vowed that she would win the fight, but it was long, in her excited state, before she could formulate any practicable scheme of action. For hours all that was really clear in the chaos of her broken hopes was that somehow she would go back to Germany, and would toil and struggle and never rest till she had gained the secret of controlling not only her instrument and her fingers, but also the hearts, the fancies of her audience. Somehow, too, she would bring Alick to admit that her ambition was as noble as his own. Somehow she would prove to him that she was worthy of better things than pity.

As the train sped on—so she told me afterwards—she regretted that she had consented to this hasty flight homeward. It was dreadful to think of having to face

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the curiosity of all her old acquaintances, of having to endure their uncomprehending commiseration. She hated, too, to think of being under Alick's half-scornful, half-compassionate eyes. She wanted to be alone, amongst strangers, who would take no inconvenient interest in her disappointments, her misfortunes, her agonies. She could work better if free from the gaze of all friendly eyes, and so she began to consider the possibility of turning back even now without going to Willow Point at all.

Of course Alick and his father would be disappointed, but what was the use of going on? They talked indeed of Ida and her danger, but probably the peril was only in their fancy, and if it were real, how could they expect Ida to pay heed to a sister who had never taken the least trouble to help or please her? No, whatever they might imagine, she was the last person who could have any influence over Ida.

Sometimes I wonder whether Celia really remembers clearly her thoughts and plans on that wretched journey. She insists that she did. She says that she was so full of selfish grief and rage that nothing else in the wide world seemed worth thinking of—not even the bitter disappointment she was planning to bring on her best friends, nor her failure to help Ida in her time of need.

All the while she was rushing towards Willow Point at the rate of scarcely less than a mile a minute, and soon it would be impossible to turn back. Suddenly, with the sharpness and vividness of a dream, she seemed to see before her eyes an advertisement for an experienced travelling companion to go with some lady to Europe. It flashed into her mind that she must have read it in a paper which Alick had given her as he said "good night," and when, a few minutes later, the express

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made a brief stop in a well-lighted station, Celia seized the opportunity to search the columns of her paper for the half-remembered advertisement. It was there in plain print, sure enough, and seemed to promise an easy way out of her difficulties. The advertiser lived in Buffalo, which they would reach within little over an hour; and Celia, beginning to think that fate after all might not prove utterly adverse to her scheme, resolved to leave the train at that city, and to endeavour to make arrangements that very morning for her return to Europe, even if it must be in the capacity of travelling companion. In spite of the severe blow she had just received, she assumed, with that sanguine confidence in her own powers that had characterized her from childhood, that to apply for this position was to obtain it, and her spirits rose at the thought of thus working her way back to Germany with a little store of money in hand for the opening of her campaign.

In the brief seconds of delay at the station, Celia contrived to scribble off an incoherent note to Sten, to be given to him by the porter, when he should come to inquire for her at Buffalo. This written, she prepared everything, in feverish haste, so that she could leave the train and slip off into the crowd without the delay of an instant. She was half mad, she says, with the sense of disgrace and the dread of meeting us all at Willow Point; but now she wonders that she could ever have formed such a heartless plan.

Celia's coach was the last on the long train; and she carried her wraps and hand-bag to the rear platform, but she felt so like a traitor that she was ashamed to look even the black porter in the face. As for him, he was vaguely suspicious of her, and kept so strict a watch upon her movements that to propitiate him, when

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committing the note to his care, she gave him one of her few remaining dollars, and condescended to explain that she found she must get off at Buffalo, to see some one on business.

"Well, ma'am, we'll be dar in jes' fifteen minutes," observed the man, still eyeing her curiously with his rolling black orbs.

But he spoke too soon. As the words left his lips there was a shock, a grinding crash, and the flying train seemed to crumble to pieces in awful wreckage of engine, cars, and human lives. I cannot bear to think of the terror that followed in that dark hour preceding the winter dawn. I would not speak of it, but I cannot tell my tale without it.

Celia, standing on the rear platform, was flung clear of the train into a snow-bank, and that doubtless saved her life. She must have been half stunned. She was roused by frightful, heartrending cries, and then she knew what had happened, and struggled to her feet in terror that only grew more awful when she could see as well as hear. She told me once that it was as if the Judgment Day had crashed into her little, selfish, egotistical world, showing it for once in all its wretchedness and narrowness; and I don't think it ever looked quite the same to her again, though I doubt whether she had any time for such thoughts in those awful minutes. I fancy they must have come later, when it was all over.

Already, before she reached the wreck, all who could move were labouring fiercely to rescue those who could not. Scarcely knowing what she was doing, but crying out, "Alick, Alick!" Celia tore like the rest at splintered wood and twisted iron, then turned to find Alick at her side. "Thank God, you are safe!" he cried, bending

The Trouble Man

to lift a broken beam from above a poor woman, who was past all help.

Celia, too, tugged at the weight, till she heard her own name called in a high wild scream. To her excited imagination it brought back that scene in the concert hall, which seemed now to belong to some other life.

"Your father, Alick?" she gasped. "Is he hurt?"

"Come!" cried Alick, incoherently, seizing her hand. "We must tell him you are safe. 'Find Celia, go to Celia,' was all his cry. He is not hurt one bit, he says; but he cannot get out till we can get help to move a pile of stuff."

But Celia shrieked out in fresh horror and pointed.

"Look, Alick, look!" she wailed.

A flickering red light had begun to show itself here and there amongst the black masses of wreckage, and a low groan of despair ran all along the line of helpers. Some dashed for water; some tried to beat out the fire with wraps and coats; some strove to smother it with snow and earth; and others tore the more furiously at the ruins.

Alick, crying, "Father, father!" flung himself against the remains of one of the heavy coaches, as if he hoped to do a giant's work; and Celia followed sult.

"Alick, boy, don't mind me," protested the prisoner, eagerly. "Don't waste yer time on me. Save Celia, lad, save Celia!"

"I'm safe, I am here!" she cried, but he did not hear.

"Alick," he repeated desperately, "maybe it's the last command I'll ever give you, an' it's your plain duty to obey. Go an' find Celia, I tell you! 'Tain't no use your shoving at this old car. It's too hefty fur you, an' I tell you, go to Celia. Her life's wuth two of a old man like me."

A Dark Night's Journey

"She's here, father, she's here—safe and well."

"Sure?"

"Yes, Uncle Sten, yes; and we'll have you out in a moment, never fear."

"I guess the truck down yonder has gone an' went a-fire," came Sten's voice from below; but he was speaking calmly now. "Alick, lad, leave off shovin' at that there ironwork, an' try an' pry up yon beam a little. I believe if I could git two inches to turn in, I could wiggle out under this here rubbitch."

They tried to follow his suggestion, with woefully little success; but Celia, watching the flickering glow in secret agony, tried to cheer the poor prisoner, who, indeed, was for once in his life the calmest of the three.

"No, no, I ain't no call to be afeard," came bravely from the captive's lips; "s'pose it was God put me here, an' maybe He'll let me out afore the fire comes along. If not—well, I'm glad it ain't you nor Celia, Alick."

"They are getting it under, father," reported Alick.

"That's good; but don't you run no risks fur me, children. D'ye hear?"

The smoke thickened, and renewed shrieks of terror and anguish wrung the hearts of the would-be rescuers.

"Give it up, children!" cried Sten again. "You know you can't do no good, an' you'll on'y hurt yourselves. I tell you the iron a-top o' me is too hefty fur you."

"It's not, father. We're going to do it. Oh, why don't they send some help?"

Indeed, the handful of rescuers was doing wonders; and by this time all but two or three of the wounded had been dragged from the jaws of the threatening death; but, as yet, there was no aid to spare for poor Sten, for another captive lay in still more terrible peril.

The Trouble Man

"Listen, boy; listen, Celia!" cried Pepler, fully convinced that he had but a few moments to live. "Alick, leave makin' sich a noise, an' listen. Give my love to all of 'em, an' tell yer ma it didn't hurt none, fur I guess it's the smoke 'll be the end o' me—'deed I'm smotherin' now. Don't forget—it don't hurt none, fur I wouldn't like her to be hanted to her dyin' day wi' thoughts o' me, same as one o' them old martyrs."

"Oh, Uncle Sten, that's just what you are—a martyr to my wicked selfishness!" wailed Celia, breaking down at last. "I'll never, never forgive myself!"

"No, no, my gel, you ain't to blame; but you'll keep a eye on Ida, my dear, won't you, an' give her my true love, an' tell Torrance——"

But nearer, ever nearer, was creeping that awful doom, and the two, who loved poor Sten so dearly, scarcely heard his last message, in their desperate efforts to save him.

Once the mass above him moved a little; and Alick, shouting, "One inch more will do it!" made a frantic endeavour to lever up a mass of wreckage. It gave way a little, but the beam on which Celia was standing shifted also; and not that only. She fell, a crushing weight slid down upon her arm, and she knew no more of that grim scene.

But Sten had gained the two inches of space he needed, and stiff, sore, and bruised as he was, he crawled out to aid in his turn in rescuing Celia. The sight of her still, white face and bleeding hands unnerved him more than his own horrible peril had done, and, sitting down on the ground with the poor girl in his arms, he sobbed like a little child.

As for Alick, he was hurrying to the aid of the last unhappy captive, when from the darkness, far up the line,

A Dark Night's Journey

sounded a great shout, and in a moment a fresh contingent of helpers—strong, able, determined—flung themselves into the fight against time and flame, and tenderly carried the wounded and the dying to shelter.

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CHAPTER XXXI

THE SISTERS

IT was noon when the first news of the accident reached Willow Point. Alick had telegraphed to Churchill, to beg Ida to come to Celia. She was sorely hurt, he said; but alas, Ida was in one of her wilful moods, and nothing that Marmaduke could say had any effect upon her.

"It is a plot amongst you to get me away," she said angrily. "But I am not going. It is all nonsense. Celia is in Germany, and you know it."

"Ida, do you ever remember my telling you an untruth?" asked Churchill, at his wits' end.

"A few months ago I should never have dreamed it of you," admitted Ida, "but then I would not have believed that you would meddle and gossip and interfere with other people's business. Now I don't feel as if I can ever have really known the folk I have been brought up amongst, for they are all acting so strangely—even Mrs. Dale and the minister himself! Why, Marmaduke, there was a time when I imagined that that man could do no wrong. I would have trusted him with anything and everything."

"You may trust him still, Ida; but what can I do to make you believe me?"

"Nothing. I don't intend to go. There is some plot. What does it mean—all this mysterious racing

The Sisters

up and down the country? Nonsense; I don't believe either Alick or Sten ever went to New York, and I won't go to Buffalo or anywhere else to please you. It's just a trap, so that you can carry out your threats and get me away from the only real friends I have in the world."

She was obstinate in her decision, and, as usual, Churchill hurried up to our house to pour out the tale of his woes. "She is infatuated!" he cried, "but she will never forgive herself, if she lets Celia die without trying to see her."

"Oh, Marmaduke, surely things are not so bad as that?" I said.

"I fear they are. It was a horrible accident, Mrs. Dale—caused, they say, by a flaw in a rail. If I had my way, I'd make the directors—or some one—responsible for such work. I'd have 'em up for manslaughter—indeed, it ought to be murder often enough, with their cursed haste to be rich."

"But about Celia?" I asked. "Tell me exactly what Alick said."

"Very seriously injured—and—to think of it—that Ida won't go."

That night came a second telegram to Ida herself, this one from Sten: "Celia may not live many hours. Come at once. She is asking for you."

Ida was just reading it when Torrance, who had been to Haverstock, burst in with a newspaper in his hand. "Mother! Ida!" he shouted, "here's queer doin's! There's bin an awful railway accident a few miles out of Buffalo, an' who should be in it but Celia an' Alick an' Sten? Of course Sten had to go gettin' into a fix, if there was anythin' goin', though where he got the money to spend gadding up to New York to meet Celia

The Trouble Man

passes me. Anyhow, the car kind o' crushed up on top o' him, an' Celia, not satisfied wi' getting safe out o' the train once, must needs go a-tryin' to rescue Uncle Sten with her own hands, an' somethin' keels over on to her, an' now (they say) she's lyin' at death's door in a Buffalo hospital."

"Then it's true!" said Ida, with a sob. "She's dying, and I didn't believe it, and wouldn't go to her!"

"That isn't all the story neither," said Torrance. "Poor girl! she's had an awful time, Ida. She was taken sick when she was playin' at a big concert in New York, an' the folk was kinder hard on her, from what the paper says, an' then this awful thing happens."

"And I wouldn't go to her!" repeated Ida. "Oh, it was cruel, cruel of me! I ought to have known—I did know that nothing would induce Marmaduke to tell a lie."

"Well, little one, she ain't gone yet," said Torrance, slowly, "an' what's to hinder you an' me trav'lin up to Buffalo to-night? Tain't much of a run, an' maybe we'll find she ain't so bad, after all. Leastways we'll hunt out some o' them great doctors, an' they'll fix her, never fear."

Before midnight Ida was at her sister's bedside; but Celia's mind was wandering, and she did not know her. She even fancied that Ida was her long-dead mother, and she grew so excited that the nurse soon sent the young girl away.

Under the stress of this trouble, which was in a measure common to them, Sten and Dickey went back naturally to the old friendly relations, and the hotel-keeper established himself in the boarding-house (a few minutes' walk from the hospital) where the Peplers had already found a refuge.

The Sisters

Sten was burning to pour out his tale, and in it Celia figured as a noble, self-forgetful heroine. I am sure she would not have recognized herself in this picture of Sten's painting; and he was so full of his subject that he did not realize how hardly he was bearing upon poor little Ida.

"She's a martyr!" he cried, "that's what she is—a double-edged martyr! She give her life fust for you, Ida, an' then fur me. If it hadn't bin for her love o' you, my gel, she'd never hev went near that there train,"—(Surely Sten had forgotten the painful misadventure at the Astell Hall!)—"an' if it hadn't bin fur love o' me, she'd a got off scot-free, as the sayin' is. Why didn't you come at oncet, Ida? She'd a knowed you at first, an' now maybe she won't come to no more, an' you'll never hear her sweet voice again."

"It was wicked of me!" sobbed Ida. "I was so suspicious. I thought it was Marmaduke just making up a story to get me to do something he wanted me to do."

"Well," exclaimed Sten, with some severity, "after all these years you might a knowed, I think, that Marmadook wouldn't tell you a lie—not even the very littlest snow-white un, if there be sich things—to save any amount o' worry an' trouble. That's jest azackly the one thing he won't do."

"Yes, and I did know it in my heart," confessed Ida, humbly. "Oh, if Celia dies whatever shall I do? She must have thought it so cruel of me—poor darling!—that I wouldn't take even that much trouble for my own sister."

Ida's grief was so violent and so evidently sincere that Sten's heart was instantly softened towards her, and he vied with Dickey in all kinds of queer, well-meant

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efforts at consolation. At last they persuaded the tired child to go to bed, promising to rouse her the moment Celia asked for her.

I never heard what had become of Alick all this time, but Sten says that he came in next morning when they were at breakfast, "lookin' the very moral of a sleepless, wanderin' ghost."

All day the dismal little party of Celia's four friends waited in the hope of cheering news; but the poor girl had been so grievously bruised and wounded that neither doctors nor nurses could give them much comfort. Indeed, they said that she might probably pass away within a few hours, without a sign of recognition to any one.

Happily, that was not to be. Late on New Year's Day she woke in her right mind, and again asked for Ida. I suppose she herself thought that she was dying, but she seemed to remember everything. She could not talk much, but she clung to Ida's hand, and entreated her to make one solemn promise, which—thank God!—she has religiously kept. In the joy of feeling that Celia knew her at last, I believe impulsive Ida would have promised anything.

"Darling, darling, Sten has told me how you were hurrying home to me to try to save me from disgracing myself!" she cried. "Oh, Celia, if you will only get well, I will be good—I will, I will!"

Then Celia tried to tell her tale; but the nurse saw that she was getting excited, and sent Ida away. It was indeed many days before Celia's woeful story was told, but from the time when consciousness first returned to her the invalid slowly gained strength, and, in turn, Sten and Dickey and Alick were admitted to see her, each for a few minutes only. When she was pronounced

The Sisters

out of danger, Dickey and the Peplers returned home, but Ida stayed behind till Celia was fit to travel.

That was not for several weeks, and I think that that quiet time in the elder girl's sick-room drew the sisters together as nothing else could have done. Celia did not long allow Ida to imagine that she had really been the heroine of Sten's painting, but I don't think the confession of her selfishness shocked Ida as much as the mournful recital of poor Celia's bitter disappointment moved her.

"Oh, Celia, how could you bear it?" she cried. "It was hard for all your work to end in that!" Then she clenched her hands, and stamped her pretty foot, saying eagerly, "But you'll win yet, Celia. We shall live to see those proud New Yorkers at your feet."

"I don't know," sighed the invalid. "Perhaps, after all, as Mr. Sandford and Alick seem to think, it isn't in me. Sometimes, Ida, I fear that I have overrated myself and all my powers. Sometimes I fancy I have given my life for a shadow."

"No, Celia, no. You will play better than ever when you get well and strong. Think how the people in our little village love to hear you. I am not learned in these matters, but I have a notion that the music that can touch their hearts must be real music."

It was a cheering thought, and, for a while, Celia had dreams of speaking noble things by her art to the common folk—the toilers, and of bidding no more for the good opinion of the rich, the cultured, and the pampered. But, even now, coming slowly back, as she was, from the very gates of death, she could not think of those terrible moments at New York on the stage—I had almost written on the scaffold—without being mastered by the old fierce, terrible ambition. Just for

The Trouble Man

once in her life, she would force the cultivated and the critical to acknowledge her power—and then she would dedicate herself and her music to the service of the poor and the humble.

Alas, it was not to be! The doctors, knowing nothing of her struggles, of course, let her dream her dreams and build anew her airy castles of hope; and then, one day, they told her gently enough that her injured hand would be stiff and maimed, and more than half useless for life.

Celia listened with an outward calm that won their admiration, only questioning them as to whether all possible had been done to bring back its strength and lissomeness. They told her that from the first there had been no hope of saving the use of her hand, and when they left Celia turned her face to the wall and mourned and wept and refused to be comforted.

I don't know that Ida even tried to comfort her, as older and wiser people might have done. I believe she simply threw herself beside her on the bed and wept and wailed with her. It was but the other day, indeed, that Celia, with eyes in which tears strove with laughter, told me the simple little story.

Ah, but it was no laughing matter then. It was one of those grievous disasters which seem with lightning stroke to scorch away all the bright and beautiful possibilities of life; and who, when thus smitten, has the foresightedness to look forward to a fresh budding of green life from the blackened stump? Only one here and there—certainly not such a one as passionate Celia.

She declared then that her fate was worse than death. She wished that she had died before she became the victim of such misery. That was one day, when she was taking her first airing in the hospital grounds, leaning on her sister's arm, and Ida with a shudder

The Sisters

said suddenly, "Do you know, Celia, what made Alick telegraph that night in New York for his father? He stumbled over a poor drunken wretch—a woman—lying across the side-walk, and he thought of me. I was angry when they warned me; but, Celia, if you had died, I know now that I should soon have been like that woman. I did it to tease Marmaduke just at first, but, oh darling, I do believe I was beginning to like it for its own sake. Do you know it makes me afraid sometimes to go home? How shall I stand the smell and the sight of it? Help me, help me, Celia! I am horribly afraid!"

Celia drew her to her side, and kissed her and said no word, but cried out in her heart to the God of the helpless; and though she did not know it, new springs of life began to well up in her own heart.

Ida clung to her, half sobbing. "Celia," she cried, "if we had it to do again, I would not try to set dad's face against giving up his business! If it was not that they have been so good to me and that they love me so, I should be afraid to go back—I am afraid, as I told you. Once, Celia—I can hardly bear to tell it, even to you—I said silly things to Marmaduke, and he looked at me, as if I had struck him in the face. In a way I knew what I was doing, but I couldn't hold my tongue. I just laughed and giggled and talked worse and worse. Oh, I don't know how I shall dare to look him in the face again!"

"Once he used to do the same," said Celia.

"Yes; but he had the sense to stop quickly, Celia. I used to laugh at him, but now I can't. He is a great deal better and braver than ever I shall be."

"He is kind too," murmured Celia, quietly.

"Too kind!" retorted Ida, with a touch of the old

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wilfulness. "He is always interfering. I'd forgive him even for that, however, if he could find a way of stopping father touching the stuff, as he has stopped me. I am afraid for him too—dear old dad! But what can I do? I can't seem to take sides against him even for his own sake."

"Tell him what you have told me—that you are afraid of it all, even for yourself, and perhaps he will listen. He loves you, Ida, and I believe he will do for you what he would not do for himself."

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CHAPTER XXXII

STEN IN HIS GLORY

IN this little history I have told of many misfortunes and misadventures that befell us who dwelt at Willow Point, but at the time of which I am writing Roger and I and all our people had almost reached the point of despair. As a congregation, we were so weakened by division, so haunted by unworthy insinuations against one and another, so hampered by poverty and debt, that it really seemed impossible that St. James's could ever again lift up its head.

In addition to all this, as I hinted before, Roger and I had a load of private embarrassments to worry us. There came a day when I sought in vain for a ten-cent piece to give to a poor old widow, who had looked to us for help in little emergencies since I first came to Willow Point. Almost all our people were behind with their contributions towards the stipend; but they were still working grimly to raise money for the Building Fund, and still Roger vowed that he would not leave what really appeared to be our sinking ship. "They are doing bravely, Nell," he said. "We must see them through, we must see them through."

"Or perish in the endeavour," I added, with a feeble attempt at a jest; but when immediately after that I

The Trouble Man

made a trip "down cellar," and chanced to inspect our fast diminishing supplies of food and fuel, the little jest took on a grim resemblance to a prophecy, and I caught myself declaiming, in melodramatic accents, that old piece, through which we had made our sing-song way at school :—

"The boy stood on the burning deck,
Whence all but he had fled;
The flame that lit the battle's wreck
Shone round him o'er the dead."

Suddenly I heard a voice calling my name—Sten's, of course—and I ran up the rickety wooden steps, prepared for the worst in the way of news.

"Mrs. Dale, I've somethin' very pertikler to say; but I beg of you in the name o' St. James's that you'll keep it from the parson. The Buiidin' Committee hes decided—subject o' course to your approval—to hold a Surprise Party here this very night."

"A Surprise Party i" I gasped. "I can't say I'm fond of that kind of entertainment, Mr. Pepler."

"Nat'reliy, 'cause you got prejudiced by that onlucky affair at Dickey's long ago," observed Pepler; "but you may take my word fur it, ma'am, this here surprise that's in the wind now is a tee-totally different affair. Yes, tee-totally different—that's jest the word fur it," and Sten was so overcome with laughter that he had to sit down to recover his breath befor he could continue his argument.

"Please, Mrs. Dale, don't breathe one word o' this to the parson i An' don't you go a-gittin' down to the village to-day on no pretex' whatsomedever, if you please, ma'am. It's this way. The Buiidin' Committee hev decided that we must do somethin'—an' quick too—to raise money, an' a Surprise Party seems jest to

Sten in His Glory

fill the bill, so Mary she's comin' right along to oncet to help you git ready."

I suppose I must have looked a little glum, as Roger says, at being thus taken by storm, for Sten suddenly put on an expression of piteous entreaty.

"Don't say 'No,' ma'am," he besought me. "I tell you, if you do, you'll never stop regrettin' of it to your dyin' day. There's things a-hangin' on this Surprise that ain't no less than momentuous, ma'am."

"But, Sten, how can I get ready in time? Would not to-morrow do?"

"No time like the present," said Sten. "The thing is, we want it to be a reel genuine surprise—to the parson anyway; an', to say the truth—there's cats in the bag, so to speak, as can't be kep' in long, an' they might git out at any minute. Fac', if he oncet gits down to the village, it's all up. I darsn't trust myself anywhere's near him this blessed day,—a-thinkin' o' those same cats. Besides, Alick's got to go back to T'ronter to his work to-morrer, an' I wouldn't hev him miss the Surprise—this pertikler Surprise!—fur nothin'. Say we may hev it, ma'am, do now!"

"Very well, Sten. Do as you think best."

"Hooray, hooray!" roared my visitor. "Then I'll be off; an' jest you give yourself to keepin' track o' the parson, ma'am. You leave Mary to hustle round an' sweep an' dust, an' cetera, an' you jest hang on to Mr. Dale like grim death. Oh yes, you save yerself to enj'y them cats, ma'am. Oh, oh! I must put out o' this, or I'll never hold myself in. My young folk, they wanted me to send Alick up here, fur they declared that it warn't in me to keep a secret wuth callin' a secret; but I'll larn 'em to sass their old tad. My, if that ain't the parson a-comin' now. Mrs. Dale, I'll jest

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scoot by the front way. You'll not let on to nothin' now, will you? Not one word, ma'am—'bout them delightful cats!"

"What's in the wind, Nell?" asked Roger, as he came in to breakfast.

"Cats," I answered oracularly.

"What, Nell? I thought I heard Sten's voice as I opened the wood-shed door, and I'm sure I saw his tracks across the field."

"Oh, he's been up to tell me that Mary has 'took a notion' to help me to clean up your poor old study. He wouldn't be persuaded to stay."

Like her father, Mary was bubbling over with good humour and mystery, and towards noon Alick turned up in an equally excited though less hilarious frame of mind.

"Mrs. Dale, give me something to do," he cried, "or my brains will give way under this terrible strain! No! I don't know. Like yourself, I am admitted only to half the secret. You must ask Mary, if you want to know anything. I was sent up here to keep an eye on Mr. Dale, and to make myself useful—if I could. Please set me to work."

The mystery and half-suppressed excitement affected the children, but when, at bedtime, they were hastily attired in their Sunday garments instead of their night-gowns, they explained matters by imagining another Christmas Tree, and promptly instituted an exhaustive search for it.

"Poor little dears, it's too bad!" laughed Mary. "They will be disappointed with father's cats, I am afraid." Then she caught Tommy, and sent him off to persuade his father to array himself in his best suit.

The energy of our assistants was such that everything

Sten in His Glory

was in readiness ridiculously early, and when the clock struck half-past seven, the whole parsonage family was solemnly sitting in state with Alick and Mary, waiting for something to happen.

At ten minutes to eight there was a distant jingle of sleigh-bells, and Tommy sprang up from the lounge, on which he had been curled up like a little dog, listening intently, to shout, "It's a S'prise Party, father—all of you! Aren't you glad?"

I felt a little anxious and uncomfortable, remembering that the last occasion on which we had a congregational meeting at our house was that unfortunate evening when the project of the new church had been mooted. I need not have feared, however.

It does me good yet to think of dear old Sten on that wonderful night. He was credited with having planned everything, and, to his indescribable delight, and his lasting glory, all moved without a hitch. To begin with, the actors came on the stage with the suddenness and the order of a well-regulated dramatic company, though far be it from me to suggest that Sten had ever seen any more ambitious effort of histrionic art than the little "dialogues" presented occasionally by our Sunday Schools. We learned afterwards that the Town Hall had been appointed a rendezvous for the congregation, and that Sten had arranged the jingling procession of cutters and bob-sleighs according to a plan which he had spent half the previous night in devising.

First came the master of the ceremonies and his household. Then followed all the mainstays of our congregation—Mrs. Rand and the rest—who had been true to us throughout the troubles. Next (to Roger's utter astonishment and mine) came a large company of the Seceders. Lastly, to take away our little remaining

The Trouble Man

breath, there dashed up to the door a great double cutter, drawn by a fiery team, well known to be the pride of Dickey's heart. It was driven by Dickey himself. Churchill sat beside him, and, packed snugly in the broad back seat, were Mrs. Dickey and the two wards of St. James's, whom we had believed to be still in Buffalo. I had never seen either of them look prettier, for, though Celia was paler and thinner than of old, her face had gained an indescribable beauty since I saw it last. As for Ida, she looked perfectly radiant at being with us again on the old friendly terms.

At sight of this little company, Sten tossed up his fur cap, and led off with a wild cheer; but Dickey paused on the threshold to say to my husband, "May I come in, Mr. Dalé? There is somethin' I want to explain to the congregation, if so be I may."

"Not yet awhile, Torrance," implored Sten. "That 'ud spile everythin'."

"You are very welcome, Mr. Dickey," said Roger, entering suddenly into the spirit of the thing. "Old friends are always welcome here."

"If so be as they can hold their tongues till the proper minute," muttered Pepler, threateningly, with a roll of his black eyes towards a knot of damsels, who betrayed an inclination to giggle and whisper in corners. "Now what was the conditions on which we all comed here?" he demanded. "What was it, gels? I arst you. Warn't it that everythin', from the first procession to the concludin'—ceremony!—was to be done decent and in order?"

Accordingly, we meekly delivered ourselves into Sten's hands, to sing hymns or play games as he gave the word. For an hour he left most of us little opportunity for conversation, but both Alick and Marmaduke showed

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amazing facility in escaping his vigilance, and when at last he marshalled us in the dining-room, to witness the ceremony—whatever that might be—not only these two young men, but also the fair wards of the congregation were missing. A hue and cry was instantly raised, and the culprits reappeared, all audaciously smiling.

“Well, now, I think we’s all ready for business,” said Pepler, looking round with a sigh of importance, “an it behooves me, bein’ in the ins an’ outs o’ things from the first, to explain the object o’ this here meetin’. But first, Mr. Dale, if so be as you haven’t any objection, I’d like you to take the chair, formal-like, an’ call the folk to order, an’ app’int some one to read the minutes o’ the last meetin’ held ’bout the buildin’ o’ the church—so that whatever is done to-night may be done legal and straightfoward an’ bindin’.”

Thus, with astonishing celerity, our Surprise Party transformed itself into a regular congregational meeting; and Sten, at Roger’s elbow, prompted him to demand reports of the work that was in hand for the augmentation of the building fund. With broad smiles, as if it were all the most delightful thing in the world, the several conveners of our little committees gave a series of most discouraging reports. Even the insurance company was still causing trouble, it appeared. Then having lowered our spirits to the very depths, Sten shot his last and most effective bolt.

“Mr. Chairman, ladies, and gentlemen,” he cried, bouncing from his seat in wild excitement, “I do now move that Mr. Torrance Dickey be asked to explain his persition with regards to that same insurance question.”

“I sanction that,” said the laconic Joshua, by way of second; and Roger (that nothing of form and circumstance might be wanting) put the proposition to the

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vote, though he feared that Sten was only stirring up more strife. But Dickey, with his broad face beaming like a genial sun, instantly stepped forward to stand beside Roger's little table.

"Friends, I'm no speechmaker," he said, "but there's several things I'm bound to say to-night. First, I've found out that it's true that Neddy Clark did set the church afire, thinkin', poor lad, to please me. I must a said somethin' hasty in his hearin', an' he took it (knowin' no better) that I wanted the deed done. Well, I'm sorry for it."

He could get no further, for Sten and his coadjutors drowned his voice by clapping. Sten's face was the picture of delight; but Roger, feeling we were on dangerous ground, looked worried and anxious.

"I'm sorry for it," repeated Dickey, clearing his throat.

"Hear, hear! Of course!" cried Sten, encouragingly.

"I'm sorry for some other things too, which I'll not take up your valible time to explain just now," continued Dickey. "You may remember, however, that when we were all here last I made a little offer to the churchwardens an' congregation o' St. James's, which St. James's didn't see its way to accept."

Roger made a movement as if to speak, but Sten, who had been watching him keenly, made a sign of entreaty (or perhaps command) that he should be silent.

"Now to-night I want to make that same offer again," said Torrance, "but I'd like first to say I've changed my mind some in these last three months, an' I'm thinkin' serious—in fact, I've quite decided—to make a change in my business too. Henceforward, Mr. Chairman and ladies and gentlemen, the 'River House' 'll be conducted strictly on temp'rance lines."

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With that Dickey turned and grasped Roger's hand ; and Sten again gave a screaming lead to a deafening cheer. "Another, lads, a good un!" he cried, "fur I tell you the walls of Jericho is down now with a vengeance!"

But Torrance had more to say. "God helping me, I'll never touch another drop of liquor as long as I live, nor sell another drop, nor make it easy fur another man to take it! but I can't undo the past. I can't bring back poor Oliver from the grave, where—maybe—I helped to lay him. I can't make up to lots o' folk for the ill I've done 'em. But—if the parson 'il sec it—it 'ud ease my mind a bit if he'd let me do somethin' worth doin' with some o' this money that's what the temp'rance folk call tainted. It 'ud be a comfort to me an' to my wife an' to Ida yonder, Mr. Dale, if you'd let us build the church same as I said before."

"Mr. Dale, don't say 'No'," pleaded Mrs. Dickey, suddenly breaking silence. "Please let us do this thing—for God's sake!"

"If it is your pleasure, friends, that we should accept Mr. and Mrs. Dickey's generous offer," said Roger, "will some one kindly make a motion to that effect?"

Mr. Mosely was ready for the emergency. "I move that it 'ud be very foolish not to accept Mr. Dickey's generous offer, an' us in such a fix with that there building fund."

"I'd like to second that," cried Sten. "Oh yes, let us close with this here offer to oncet, by all manner o' means."

So the motion was put to the meeting and passed uproariously. And then and there, amidst a breathless hush, Dickey, in token of his sincerity, solemnly signed "the pledge." The room was so very still that every one, even those out in the hall, could hear the scratching of

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his pen on the paper, and some of us felt as if we could hear the beating of our own hearts.

But Stennett Pepler could hardly wait for the last stroke of the Y in Dickey's flourishing signature, before he burst forth, "Now, Mr. Churchwardens, there's a bit more business yet, ain't there? I thought so, an' I guess we'd better arst the parson to leave the chair fur a moment."

Roger discreetly retired to the kitchen; but they made me remain. Without a dissentient voice they hastily passed resolutions, dissolving the Building Committees and merging the fund in the general funds of the church. The churchwardens then signed a cheque for the arrears of Roger's salary, and my husband was recalled to receive it. But when this piece of business had been adroitly settled, our master of ceremonies still stood at attention, as if listening for some sound from without.

I noticed then, what I had not perceived before, that Churchill and half a dozen of the younger men had slipped from the room, and I speculated what was to be the next event in this truly extraordinary meeting. I had not long to wait.

There was a heavy bumping and thumping in the outer regions, then Sten, in his high sing-song voice, again took up his parable. "Mr. Dale, sir, there has bin times when we's seemed lukewarm; there has bin times when a onlooker might a thought us unappreciative o' your services an' your worth, sir, in all these many years what you've gone in an' out amongst us. But let me tell you, reverent sir, (an' in this I may say I'm the actin' mouth-piece o' the whole congregation), that it is not so! To all appearances, notwithstanding, we has appreciated your self-denyin' labours hearty, sir—' for

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richer, for poorer, for better, for worse, in sickness and in health——’ ”

This unexpected excursion into the marriage service was accompanied, not only by continued thuds and scrapings, but by agonized exclamations of “Heave her up a bit, heave her up, lads, or she’ll tear every bit o’ plaster off of the wall. Now she’s a-goin’ to stick in the doorway. Up-end her, lads! Easy now, easy!” But Sten, now well afloat in what he felt to be the speech of the evening, was deaf to the hubbub. With hands thrust deep into his pockets, eyes fixed on a corner of the ceiling, he continued to chant his quaint eulogy of my embarrassed husband. “Wet or dry, rain or shine, always at your post, sir! Ever ready to risk your life by fire or water at the calls o’ duty! A fine, edifyin’ preacher, a agreeable visitor, a painstakin’ shepherd to the lambs, Mr. Dale, sir, we congratulate ourselves in havin’ got you—an’ Mrs. Dale, too, what’s always showed herself a most extraordin’ry good helpmeet, as the Bible says Eve were made fur, both to you an’ the congregation. Yes; we congratulate ourselves in havin’ got you—an’ kep’ you through these eventful an’ stormy times.”

Upon this he drew one hand from its sheltering pocket, and seized that of his pastor. Then arose another mighty cheer, sounding longest and loudest from the passage.

“Bein’ as all the aforesaid is the case,” continued Sten, “we thought as how we’d like to give you a kind o’ testimonial. What form it were to take was subjeck o’ consid’rable discussion, but knowin’ as you had a nice set o’ shelves all handy we concluded jest to git a great scholar to selec’ a nice compac’ little li’bry fur you, an’ —— ”

He broke off suddenly, amidst a general laugh, then

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in his natural tone he roared, "Now then, boys, ain't them cases ready?"

"Coming," answered Churchill. "Easy, now, easy. Clear the way, good folks!"

The crowd pressed back, and through the narrow lane thus formed the young men carried to Roger's feet one of the very cases he had packed so sorrowfully a few weeks earlier.

"We have put the others in the study," said Alick.

Roger was so overcome that he could hardly speak. "Friends, I can't begin to thank you all," he murmured, "but my wife and I will never forget this wonderful evening and all your kindness till our dying day."

"Now, Celia," whispered Sten, "jest let's hev that concludin' hymn an' then we'll have supper an' get away."

Celia immediately began to sing the glorious old doxology; and, as I listened to her rich voice, I was thankful that she should still be able to make music, though she could never again play her chosen instrument. To herself it seemed for long but a poor gift that was left to her, and she laid aside for ever the dream of winning fame and power and wealth by music. But she sang for love, and thus, with her simple songs, she found all unconsciously a way to the hearts of her hearers as she had never done with the ambitious music of her earlier days. At last one glad day her eyes were opened, and she knew that this remaining gift of God was very good.

But I must bring my long story to a close.

The building of the new church was pushed on apace, and on the midsummer day, when it was opened, Sten's excitement really exceeded all measure.

Adorned with an immense white favour, he danced

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like a butterfly, in and out, amongst the crowd of Willow Point folk (of all denominations), who that day pressed into the church. I am afraid he grasped nothing of the solemn ceremony by which the church was dedicated to the service of God. I can't say that I have any clear recollection of it myself, though I have a very distinct vision of the venerable form and benignant face of the successor to poor Bishop Southwell, who officiated on this auspicious occasion.

After the service was over there was a pause, but no one left the church except Sten, who hurriedly rushed to the gate to take an observation, came back to me—at the organ—to whisper hoarsely, "They're comin', an' the sun never shone on a lovelier pair o' brides!" and then dashed out again to bring in his adopted daughter.

They were the two wards of St. James, white-robed, white-veiled, carrying sweet-scented flowers, and never was a prettier wedding than this of the two sisters. I even went so far as to find both the bridegrooms extremely interesting. In fact, by this time I hardly knew whether I was prouder of slight, earnest-eyed Alick, now to his father's great glee actually a lecturer at the University of Toronto, or of jolly-faced Churchill, once our burly British Possessor. Never in all my life had I found it easier to rejoice with those that do rejoice than on that glad day, but, after all, that was not surprising, for the joy was all one's own.

As I watched Dickey moving slowly up the church with Ida on his arm—as I looked on his face, which had already lost some of the coarse marks of the old sin, I thought of Churchill's question—which once I had not dared to answer—"Can love—true, deep, unselfish love—ever harden?" Looking round on our people, I read everywhere the glad assurance that of

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all love—human and divine—nothing but good can come.

“Who would a thought it?” murmured Sten, as we stood, two hours later, on the verandah of the “River House,” after watching the bridal party drive off, “who would a thought, less ’n a year ago, that things could a worked out as they hes? The parson an’ Dickey, the ‘River House’ an’ the Church, ali a-backin’ one another up an’ workin’ together jest like the two blades o’ one pair o’ shears! It fair takes one’s breath; an’ then to crown all, these weddin’s! Mrs. Daic, ain’t it wonderful that the fust thing to happen in this here new Church o’ St. James’s should be the double weddin’ of his very daughters, as you may say?”

THE END

