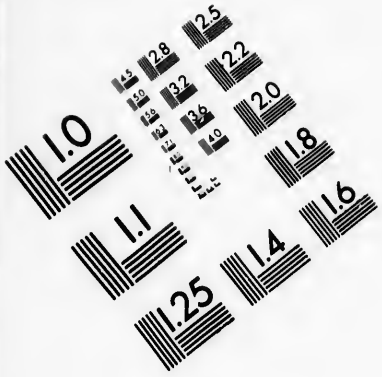

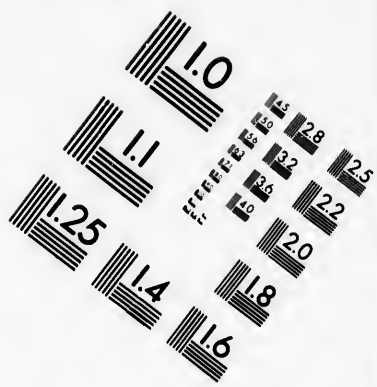

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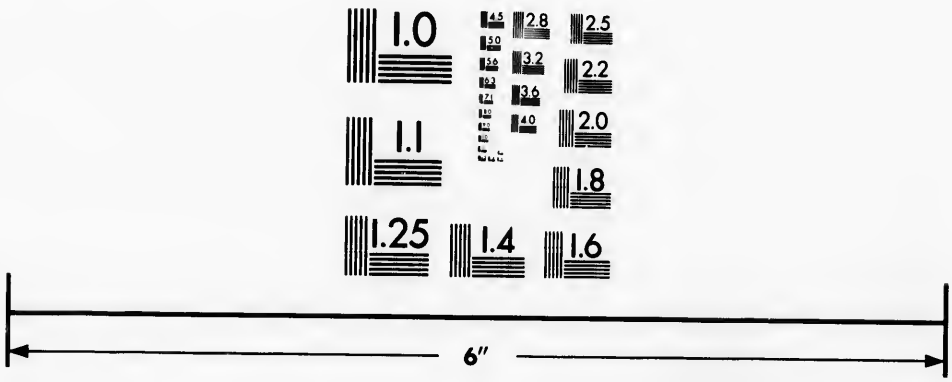

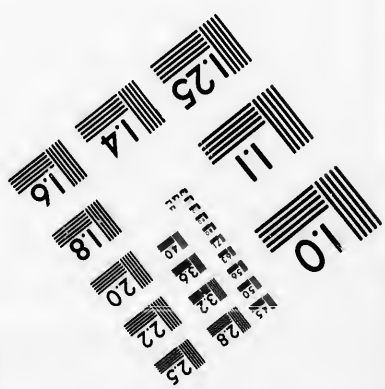

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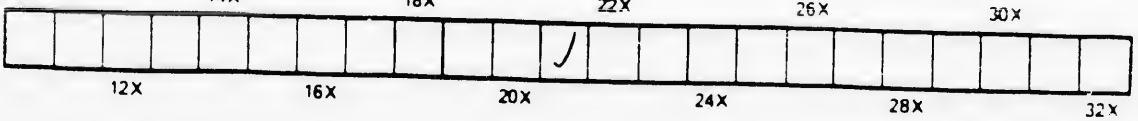

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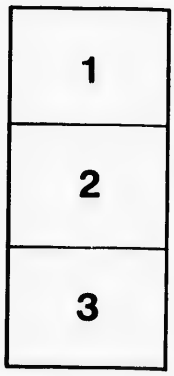

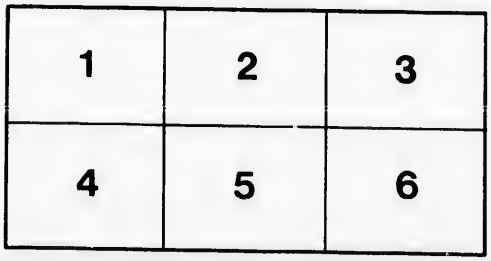

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CANADIAN COPYRIGHT EDITION

BOOTLE'S CHILDREN

BY

JOHN STRANGE WINTER

TORONTO: THE NA

BOOTLES' CHILDREN

—BY—

JOHN STRANGE WINTER

AUTHOR OF

"BOOTLES' BABY," "PLUCK MIGNON," "BEAUTIFUL JIM,"
ETC., ETC.

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PREFACE.

I FEEL that it is necessary for me to give some word of explanation that, after bidding farewell to BOOTLES' BABY, I should continue the story of BOOTLES' CHILDREN. The truth is this—I received many letters asking me to show something of Mignon's later life, all of which made me wish with regret that I had not closed that page, as I thought, for ever. But when my dear and honoured friend, Mr. Ruskin, said to me that he also would like to know more of Mignon, I felt that there was no more to be said, but that when the spirit moved me to do it, Mignon must go on the stage again.

There is not much about Mignon in this story, but there is a little that I hope will interest those who love her; and if there are some who are a little tired of her, well, I hope they will bear with her when they remember that this story was written in the hope of giving an hour's pleasure to one whose whole life has been to give delight and help wherever the English language is spoken.

JOHN STRANGE WINTER.

The Cedars, Putney,
June, 1888.

CONTENTS.

BOOTLES' CHILDREN.

CHAPTER I.

ASK NO QUESTIONS.

"O little souls! as pure and white
And crystalline as rays of light."
—WEARINESS.

"Pleasant thy frankness of speech, and
Thy soul's immaculate whiteness."
—EVANGELINE.

EVERYONE who knew Captain Ferrers, or, as his familiar friends called him, Bootles, in the old days when he was the life and soul of the Scarlet Lancers, knew that he had two soldier servants who were greatly attached to him, and upon whom he set great store—Browne, his personal attendant, and Terry, his head groom. And everyone who knew him after he left the Service, and settled down to the life of a country gentleman, knew that Browne and Terry had also turned their backs upon the army—for a consideration which Bootles arranged with those in authority—and followed him into his new

life, in which they both settled down as if the gay, restless soldiering days had never had the smallest attraction for either of them.

Browne was still Captain Ferrers's valet, and ever since he had been at The Court, Terry had been at the head of the stable department; and a person of no small importance he was, not only in his own eyes, but in those of everyone who came about the place.

It happened that one dreary November day, when the afternoon was just sinking into dusk, Terry was reading a letter in the saddle-room. The letter was from a young woman. *That* goes without saying, for though Terry had not entered into the holy state of wedlock and did not seem at all likely to do so, he had not altered from the old days when he "wore his cap on one side and looked big at the gals," but was by way of keeping company with every pretty lass who lived within a ride of The Court and of making eyes at every smart lady's-maid who sojourned within it.

"H'm!—wants me to meet her at Stapleton Corner at seven o'clock. H'm—anything else, I wonder. Knows it's an off-day with the 'ounds," looking at the letter again. "Ah! you're getting to know too much, my dear; that's about the meaning of it. Well, I can't oblige you to-night, that's certain, for I've wrote to 'Liza that I shall be elsewhere."

Just then there was a sound of running feet upon the pathway without, and two slim little figures sped past the window, and, after a sharp imperative knock at the door, the two elder of the daughters of the house entered.

"Oh! you're here, Terry!" exclaimed one.

"What a gorgeous fire you have!" cried the other.

"We want to see the new pups?" exclaimed the elder of the pair.

"And we promised to take 'em in to show little Madge. She's got a bad cold, and Humphie won't let her stir outside the nursery."

Terry shoved the letter into his pocket and straightened himself into a peculiar attitude of military stiffness, which was his idea of a proper deportment when in the presence of any of the family.

"Well, young ladies," he answered. "I don't suppose old Juno 'll object to your taking the pups indoors for a bit to show little m'ssie; but I wouldn't keep 'em very long. They're tender little things, and squeal a good bit when they're handled, and Juno gets anxious if they're kept apart from her for very long together. I doubt you'd best let me take 'em in myself."

"Oh! all right," returned Pearl, settling herself in one of the big Windsor chairs, and stretching out her long black legs and neatly shod feet to the blazing fire. "How comfort-

able you are here, Terry—I don't wonder Father likes to get in here whenever he can."

"Whose photograph is this, Terry?" demanded Maud, who disdained the attractions of the fire, and had started on a tour of inspection round Terry's special domain and sanctum.

Terry "dratted" the photograph in his own mind, but answered the little lady's question promptly. "Oh, that's my sister, Miss Maud," he said, hoping to stop further questioning by telling a thumping fib at once.

"Your sister! H'm! She is a great deal younger than you are, Terry," was Maud's embarrassing comment.

"She is younger than me, missie," Terry admitted, discreetly.

"How much younger is she?" Maud asked.

"Let me see," put in Pearl from the big chair. "Oh! is that your sister, Terry? Why, how much prettier she is than you."

"Polly *is* pretty, Miss Pearl," said Terry, finding that Pearl's great blue eyes were fixed upon him in evident expectation of a reply to her remark.

"Oh! her name is Polly, is it?" Pearl returned. "Polly Terry! What a pity they didn't call her something else," she added, with the terrible frankness of childhood; "Polly doesn't go at all well with Terry."

"Perhaps it don't, missie," Terry agreed, hoping devoutly that the young ladies would

soon demand the puppies and carry them off into the house.

"But *how* much younger than you is she, Terry?" put in Maud, taking possession of the other Windsor chair.

"A goodish bit, missie," answered Terry, evasively.

"Yes, but *how* much?" Maud persisted. "I want to know how old she is exactly."

Thus badgered, Terry made reply with the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

"She's just eighteen, Miss Maud," he said, and "dratted" the photograph once more right vigorously.

"Just—EIGHT—EEN!" cried Maud, in accents of the most profound astonishment. "Why, Terry, you are eight-and-thirty! Fancy having a sister twenty years younger than yourself. Why, you're old enough to be her father."

"Or her husband," said Pearl, meditatively, and thinking of her elder sister, Mignon, and Major Lucy.

"No, not her husband; Terry's too old for that," cried Maud, decidedly. "Yes, I do know, Pearl. I know exactly, for it was only yesterday that Jane Carmine said to Mrs. Smith that Mignon was a great deal too young to be married, particularly when there is such a great disparity in their ages as there is between her and Major Lucy."

"Jane Landover, you mean," corrected Pearl.

"Yes, Jane Landover. And that was what she said, and Mrs. Smith said in *her* way—you know, Pearl—'Oh, my dear Mrs. Landover, don't use such a dreadful word as disparity; a difference in age does not begin to be a disparity until it gets to twenty years.'"

"How very funny," said Pearl, sagely, "to have a disparity of age between a brother and sister. What does it feel like, Terry?"

Terry's face grew hot and scarlet. He had fondly hoped that the introduction of Squire Landover's wife would carry the conversation into other channels, but Pearl's direct question brought him up sharply, as it were, with his nose to the grindstone again. However, before he could answer, a quick, firm footstep fell upon the flagged path outside, and Maud called out, "Oh, here's Father!" just as Captain Ferrers entered the saddle-room.

"Hallo! what are you two doing here?" he asked; but his tone did not express much surprise, and he was evidently well accustomed to seeing his little daughters in possession of the big chairs beside Terry's fire.

Pearl entered into an elaborate explanation.

"Well, you see, Father, it was this way: Madge has got a horrid cold," she said, "and Humphie won't let her go out, and Madge gets pretty cross staying about the nursery

all day, and so Maud suggested that we should go and fetch Juno's pups for her to see, and Madge wanted them at once, and so we came to see if we could have them."

"And that was a good bit ago," added Maud, who was noted for an accuracy of detail in relating any circumstance such as frequently resulted in her being more literally truthful than conventionally polite; "and I should think Madge is getting very sick of waiting for us. But, of course you know, Father, we had to come in and ask Terry if we could have the pups, and then we got talking about other things. Now this"—to Terry's unmitigated horror, holding out the photograph for Captain Ferrers' inspection—"this is Terry's sister; her name is Polly, and she's just eighteen. She's very pretty, isn't she, Father?"

"Wouldn't you like to take the pups in for little missie to see now, Miss Maud?" put in Terry, hurriedly.

"Yes; but wait till Father has seen your sister's photograph," returned Maud, calmly. "She's very pretty, isn't she, Father?"

"How many *other* sisters have you got, Terry?" asked Pearl, wondering why the man was so uneasy and kept shifting about from one foot to the other.

"Not any more, Miss Pearl," answered Terry, his face gradually becoming deeper and deeper in colour.

Captain Ferrers cast a quick glance of in-

tense amusement at the head groom, and Pearl put a still more embarrassing question:

"And how many brothers have you, Terry?"

"No brothers, Miss Pearl," he replied.

"How *very* funny," remarked Pearl, "to have only one sister or brother twenty years younger than yourself. Why, she must have felt it quite a liberty to call you by your Christian name."

"Not at all, Missie," said Terry, at which his master burst out laughing, and told his little daughters that they had better get Juno and the pups and be off to the nursery with them, for he wanted Terry to look at a certain mare with him, and he had only ten minutes more to spare.

"Here's your — *sister*, Terry," he said, handing over the photograph of the pretty girl to the servant. "So you're at the old game, hey? Much better follow my example and settle down once for all."

"I might if I had your temptation, sir," said Terry, promptly, at which Bootles laughed again, well pleased, for he knew his old servant and comrade's devotion to Mrs. Ferrers, and a genuine compliment paid to her was a ten thousand times greater pleasure to him than it would have been if paid to himself.

"Juno is going with us," said Maud, when they met the two children on their way to the house, each with a St. Bernard pup in her

arms, and Juno following with stately step and a certain anxiousness of expression which told that the warm little roly-polies belonged to her. "She doesn't mind our having them a bit."

"Yes, but if they begin to whine, Missie," said Terry, forgetting the uncomfortable quarter of an hour through which he had just passed, "put them down at once; and as soon as the Captain has looked at the mare I'll come in myself and fetch 'em back. She's good-natured enough in a general way, sir," he added to Bootles, as the children and dogs passed on towards the house, "but if her pups start whining she's like a mother with a crying babe, she stands nothing and she sticks at nothing."

"Always best to be careful—not that I think she'd harm one of the children," answered Bootles; "only it's best to be careful, so I'll just glance at the mare and set you free to go in after them.

CHAPTER II.

LASSIE WILCOX.

Can it be so! Or does my sight
Deceive me in the uncertain light?
Ah, no! I recognise that face,
Though time has touched it in his flight.
—*The Golden Legend.*

JUNO was safely back in her own corner again, and the roly-polies were taking their supper with avidity. The great rambling stables were closed, and the yards thereof fairly quiet, only the occasional stamping of the horses and the "wuff-wuff" of one or other of the dogs breaking the silence.

All the "lads," as Terry called the men about the stables, had gone home for the night, with the exception of the under-coachman, who lived in the house and who was at that precise moment occupied in the fascinating game of a desperate flirtation with the maid who waited on the young ladies, Pearl and Maud.

It was just a quarter after eight o'clock, and Terry, with a pipe in his mouth and a letter in his hand, sat staring into the fire with something like a frown on his face.

"H'm! If the little baggage had contrived to get a letter here a bit sooner, I might as well 'a gone to Stapleton Corner to meet Liza," he muttered. "Just like a woman, to wait till a fellar's sent his excuse elsewhere, to find out that she can't come. As it is, 'ere I am wasting my whole evening, and disappointing Liza for nothing. It's just like 'er. Strikes me I shall have to straighten Polly up a bit. She's getting to think too much of 'erself, she is. I wonder what little game she's up to now—it's all bosh about not being able to get out and her father wanting 'er. Polly 'd get out fast enough if she'd had a mind to. I wonder who it is? Shouldn't be surprised if 'twas that chap from Landover, though what any good-looking girl, with a respect for herself, can find to look at in a greasy ferret-faced foreign chap like that beats *me* to know. Well, there is no accounting for taste, and perhaps that ain't it, after all; and maybe it's just as well I was kept from going to Stapleton Corner to-night, for Liza's getting to know more than is good for her, that's certain."

He tossed the letter into the fire, and knocked his pipe out against the side of the grate. "Half-past eight," he said, glancing at the little clock on the chimney-shelf. "I may as well have another pipe before supper."

He had just set his pipe going again, when a sound made him turn his head towards the window just in time to see a figure pass by.

The next moment there was a very timid tap at the door.

"Come in," shouted Terry.

The door was opened slowly, as if by a hesitating hand, and the figure of a woman huddled up in a big shawl appeared, and waited, with a shrinking air, for him to bid her enter.

"Hullo, Missis," exclaimed Terry, surprised at such a visitor at such an hour. "What can I do for you? Do you want the way to the kitchen?"

"No; I wanted to see you, Mr. Terry," she replied, timidly. "May I come in?"

"Why, yes, of course," said he, peering keenly into the shadow wherein she stood, in a vain attempt to discern her features.

There was a something that was familiar to him in her voice, yet it was not enough to make him recognise her. However, after a quick glance around, she stepped into the light, and he was able to see her clearly, and the face was more familiar than the voice, though he was not able for the moment to put a name to it."

"Why," he exclaimed, staring at her with puzzled eyes, "why——"

"You don't know me, Mr. Terry," she said in a weak, faint voice; "I see you don't. I knew I'd altered a lot, but I thought *you'd* have known me in spite of everything."

"*Lassie!*" he cried, in a sudden burst of recognition. "Good God! is it you?"

"I knew I'd altered," she said, in a dull, hopeless tone, and with a sad shake of her head. "I'm so tired. Would you let me sit down a bit? I've walked miles and miles this day, and I'm just done up."

Terry pushed his chair nearer to the fire. "Sit here and get warmed. It's a cold night," he said, kindly. "Can I get you aught to eat, my girl? You look famished."

"Not a bite has passed my lips this day," said the woman; "but don't trouble. I'm not so hungry as I was yesterday. I was like a wolf then; but I'll sit here a bit, if you'll let me, and get rested."

"Yes; sit you there while I go and get you some supper," returned Terry, seizing the poker and stirring the fire vigorously. "Don't be afraid, nobody will come; and I'll be back in a minute or two."

She sank down upon the chair with a sigh, and Terry went off to the kitchen, where he found the cook just resting after sending up the late dinner, while some of the undermaids served up the kitchen supper.

"Cook, I want you to do me a favour," he said, in the pleasant, civil tones which had made him a favourite with everyone about the place. "A poor soul has just come into the saddle-room that I knew years ago, and she'd dead beat, and hungered into the bargain. I want you to give me a bit of supper for her."

"Poor soul! Bring her in here. We're

just going to have our supper," returned the cook, hospitably.

"Why, thank you kindly, cook, but I don't think she'd like to come. She's down on her luck, and tired out," Terry explained; "too tired to tell me how she got here or what the brute that married her's doing; and I think——"

"Oh! all right. Jane," cried the cook to a young maid just then passing; "get some supper on a tray for Mr. Terry—a basin of soup and a bit of that hotted chicken—and put it in a little covered dish. Terry, I'll go and ask Mr. Bowles for a glass of sherry for her."

"Better say a drop of whiskey," said Terry, remembering how chilled and blue Lassie had looked.

"Very well. I daresay you've got a kettle out there," replied the cook; "so I'll just put sugar and a bit o' lemon, and may it do her all the good in the world, poor soul, this bitter night!"

She went off followed by Terry's profuse expressions of gratitude, and in a very few minutes the tray was ready.

"Is she a young woman?" asked the cook as she put the tray into his hands.

"A matter of ten years younger than me," replied Terry, "but she might be ninety to look at her. If you was to ask the Capt'n who Lassie Wilcox was, he'd tell you that she was the prettiest girl, not only in the

Scarlet Lancers, but in the whole of the British Army ; but I did'nt know her when she came in. I knew the voice, and I knew the face, but I didn't like to put the name of Lassie Wilcox to such a wreck as she's come to be now. I didn't, upon my soul."

"Poor thing, poor thing!" murmured the cook, pityingly. "Well, I hope she'll enjoy her supper anyway."

Thus laden with a tray of good things, Terry went back to the saddle-room, where he found Lassie before the fire just where he had left her. She was sitting fast asleep, though in that peculiar attitude which nurses and tramps acquire, or, in fact any persons accustomed to sleeping without going to bed. Terry set his tray down on the table and dragged it close to her side, but she did not wake.

"'Pon my soul," he said, looking at her with pitying eyes, "I'd never have known you. I wonder what the Capt'n would say if he was to see you—he used to say you was the prettiest girl in the Service; and I was gone on you. Poor little Lassie, you turned me over for Sim Halliday, and——" he broke off sharp with a big sigh to the memory of that bygone pain, and laid a gentle and kindly hand upon her thin shoulder.

"Lassie, my girl," he said; "I've brought your supper. Come; eat it whilst it's hot"

The poor soul started up with a nervous

cry. "Yes, I'm going; I only sat down to rest for a minute. Please, let me——"

"Lassie, Lassie," cried Terry; "don't be frightened. There's no one here but me. Come, eat your supper."

But Lassie could not still the trembling which had seized her.

"I thought it was a policeman," she said, with a scared glance around, "and I'm so afraid of 'em. If one looks at me I feel as if he wanted to shove me into prison."

"Oh! rubbish, rubbish. You're nervous and tired," returned Terry, soothingly. "Get your supper before it's cold, and then you'll feel more like yourself again."

He took the cover off the bowl of steaming soup, which sent forth such a rich and savoury odour that the weary woman all at once realised the fact that she was desperately hungry, and that she had not tasted good and nourishing food for weeks, and no food of any kind during that long and weary day.

"I haven't *seen* such food I don't know when," she said, fairly gloating over it; "and to-day I've had nothing—nothing at all. You'll wonder how I came to find you out, but I was on my way to a place called Landover Castle. I've a cousin who is housekeeper there, and I thought she might get me a place where Halliday wouldn't be able to find me."

"Halliday! Is he living?" asked Terry,

his face darkening at the sound of his rival's name.

"Living! Yes. I wish to heaven he wasn't," she answered. "At least, he was living a month ago, and drunk enough to knock me down. Yes, *me*"—with a wild sob—"*me* with a babe of a month old, the brute! And as soon as he was quiet and asleep I came away, and, please God"—letting her spoon fall and rocking herself to and fro—"please God, we'll never meet again any more, either in this world or the other."

"You haven't got the baby there?" Terry exclaimed, in dismay.

"Yes"—rocking herself still—"but she's so quiet, so good; she never cries nor stirs. You won't send me away till I've got rested because I've got a little baby here, will you, Bill, for old times' sake?"

The use of his Christian name, or the plea for old times' sake, brought a lump into Terry's throat. It was so long since anyone had called him "Bill." At The Court he was always called Terry, or Mr. Terry, according to who it was that addressed him; and Liza was a free-and-easy young person, who had never asked what his proper name was, but had dubbed him "Tom" from a very early stage of their acquaintance; while Polly (his sister) was of a more sentimental and affectionate turn, and always called him "Willie." And so with all the other Lizas and Pollies who had held sway over his heart

for a longer or shorter time—one had called him this, and the other had called him that, but never, since he had left the Scarlet Lancers, had he heard the once familiar "Bill."

"Come, get your supper, my girl," he said, with rough kindness; "if you've got anyone at Landover who can help you, your troubles are well-nigh over, for it's only a matter of nine miles from here, and I'll drive you over in the morning. And, to-night, for old times' sake, I'll see if some of the women won't give you a bed and make you comfortable. The Captain's the last in the world to deny a night's lodging to one of the old regiment!"

"The Captain?" cried Lassie.

"Captain Ferrers—this is Ferrers Court," he answered.

"I didn't know it," she gasped. "I went into a little shop in the village to ask my way to Landover, and a lad came in with a message from you, and I said, 'What Mr. Terry is that?' 'Oh,' said he, 'he is head-groom at the Court.' 'Was he ever in the army?' said I. 'Yes,' said he—'in the Scarlet Lancers,' and so I knew it was you; but Captain Ferrers—'Bootles,' they used to call him—I—I——" and then she began to cry weakly, and at last slipped off into a dead faint, when her feeble grasp of the bundle in her arms relaxed, and it rolled to the ground, where it lay without sound or motion.

CHAPTER III.

A BURDEN OF SORROW!

It is the fate of a woman
Long to be patient and silent, to wait like a ghost that is speechless.

—*Miles Standish.*

For the good, the heavenly Shepherd
Took the lost lamb in His arms—

—*Children of the Lord's Supper.*

For a moment Terry was almost beside himself, and knew not what next to do. It was, however, imperative that he should not stand staring at the faded wreck of her who had once been his heart's best and dearest love, so he pulled himself together and carefully lifted the bundle containing the little babe from the ground.

There was a large, old-fashioned chair at the other side of the room, and he dragged it over to the fire and laid the bundle gently down in it; then he took the loose cushion from the back of it and slipped it under Lassie's head, thinking, as he did so and looked into her worn and altered face, that her pretty name, which had once seemed to

suit her so well, had come to be sadly inappropriate. But rouse her he could not, nor yet force any of the hot whiskey-and-water between her tightly-clenched teeth, and at last he realised that the sooner he got help from the house the better.

By that time he knew that if the gentlemen had not already left the dining-room, they would be about to do so, therefore he went straightway in search of Bowles, the butler, who had been at Ferrers Court almost from time immemorial.

"Mr. Bowles," said Terry, knocking at the door of the butler's sanctum and pushing it open, "is there company to-night?"

"Twenty-four to dinner, Terry," answered Mr. Bowles; "fourteen staying in the 'ouse."

"'Cause I want to speak to the Capt'n *particularly*," Terry went on.

"They haven't left table yet; leastways only the ladies," said Mr. Bowles; "but I'll let the master know you want him. Hadn't you better go into the study?"

"Very well," said Terry, and betook himself off to await his master there.

It never occurred to him that the room would have any occupants, so he pushed the door open and went in, to find, however, Major Lucy and Miss Mignon sitting close together on the roomy old sofa.

"I'm sure I beg your pardon, sir," said Terry, turning scarlet, and feeling that he had put his foot in it utterly.

"Never mind, Terry. Do you want the Captain?" Mignon called out.

Terry turned back. "Yes, Miss Mignon, I wanted to speak to the master, and Bowles has just gone into the dining-room to ask him to come. I'm very sorry, I didn't know there was anyone here."

"Well, never mind; there's no harm done," said Mignon, with a laugh. "Oh! here he is. Terry wants you, dear."

"Hollo, Terry, what is it? Anything wrong?" said Captain Ferrers.

"Not with the stables, sir," answered Terry, with a formal salute, which was a compliment to Major Lucy's presence. "But perhaps you'll remember Lassie Wilcox?"

"I do," said Mignon at once.

"Of course I do," said Bootles.

"Pwretty girl," murmured Lucy.

"Well, sir, she came into the saddle-room an hour or so ago, and—and I didn't know her, gentlemen. Just on tramp she seems to have been, and hungered into the bargain. She'd a babe in her arms but a few weeks old, and I got cook to give her some supper—for I knew, sir, you wouldn't grudge it to any starving woman, let alone one of the old regiment—and she just took a spoonful or two and then all at once she give way, and she's lying senseless on the saddle-room floor at this moment."

"Good God!" cried Bootles in dismay;

"she had better be brought into the house at once."

"Let us go out and see her," suggested Mignon; "I used to like Lassie awfully."

Captain Ferrers had already moved towards the door. "Where is her husband? Didn't she marry Sergeant Halliday?"

"Yes sir; and he's treated her like the brute he is, and always was," answered Terry, bitterly. "I remember when she was married it was thought a grand thing to be marrying a sergeant—the ranks," with meaning, "wasn't good enough for the provost's daughter; but there was plenty in the ranks of the Scarlet Lancers as would have treated her different to what Sergeant Halliday's done; and whatever they'd been they couldn't have treated her worse—judging by her looks, that is."

"H—m!" was Bootles' comment.

He guessed by the intense bitterness in Terry's tone that this was the solution to the mystery of Terry's unmarried state—this was the reason that he had to invent relationships now and again—this was the meaning of all the Lizas, and Pollies and Susies of whose existence he every now and then became aware. He had never dreamt that there was a bygone romance in Terry's life, and he all at once felt very sorry for him—more sorry in fact, than was needful.

"She's never stirred—I hope she ain't

dead," said Terry, as he opened the door of the saddle-room.

"It looks uncommonly like it, poor soul," returned Bootles. "Mignon, my pet, you'd better not come in here."

"I would rather," said Mignon, quietly, and kneeling down in her pretty velvet gown beside the woefully draggled and travel-stained figure on the floor "Oh, poor thing, she is wet through, and so cold! Terry, run and fetch Humphie; she will know what to do better than anyone else. *I* should send off for the doctor—or, stay, why not ask Dr. Delaney to come out here? I'm sure she ought to have all these wet things off at once, and be got to bed. You'll let her stop here for the night, Bootles, won't you?"

"Poor soul, yes," answered Bootles, with a pitying look at the face he had never seen since he had seen it as a blooming bride. "I'll go and ask him to come and look at her."

"She is not dead," said Mignon, decidedly; "but she must be very ill. But, Terry, didn't you say there was a baby?"

"Yes, Miss Mignon; but it seems pretty quiet," Terry answered. "It never even cried when it rolled out of her arms on to the floor, so I put it on the chair here. I was that scared about the mother I hadn't time to look to it."

Mignon gave a cry of pity. "Oh! did it

fall? Poor little thing, how good of it to sleep, for it must be cold and hungry and wet like its mother. We must take it to Humphie; she will soon feed it and make it—— *Oh!* Terry, Terry"—as she unfolded the large shawl and the babe's little white, pinched face was brought to light—"it is ill—it is——"

"Dead, Miss Mignon," said Terry, sorrowfully.

"No; not *dead*," Mignon began.

"Put the little thing down, my darling," put in Lucy at this point. "You can do nothing for it but be thankful that its troubles are all over. No, don't cwry, my dear; it is far better that it is so."

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CHAPTER IV.

OUT OF THE SHADOWS.

"O, let thy weary heart
Lean upon mine! and it shall faint no more,
Nor thirst, nor hunger; but be comforted
And filled with my affection."

—*The Spanish Student.*

A WEEK had gone by! The little babe was put decently out of sight in a quiet corner of Ferrers Church-yard, and the inquest which was held on the poor little body was adjourned until the mother should be able to attend and give her evidence.

And poor Lassie, who had once been the belle of the Scarlet Lancers and the darling of Terry's heart, lay in an upper room at Ferrers Court battling with the burden of extreme illness, her poor, anxious, distraught mind wandering hither and thither in the bewildering mazes of delirium.

Happily, she had forgotten the immediate past and even the baby did not form any part of her thoughts. No, she had gone back to the days and beyond the days when Sergeant Halliday had been the hero of her fancy, to

that happy time when the Provost-Sergeant's daughter had had half the non-coms and almost all the ranks of the old regiment at her beck and call.

"I didn't use poor Bill any too well," she kept saying over and over again to the nurse, who had no idea she meant "Mr. Terry" by Bill—"and he was so fond of me, it was a shame."

"Well, never mind, my dear, you must make up to him for it now," was the nurse's soothing reply made as many times.

But it was not all delirium? There were times when she lay for long hours perfectly calm and passive, not even troubling herself to wonder how she had got into that cosy room, nor who the pleasant-faced woman in the white cap might be, who sat beside her bed and attended to her slightest wish; but even then she had no remembrance of the feeble little life which had been given up upon her breast as she made that last weary effort to reach the Court and her old friend and admirer, Terry.

Still this state of things could not go on for ever, and at last there came a day when the nurse had to answer a question which she had been dreading ever since she had first heard the circumstances under which the patient had come to Ferrers Court—a day when all the feverish brightness had died out of her eyes, and the delicate features, which had once been so pretty, looked gaunt

and large by reason of the deep hollows in the cheeks and the loss of the silver-streaked hair which had been shorn off close to the head—a day when she looked up reasonably and asked "Where is my baby?"

Now this was a question which the nurse did not feel herself equal to answering. So she put her off with an evasive "Now don't worry about the baby, my dear," and went off at once to fetch Mrs. Ferrers that she might do that from which she shrank.

Mrs. Ferrers came at once and sat down beside the bed. She had been to see poor Lassie so many times that she had become a figure almost as familiar to the poor invalid as that of the nurse.

"You are better to-day," she began in her sweet and gentle tones.

Lassie put out a trembling and skinny hand to meet the pretty plump one which Mrs. Ferrers held out to her. "Yes,—my lady," she answered with an almost imperceptible hesitation ere she uttered the two last words.

Some womanly instinct told Mrs. Bootles that the poor soul must indeed have been crushed down to the very earth or she would not have thought of addressing her in such a way, for it was spoken in the same tone as she was accustomed to hear it from poor souls whom she met on the roads round aboutFerrers on their way to the workhouse at Eccles, or from the flower women in London of whom she bought flowers not because she wanted

them, for she had plenty and to spare of her own, but out of pity for a lot which was so much harder and so much less fortunate than her own.

"You must not call me that," she said gently, "I am Mrs. Ferrers. And you are better, are you not?"

"Yes, Ma'am," answered poor Lassie, her thin face flushing hotly. "And I am at Ferrers Court?"

"Yes, this is Ferrers Court," said Mrs. Bootles kindly. She saw that her poor guest wanted to say something that was not easy to say.

"You'll hardly believe me," Lassie went on anxiously—"but I was desperate when I came to seek Terry out, and I had no idea whose house this was. I went into a little shop in the village to ask my way to Landover, for I've a cousin there who is housekeeper."

"Yes, I know," said Mrs. Ferrers kindly. "She has been over to see you several times."

"I thought I'd seen her lately," said Lassie —"it was good of her to come over to look after me, for I'm nothing but a trouble to everybody now. Well, I heard the name of Terry and asked who he was of the boy who had brought a message from him. He told me he was head-groom at the Court, but I didn't know it was Ferrers Court till I got here."

"Never mind—as it happened it was all

the better for you," said Mrs. Ferrers kindly. "It was so much better to be ill among old friends than if you had fallen among strangers. And you have been very ill you know."

"Yes, and if I'd been a queen I couldn't have been better cared for," cried Lassie, her eyes filling with tears. "There's only one thing I'd like to ask, Ma'am — my baby——"

Mrs. Ferrers laid her gentle hand upon the other's trembling one. "Don't ask me for your baby, my poor girl," she said sorrowfully —"its troubles are all over—you must not fret or repine after it. Indeed it is all for the best. I know it is hard for you but it could never have got over the exposure of that terrible night, poor little thing."

For some minutes there was absolute silence; the nurse stood looking resolutely out of the window dreading what effect the news might have upon her patient, and Mrs. Ferrers held the poor mother's hand fast within her own. Lassie was the first to speak!

"He'll never be able to knock her about as he did the others," she said, drawing a long breath which told her hearers volumes of what her sufferings in the past had been— "she's safe from that, anyway."

"My poor girl," cried Mrs. Ferrers holding the thin hand close against her warm heart, while the nurse at the window caught her

breath in a sob and the hot tears began to stream down her cheeks.

"I've had seven children, Mrs. Ferrers," Lassie went on turning her great hollow eyes upon the mistress of the Court—"and they've all gone the same way. Thank God for it! I'd only one lived to be weaned—and she was deaf and dumb! He used to kick her about like a football just to spite me, though what he had against me I never could make out, except that I passed over a dozen better men than him"

"Lassie!" cried Mrs. Ferrers incredulously.

"It's true, ma'am, true as gospel," Lassie said in a dull tone of misery. "I came away because I'd only her left and I couldn't stand it any longer, but the Lord's thought fit to take her and I'll not repine. Halliday's sure to find me out again sooner or later and it's better that she should be gone before he has time to knock her about like he did the others."

"Well, you are safe, quite safe here," Mrs. Ferrers told her kindly. "And all you need do now is to get strong and well as soon as you can. And now I will leave you to rest—try and sleep if you can, and remember, whatever you wish for, you have only to speak to nurse here about it. Captain Ferrers particularly said that you were to have everything just as you wanted it, for old times' sake."

The tears flooded in Lassie's hollow eyes again.

"The Captain was always so kind, so kind," she murmured. "There's just one thing I'd like, Ma'am; if I might have the children to see me when I get a bit stronger."

"Of course—they are very anxious to see you," Mrs. Ferrers answered, "so let them come up any time that Mrs. Halliday wishes for them, Nurse."

"Yes, Ma'am," said the nurse, feeling profoundly thankful that her patient had taken the news of her baby's death so quietly.

"And Miss Mignon," said the invalid shyly —"I should like to see her. I well remember her first coming to the regiment, Ma'am, and —I should like to see her now she's grown up."

"So you shall. I daresay she will come in this afternoon for a little while, if she is at home, that is," Mrs. Ferrers returned kindly. "But her time is scarcely her own just now, for you know she is going to be married to Major Lucy very soon—on the first of December, that is."

"Miss Mignon—going to be married—and to Mr. Lucy!" exclaimed Lassie, going back to the old way of calling Lucy. "Oh! Ma'am, is it possible? And it was only the other day that I saw her toddling about the barrack-yard, scarce able to keep her feet! Oh! I hope she'll be happy, happier than I've been."

"Or than I *was*," said Mrs. Ferrers under her breath, and thinking of the sad days gone by when life had seemed to her quite as dreary and the future quite as hopeless as this poor soul's could ever look.

"Ah! but there's very few Captain Ferrers about," said Lassie wisely.

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CHAPTER V.

LASSIE HAS VISITORS.

Come to me, O ye children,
And whisper in my ear
What the birds and the winds are singing
In your sunny atmosphere!

—*Children.*

Two or three days had gone by, and at last the nurse had consented to go in search of Captain Ferrers' little daughters to ask if they would come and pay Lassie a visit.

Lassie had asked for them before, but the nurse had persuaded her to wait a little while, for Pearl and Maud were known to be rather boisterous young ladies, and her patient was as yet so weak that she had been afraid of the effect their strong, energetic, and healthy freshness might have upon her. But now that she seemed really stronger, and better able to bear a less thoughtful and more wearying visitor than Mignon had proved herself, she consented to go in search of the young ladies on condition that Lassie would give her warning when she felt the least overset or tired.

"Mrs. Humphie," she said when she

reached the nurseries, "my patient would be glad of a visit from your young ladies if they would like to come."

"I think they'll be very willing, Nurse," answered Humphie, and then proceeded to lay down the law with great clearness as to the demeanour befitting such an occasion. "You'll remember, my darlings," she said, "that poor Mrs. Halliday has been *very* ill, and that you musn't make *any* noise, but sit and talk to her *very* quietly, and directly Nurse gives you an 'int, you'll say good-bye to her and come away at once?"

"All right, Humphie, we'll be careful," promised Pearl, who was the leading spirit of the pair, and led Maud by the nose, so to speak.

So the two girls followed the nurse with great decorum and gravity of demeanour into the distant part of the house, where the invalid's room was. They went in with hushed voices, and on tip-toe, and stood by the bedside solemnly regarding her with their great blue eyes, generally so mischievous and full of fun like their father's.

"How do you do?" said Pearl, politely. "Are you better?"

"We have brought you some violets," said Maud; "they are quite fresh. We gathered some for you every morning, on the chance of your saying you would like to see us, so that we might have something to bring with us when you did."

"They are Russian violets," added Pearl. "There is a great bed of them in the south conservatory."

"That was very kind of you, dears," Lassie said, gratefully lifting the fragrant flowers to her thin flushed face.

"Won't you sit down, young ladies?" said the nurse, who wanted to keep them as quiet as she could.

"Thank you, Nurse," said Pearl, and down they sat side by side, and still solemnly scrutinised the invalid.

"You are better?" said Pearl at last.

"Yes, I am getting better now, thank you, dear," said Lassie.

"I'm very glad of that," said Pearl. "You know you look ill yet, very ill. But you must be *really* better, or Nurse wouldn't have let us in. She wouldn't for ever so long when Mother was ill last time."

"Was Mrs. Ferrers ill lately?" Lassie asked, her interest and sympathy roused at once for the one who had been so sympathetic to her.

"It was a long time ago now," said Pearl, "when Madge was a baby, in fact."

"And Madge is nearly three," put in Maud.

"Mother was very ill. And Father went about looking so miserable, for he thought she was going to die, you know; and Nurse there wouldn't let *any* of us into the room, only Madge, who was a baby, and quite too small to know anything about it or to have

minded a scrap if she'd been kept out. And one afternoon Father came down and told Mignon something, and Mignon cried dreadfully, and then Father shut himself up in the den, and I believe he cried too."

"I was only seven then," said Maud.

"Mignon came to see you this morning, didn't she?" asked Pearl, who liked to get on from one subject to another.

"Yes; she has been to see me several times," answered Lassie, rather proudly, for the bride-elect was the most important person about the Court just at that time.

"Mignon is going to be married next week, you know," said Pearl.

"And we are going to be her bridesmaids, Pearl and Madge and I," added Maud. "We are going to wear white Indian cashmere, and large white felt hats."

"And we are to carry big posies of French mignonette—that is Mignon's name-flower, you know," Pearl explained.

"And Major Lucy is going to give us each a gold bangle with 'Mignon' upon it," said Maud, "and in *raised* letters."

"That will be very nice," said Lassie, scanning the two bright faces, and thinking how like their handsome father they were.

"Yes; but then Major Lucy *is* nice," said Pearl, with a sigh of satisfaction. "Did you know him too, when you knew Father and Mignon long ago?"

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"Yes, dear; I knew them all in the old regiment," answered Lassie, sadly, "a long time ago."

"Yes; it must have been a long time ago," said Pearl, "because Father was saying at breakfast to-day that you were the prettiest girl in the Scarlet Lancers, and that *must* be a long time since," with an unconscious but significant glance at Lassie's face.

"Yes, it was a long time since," Lassie admitted.

"But Mother said that Mrs. Halliday was some years younger than her," chimed in Maud. "Yes, she did. *Some years.* Those were her very words."

"Some people wear better than others," said Lassie. "And when am I to see your little sister, dears?"

"Any time you like," returned Pearl. "You'll find her rather shy—she takes after Mother, you know. Did Nurse tell you about 'Mother Earth'?"

"No."

"It *was* such a joke. The other day Madge nearly tumbled down in the drive, because she was looking the other way to the way we were going; and Humphie said—she's very funny is Humphie, you know—'Come, my bird, look where you're going, or you'll be knocking up against Mother Earth;' and Madge said, '*My* mov—ah with the golden hair, Mov—ah Earth?—she is—ent!'"

"Madge always says 'is—ent' and 'did—ent' and 'could—ent,' you know," put in Maud, with her accustomed accuracy of detail.

"And when we got home Humphie told Mother, as a joke, don't you see? And she said, 'I tell my bird we must say *Father* Earth, instead.'

"'But she has a father,' objected Mother.

"'Me hav—ent dot a father,' cried Madge.

"'Of course you have,' laughed Mother. 'Da-da is your father.'

"Madge looked at Mother for a minute or two, and then she said, in a threatening sort of way, 'I shall go and tell my Da-Da you called him *a father*,' and off she went. And presently she toddled back into the hall, and Mother asked what he had said.

"Madge shook her head mournfully.

"'He says he *could—dent* help it.'"

"But the next day," ended Maud, taking up the story, "I heard her calling out 'Fa—ther, Fa—ther,' and asked her who father was? 'Why—*Da-Da!*' she answered, as if I ought to be ashamed of myself for asking such a silly question."

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CHAPTER VI.

REMEMBER OR FORGET?

In this false world, we do not always know
Who are our friends and who are our enemies.
We all have enemies, and all need friends.
—*The Spanish Student.*

After the ice was broken by their first visit, Captain Ferrers' little daughters spent a good deal of time in the sick room of Sergeant Halliday's fugitive wife.

She was still very weak and ailing, but she improved every day, and their fresh, bright presence had a wonderfully good effect upon her. It was surprising how she cast off the depression that had weighed her down for years, and, during those dark winter days, how the aged look faded off her worn face, and the sweet prettiness of former days began to shine out again. And after a week or so she was able to get up from her bed and be dressed in a warm crimson wrapper of Mrs. Ferrers'—such a tasteful and pretty garment as poor Lassie had never had the chance of wearing since her mother had provided her wedding gown nine years before. And then,

with the help of her good nurse's arm, she was able to totter to the sofa and be wheeled into the adjoining room, where the young ladies had already been to make everything look bright and pretty for her.

They had put a little table, with a smart cover upon it, to stand beside her couch; and on the other side of it a larger table on which they had set out all their own most favourite books, the *Punch* and the *Lady's Pictorial* off the table in the hall, a box of chocolates, and a little white china vase filled with lilies of the valley and French mignonette. And then, when Lassie was fairly settled, they came to see what effect their various preparations had had upon her.

"We couldn't come up before," said Pearl, when she and Maud had squeezed into a big chair opposite to Lassie's couch, "because Mr. Landover and Jane were downstairs. They came to bring Mignon a wedding present."

"Is that Mr. Landover's daughter?" asked Lassie, interested at once in the people with whom her cousin—and her salvation from Sergeant Halliday—lived.

"His *wife!*" cried the two children, in the same breath.

"But we always called her *Jane*," went on Pearl, "because we used to call her Jane, when she was just Jane Carmine and nobody particular. I daresay she would like us to call her Mrs. Landover, but we never do."

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"And we never mean to," added Maud with decision.

"Then she is young?" said Lassie.

"Oh, well—yes; not so very young, though," said Pearl. "She's younger than Mother, you know, but a great deal older than Mignon. But she was only married to Mr. Landover in the spring. She met him here, you know, last winter; and whenever they come here Mr. Landover always reminds her of it, and somehow Jane doesn't seem to like it—I can't tell why, because if she had never come here she would never have met Mr. Landover."

"Is she pretty?" Lassie asked.

"Yes; I suppose so," Pearl admitted, rather unwillingly—"some people think so, but we never did—did we, Maud?"

"Never," said Maud. "Pearl do you remember what Darkey said about her? 'Pretty!' he said, 'yes, as pretty as a water-rat.'"

"Mrs. Halliday doesn't know who Darkey is," laughed Pearl—"he is Mr. St. John of the Scarlet Lancers, and he didn't like Jane Landover much."

"I see. And what did Mr. Landover bring Miss Mignon, for her wedding present?" enquired Lassie—surely she was growing young again that she took such interest in all that concerned the bride.

"Well, they brought her a present each," answered Pearl. "A big diamond ring from

Jane, and a big diamond bracelet from M
Landover. And when they came in he sai
'Now, my dearest, you give yours first;' an
of course, Jane did. And Mignon put it o
her finger and admired it, and said it was to
lovely, and all that—and so did Mother an
Major Lucy and all of them. And then Mr
Landover handed out his parcel, and he said
'It's my fancy that we should give two
presents instead of a joint one—because I
wanted to show how much more *I* wa
indebted to you all for meeting such a wife
than Jane here was in picking up such a
great lumbering brute as I am;' and then
Mignon got the packet open and saw the
lovely diamond bracelet he had brought.
And it *was* lovely," the child wound up;
"but Jane just tossed her head back and
gave a little laugh—very funny."

"And Major Lucy laughed too," said
Maud, taking up the story; "and Jane
Landover gave him such a look, as if she
were offended—it was what Humphie calls
looking daggers. I asked Major Lucy what
he was laughing at, as soon as the others
began to talk again. 'I always was a fool,
Maud,' he said, very solemnly; 'and I
suppose I'm a fool still.' I don't quite
know what he meant," ended the child, with
a plaintive sigh. "Mrs. Halliday, did you
think Major Lucy a fool when you knew him
and Father and Mignon long ago?"

Lassie burst out laughing, the first time

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en they came in he said,
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And Mignon put it on
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and so did Mother and
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she had really laughed since she had come to the Court; aye, and for many a long day before that. "I don't think we ever thought Major Lucy a fool, my dear," she said, and somehow the laugh had made her look young and pretty again. Pearl noticed it.

"Mrs. Halliday, do you feel much better?" she asked.

"Much, much better," answered Lassie, flushing all over her delicate face as she remembered that for years she had not had a tenth part of the kindness and attention that she had had lavished upon her during the past few, very few, weeks.

"I thought you must be," remarked Pearl, "because you don't look *quite* so old as you did when we first came to see you. I'm glad you're better; and do you know, when you are well enough to go out, Terry is going to take you for a drive in Mother's little cart? I heard Mother talking to Terry about it yesterday."

"That was kind," murmured Lassie.

"You are very fond of Terry, aren't you?" Pearl went on.

"Terry is of you," Maud chimed in, as Lassie laughed. "I know, because I asked him if he was, and he said, 'Yes, poor soul; I'd do her a good turn if I could, for old times' sake.'"

"Terry is very good," murmured Lassie, her eyes filling with tears. "Many a man wouldn't own as much, for the old times

weren't the same as these. Terry's gone up in the world, and I've gone down since those days, and it's astonishing how one sort forgets the other when there's been a change of that kind."

"Which sort?" asked Maud.

"*Both!*" answered Lassie, with a bitter ring in her voice; "the only difference is that one tries hard to forget and the other tries hard not to remember, that's all."

"I don't see any difference at all," exclaimed Maud, after a puzzled stare at the invalid.

"Of course you do not, dearie," cried Lassie, penitent in a moment that she had let even the slightest flavour of the bitterness which pervaded her whole life tinge the child's pure mind. "You mustn't take any notice. I get talking rubbish sometimes, for I've been ill, you know."

"And it was rubbish," said Maud, with considerable emphasis, to Pearl afterwards.

CHAPTER VII.

MR. TERRY.

The passing years had drunk a portion of the light from her eyes, and left their traces on her cheeks, as birds that drink at lakes leave their footprints on the margin. But the pleasant smile remained, and reminded him of the bygone days.

—*Kavanagh.*

An hour or two later Terry was, with solemn state, conducted upstairs that he might pay the invalid a visit, his first visit; and Terry was, as he looked, particularly nervous and uncomfortable.

He had certainly no need to be either the one or the other, for he was a person of goodly presence and was always well-dressed, whether he happened to be in livery or in plain clothes; for now, as in the old Service days, he and Browne shared the reversion of their master's morning clothes between them. On this occasion he was wearing a remarkably well-built suit of rough yellowish stuff, with a pale-blue cotton cravat which suited his fresh-coloured clean shaven face uncommonly well. The cotton cravat was also a reversion

from Captain Ferrers' wardrobe, and was adorned with a neat horse-shoe pin which had been given to Terry by one of the officers of his old regiment, on some occasion when he had looked after his horses at a pinch in addition to his own work. And he was a very clean person was Terry, with a goodly crop of curly brown hair which he held under the pump in the stable-yard almost every morning in a vain attempt to get it to lie straight, and altogether he looked as nearly like a smart cavalry officer as you could imagine, only a certain awkwardness and redness about his big hands letting a rather more keen and wide-awake observer than usual know that he was not of that rank.

But to poor Lassie there was no flaw in his looks. She caught her breath in a gasp as he entered her presence; he was so big and straight and strong; he stood up before her in his good well-cut clothes, with such an honest look and manly air, that she was fairly dazzled by him.

She knew that he must be at least ten years older than she was, and she was eight-and-twenty, and yet she was a broken-down wreck, a grey-haired old woman; and he—he had the keen clear eyes of perfect health and temperate living, and the fresh wholesome skin of a man who lives much in the open air.

And she was a wreck, a broken-down old woman, tied up for ever to a cowardly hound

who made no more of knocking her down than he had done of ill-using the poor little deaf-mute, whom she had daily thanked God for two years past that He had taken to Himself. The very thought of it all caused poor Lassie to shiver and shrink and then to begin crying, weakly trying the while to cover her shamed face with her poor thin trembling hands.

And Terry stood helplessly before her, feeling neither more nor less than abject. It was dreadful to him to have a pretty—yes, even if she was still a little "gone off" she was still, he thought, very pretty—a pretty woman crying like that, and be able to do nothing, absolutely nothing whatever to comfort her; and, to make matters worse for him, the nurse at this point took the opportunity of slipping out of the room, leaving him alone with poor Lassie.

Now it happened that Terry was very tender-hearted when women and children were concerned, but though he was well-nigh at his wits' end to devise some means of stopping her tears, his only instinct in such a case was to take the poor sufferer into his arms and comfort her, as he would comfort a child which had fallen and bruised itself; yet, though he would not in the least have minded giving poor Lassie a kiss for old times' sake—aye, or for the new times' sake, so far as that went—he was held back by the remembrance of one Sergeant Halliday,

who had once been his successful rival and whom he would dearly like to see kicked from Ferrers Court right away to Eccles village—which was a distance of something over three miles. So he stood there clenching and unclenching his hands, and shifting about from one foot to the other, the very picture of misery, and at last he burst out, "For God's sake, don't cry like that, my girl; it makes me feel as if I should go outside and hang myself."

It was some time, however, before Lassie could control her sobs sufficiently to be able to speak; and then she began to reproach herself for her unkindness in receiving him in such a way.

"I'm a poor, broken-down, miserable thing, Mr. Terry," she said, humbly; "and the sight of an old friend's face was too much for me."

"Don't call me 'Mister' Terry," said he, finding his wits and sitting down on the chair beside the couch whereon the two little daughters of the house had sat earlier in the day; "can't you call me Bill, like you used to do?"

An April smile broke out upon Lassie's face. "You're such a swell now," she said, half slyly; "it's like taking a liberty with you to call you anything but Mr. Terry. And I've gone down in the world—aye, down with a run since the days when I used to call you 'Bill.' Besides, I should be forgetting,

and calling you 'Bill' when the others were by, and—and it wouldn't do. No; we'd better stick to Mr. Terry, for all reasons."

"As you think best, of course," answered Terry, remembering that one of the reasons took the form—the hated form—of Sergeant Halliday.

"It was a good Providence that sent me in search of you that night," Lassie went on, leaning back among her pillows again, and looking at him with grateful eyes. "Captain Ferrers is just what he was when he was in the regiment, and if I was a princess they couldn't have taken more care of me, or have treated me better—me that's been kicked about like a thing of naught for years past!"

Terry got up from his chair and walked to the window, where he stood with his hands thrust deep down into the pockets of his jacket.

"Did—did—did Halliday ill-use you?" he asked at last. He blurted the words out as if the question was hateful, too hateful to him to ask, and as if he wished, yet dreaded, to hear the answer.

"Ill-use me!" echoed Lassie—then went into a history of her life during the past nine years, how her children had sickened and died one after another, until she had called out in her misery that the Heavens were brass, and that the Almighty had forgotten how to be merciful.

"But I was wrong," she said with a sad

sigh; "the day came when I fell on my knees and thanked the Almighty I had called out against, for taking away the poor little thing that had to bear and suffer in silence, because it was deaf and dumb. And the other day when I asked for my baby —my poor little baby that died on the way here—the nurse went and fetched the dear beautiful mistress to break it to me. Kind soul! she thought I should be heart-broken to think my baby had died out in the cold and the rain. Ah! she don't understand; but I've got used to it; and if only he don't find me out and make me go back, I want nothing but some quiet corner where I can sew or wash or be useful until my life is over."

"He shan't 'ave you back—the Capt'n 'll see to that," said Terry, sturdily.

He wheeled round from the window as if he was about to confront Halliday and offer to fight him on the spot. Lassie was twisting her thin fingers together, and answered, without looking at him, "Ah, but if he finds me out he will; for, in his way, he's fond of me yet."

"Brute!" Terry muttered savagely between his teeth.

"Yes, that's just it; he's a brute. I got to think at last he couldn't help it—his nature was savage, and he couldn't help the brute coming out every now and then. Many a time when he's hit me, he's been

sorry when he came to his own senses again; but it never kept him from doing it again, and I got tired out with him at last."

Terry felt that he must get out of the room; he had come to the end of his endurance, for he knew that he must not say a word which would further agitate the poor trembling soul before him.

"I must go now, my girl," he said, gruffly, "my time's not quite my own, you know; and 'orses is 'orses, and have to be seen to pretty near as often as babbies. I'll come and see you to-morrow if they'll let me; and when you're able to get out, I'm to drive you all round the country. Good-bye, my girl; make haste and get well, and never doubt but that you're quite safe with the Captain, to say naught of me."

He got himself out of the room and shut the door. He could still see the pathetic, wan face he had left; he seemed still able to hear the sad tones of her voice—she who had been the blithest little witch he had ever known; he could still feel the clasp of the weak, clinging hands! He stood perfectly still for a moment, as if he could not trust himself to move. Then he turned sharply on his heel and went quickly back to his own quarters, across the stable-yard and into the saddle-room, where he shut himself in with a crash of the door which warned "the lads" that they had better not disturb him.

And then he crossed the room to the desk,

where he brought his hand down with a mighty bang upon the pad of blotting-paper lying upon it.

"Quaking lest he should find 'er out and make her go back again," he cried aloud. "Aye, but let my fine gentleman show his face 'ere, and maybe the quaking 'll be on *his* side. Damn him; but let him show his ugly mug anywhere hereabouts, and I'll grease all the steps that he may break 'is neck. Devil! It's all he's worth," and then Terry dashed something away from his eyes and walked out into the yard to look after "the lads," never noticing that there was a letter lying on the desk, addressed to him in the handwriting of *his sister* Polly!

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CHAPTER VIII.

FREEDOM.

Something within her said, "At length thy troubles are ended!"

—*Evangeline.*

But Terry had no need to resort to greasing the steps of Ferrers Court in order to help Sergeant Halliday to break his neck and cut short his disreputable and bullying career; for he did not discover Lassie's place of refuge. In fact, only two days after his first interview with Lassie Captain Ferrers came out into the saddle-room, and said, "That scoundrel's dead, Terry."

"What scoundrel's that, sir?" asked Terry, in surprise, not thinking at all of poor Lassie's husband.

"Why, Halliday, of course," Captain Ferrers replied.

"*Dead!*" exclaimed Terry. "Why—why—when was it? and how, sir?"

"On Saturday night. He got drunk, as usual, and broke his neck going home. Mrs. Ferrers has gone to break it to the poor little woman now. It's not much in my line,

Terry, to say anything against a dead man," Captain Ferrers went on; "but, bar one, Halliday was out-and-out the biggest brute I ever knew. I always thought so—I never saw the fellow I did not thank my stars he was not in my troop."

"You're right, sir; he was a brute," Terry returned. Then there was a moment's silence, and he added, "I wonder how she'll take it."

Captain Ferrers laughed. "Oh! she'll cry her eyes out, and swear he wasn't so bad after all; that he was right enough when the drink wasn't in him; and all the rest of it. Women are always like that, you know, and perhaps it's better for us that they are. If they only gave us our deserts we should come off badly."

"I don't think it would make much difference to you, sir," said Terry.

He had an intense admiration for his master, and the compliment was genuine and came from the bottom of his heart, even if he looked a shade uneasy and awkward as he paid it. Bootles laughed a little, and passed it off with a wave of his hand as he leaned against the chimney-shelf.

"Well, I hope not, I'm sure, Terry," he said. "But, you see, I've got the best wife in the world. It's hardly fair for me to take much credit to myself for being a decent sort of husband."

"I wasn't thinking of the mistress, sir,"

replied the servant promptly; "but of the days before you was a husband at all."

"Well, the less we say about them the better," said Captain Ferrers, thinking of the mothers and daughters he had disappointed in the gay and jovial time when he was a bachelor. "However, I daresay the little woman will soon get over the news, even if she does feel it a little at first."

"She ought to, sir," answered Terry. "Seems to me women aren't very different to dogs. Now, there's Miss Pearl's pug; she's a sweet-tempered little thing, that'll stand a lot—but she says to herself, 'There's a place to stop at, and I stops at Fanchette.' Mam'zelle Fanchette may be as coaxing and sweet as she likes, with her 'Cô—me a littal dorg; cô—me, den! Cô—me a lit-tal Fi-fine den'; but Fifine knows—that is, she's got to know at last—the 'E—r-r-r-r-ah! get in, you nasty lit-tal thing, do,' that's sure to follow when Mam'zelle Fanchette has managed to get behind her. Seems to me women get like dogs—they get their lessons pretty well fixed in their minds after a time."

"Ah! but I expect she'll have her cry over it, for all that," said Bootles, laughing at Terry's description of his wife's smart French maid.

But Lassie took the news very quietly, to the great relief of Mrs. Bootles, who sat down beside her couch and took her hand kindly in hers.

"I have something to tell you," she said, in her gentlest tones; "it will distress you, I daresay, but you must try to bear it, and believe that everything is for the best."

Lassie turned very white, and gasped for breath.

"Halliday has found me out," she said faintly.

Mrs. Ferrers looked at her with pitying eyes. "My poor girl, Halliday will never trouble you again," she said. "You must try to think no ill of him now; he has gone to answer for his shortcomings in another world, and——"

"Is he dead?" whispered Lassie, painfully.

Mrs. Ferrers bent her head. "Yes, my dear; he will never trouble you any more," she said, gently. "You must not fret, though it will relieve you to cry——"

"Cry!—fret!—*I?*" cried Lassie, sitting bolt upright on her sofa. "Mrs. Ferrers—Ma'am, you can have no idea of what I have suffered at that man's hands, if you can suggest such a thing. Cry!—fret!—I?" she repeated. "Why, I thank God—I—thank—God—for His mercy in setting me free I—thank—God!" and then, woman like, she sank back again among her pillows, and broke out into a passion of hysterical sobs and tears.

"There—there!" murmured Mrs. Ferrers, holding her hand fast in her own. It all seemed quite natural to her. She saw no

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her. She saw no

inconsistency between Lassie's words and her actions, and sat patiently beside her until she was more calm and like herself again.

"Who told you? How did you hear?" she asked, presently.

"Captain Ferrers wrote to a friend of his at Chertsey," Mrs. Ferrers answered, "and asked him to enquire if Halliday was there, and what he was doing. That was at the time when — when — when they had the inquest on your poor little baby, you know."

"Yes; and——"

"And this morning this gentleman wrote and told us that Halliday died on Saturday evening. He thought as Captain Ferrers had enquired about him so lately that we should be interested in knowing it; he little knew how deeply we are interested."

"Did he die a natural death?" Lassie asked, suddenly.

Mrs. Ferrers hesitated. "Well, he seems to have drank heavily for some time past, as probably no one knows so well as yourself, and that, of course, was bound to have an effect in time, and——"

"Did he die in his bed?" asked Lassie, bluntly.

"Well — no — he didn't," Mrs. Ferrers admitted.

"Mrs. Ferrers," cried Lassie, straining her thin hands together, "don't *break* it to me, please. Tell me the whole truth at once and

keep back nothing. I *can't* pretend to feel any grief for him. I should only be a hypocrite if I did. He ruined my life, broke me down into an old woman when I ought to be but a girl yet, and murdered my children —aye, murdered them—seven dear little innocent children, and I'm thankful to God Who has set me free from him. But tell me all."

"Well, Mrs. Halliday," said the lady, "he was found in a ditch with his neck broken. He had been drinking all day as usual, and went out of the inn and set off to go home alone—that is all that is known of his end."

"It is a just retribution," said Lassie, sternly. "I warned him it would come sooner or later. My last words to him before I ran away from my wretched home were a warning; for I said to him, '*Be sure your sin will find you out*'; and it has found him out already."

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CHAPTER IX.

MIGNON'S WEDDING DAY.

"In life's delight, in death's dismay,
In storm and sunshine, night and day,
In health, in sickness, in decay,
Here and hereafter, I am thine."
—*The Golden Legend.*

It was Mignon's wedding-morning, and Ferrers' Court, aye and the village of Ferrers too, was all in excitement and bustle. All the morning Mrs. Brandon and a dozen young ladies of the neighbourhood had been busy decking the old church with costly hot-house blooms and delicate ferns and tall palms, which had been sent over by cart-loads, the finest and best of all coming from Landover Castle. It was true that the mistress of that stately abode had that very morning gone into the almost empty conservatories and had looked round with a disconsolate face.

"I shall not be able to have anything like a decent show for months after this," she

muttered to her sister, Sophy Carmine, who was staying with her—and who, as a matter of fact, spent a good deal of time at Landover.

"Then why didn't you tell Geoffrey you didn't see the good of sending so many?" asked Sophy sensibly. "They were only for the church, and, after all, they'll be back again before dark; it isn't as if they were going to spend the night in a ball-room."

"No—but a nine miles' journey in December will be enough to kill half of them," Jane Landover grumbled. "And, indeed—— but there, what's the good of talking about it. Geoff is just infatuated about Mignon Ferrers, but as he puts it all on the score of wanting to show his gratitude for having met me there, I can't say a word. So absurd! He actually gave two hundred and fifty pounds for the bracelet he gave Mignon, and fifty for the ring from me. As if three hundred pounds wasn't enough proof of his gratitude, without ruining all his conservatories and upsetting the best gardener in the county. Really, I do think it awfully selfish of Mignon to take so much."

Sophy Carmine laughed. "Oh, Jane, my dear, it's not worth worrying yourself about—be thankful Mignon did not take Geoffrey himself, as well as his bracelets and his palms."

Mrs. Landover's nose went sky-wards, and her short upper lip curled itself in the same direction.

"Mignon—a child like that—cut me out with Geoff?" she repeated with the utmost scorn. "Oh, my dear!"

A retort rose to Sophy Carmine's lips that Mignon undoubtedly had cut Mrs. Landover out with Major Lucy and had given very threatening if unconscious signs of being able to do so with the master of Landover Castle—but she bit the remark off short and told her sister with a laugh that it was time to dress for "the child's" wedding; for, now-a-days, Sophy Carmine was very careful what she said to her younger sister; to Jane Carmine she had been accustomed to say what she liked and to give at times very unpalatable and wholesome advice—but to Jane, the mistress of Landover, Sophy's natural tartness of expression was always well sugared. Landover was the most pleasant house to visit that Sophy had ever known, and she stayed there very often.

Meantime, the costliest treasures of the Landover conservatories were in the hands of Mrs. Brandon and her helpers in Ferrers Church; while at the Court the busy servants were putting the last touches to the great breakfast set out in the long dining-room and the substantial lunch prepared for guests of another degree in the servants' hall.

At the suggestion of Captain Ferrers' younger daughters, the invalid guest, who was being nursed and cared-for for old times' sake, was moved from her accustomed

rooms to the day-nursery, which overlooked the court-yard and from whose windows she would be able to get an excellent view of all who came and went during that most important day.

Lassie was nothing loth! In spite of the terrible experience marriage had been to her, she took a very real and feminine interest in Mignon's wedding and all that was connected with it, and she sat by the window in a big chair, still clad in the warm and pretty crimson wrapper which Mrs. Ferrers had provided for her, although she was a widow now, and a neat outfit of black ("*Not* widow's mourning, Ma'am," poor Lassie had cried beseechingly, when Mrs. Ferrers first suggested the necessity of new garments, and, under the circumstances, the advisability of their being black ones) was in course of preparation for her.

And, in spite of the general bustle and busyness of the morning, Lassie had several visitors. First the three lovely little bridesmaids, in their pretty white frocks and their big yellow sashes, who capered about and showed themselves off before her to her infinite amusement and delight. Then the bridegroom, Major Lucy himself, who came with his soft laugh and pleasant smile to ask for her good wishes.

"I couldn't go to church unless you wished me good luck, you know, Lassie," he said, by way of explanation for his presence

Lassie's eyes filled with tears instantly. "Ah, sir," she cried, "I'm afraid my good wishes won't bring you and Miss Mignon good luck. I've been so unlucky myself all my life that you ought rather to have kept away from me lest I bring harm on you both."

"Oh, nonsense—nonsense, Lassie," Lucy cried in his kindest tones. "You mustn't talk like that—it's downwright twrash, 'tis wreally. Of course you have had bad luck so far—er—the vewry worst of luck; but, after all, the longest innings get bowled out at last, and you may look for the turn in the game now."

"The time's gone by for that," said Lassie with a desponding shake of her head; "but there, how selfish I am—how can I deserve to have better luck, while I think so little of others. It's your wedding-morning, sir, and I must not cloud it with my misfortunes. And I do wish you good luck, every joy that life can give you, a different life in every way from what mine has been."

They were almost alone, for the under-nurse was helping Mrs. Humphie to dress in the next room, and the four elder children had strayed off to the hall to see what was going on there—only little Madge, in her pretty white and yellow garments, was standing on a stool looking out of the window at the horses and carriages in the court-yard below, and turning round every now and again to

stare with solemn wondering eyes at Lassie, when the sound of tears in her sad voice attracted her attention.

"Thank you so vewry much, Lassie," Lucy answered in his gentlest tones. "I only hope that before long the silver lining may come to the fwront and you may find life diffewrent."

"Oh! Cecil—Major Lucy," cried Pearl, at that moment—"it is time you went to church. Father sent me up to find you."

"And Father *said*," added Maud, so truthfully that it seemed like Bootles himself who was speaking, "'Now *where's* Lucy? Not down yet—H'm! I wonder if the dear old chap's gone to sleep?'—that was what Father said—exactly."

"I don't doubt it for a moment," answered Lucy with a laugh—"and I'll be off at once—good bye, Lassie."

As he went out of the room, Maud joined little Madge at her post by the window and Pearl sat down on a chair opposite to Lassie's.

"There! *That* is off my mind," she said, with a sigh which was a delightful imitation of Mrs. Bootles when she happened to be especially bothered about something or other.

"We have left those two boys downstairs," remarked Maud with a resigned air—"and they are sure to get into some mischief or other. I sha'n't be at all surprised if Bertie does not get out among the horses, and if he does his smart page's suit will be ruined.

They ought to have come up and shown themselves to Mrs. Halliday while their faces were clean."

"It is too late," returned Pearl—"Here is Stephen."

"The carriage is waiting for the young ladies," said a tall footman solemnly at that moment.

Pearl's grown-up air vanished. "Humphie," she cried running to the door which led in to the night nursery—"we have to go, so if you mean to come with us, you must be quick."

"In half a minute, my dearie," came Mrs. Humphie's reply.

Her voice sounded as if she was struggling to escape from under a feather bed; but it could not have been so, for in less than a minute she emerged flurried yet smiling, and arrayed in all the glory of a new black silk gown and a black lace shawl, with a generous bunch of roses on the top of her new bonnet.

"It's dreadful getting into everything new at once," she panted; "and how I shall ever get my gloves on with my hands as hot as fire and my nerves all of a tremble on my own darling's wedding morning, *I* don't know."

"Well, really, Humphie," said Pearl severely, "there is no reason why you should be all of a tremble because Mignon is going to be married."

"Marriage is such a lottery, my honey," replied the old woman struggling with her gloves.

"Yes — for Mignon," remarked Pearl, quaintly. "It's such nonsense though being all of a tremble when you know you're just as pleased as Punch about it, and you think there's nobody in the whole world like Major Lucy—not even Father."

"Oh, Miss Pearl," cried Humphie.

"You *said*," put in Maud, in her most faithfully accurate tones, "when Mignon came and told you she was going to marry Major Lucy—'Going to marry the Major? Lord love you my bairn, I'm as glad as if I was going to marry him myself,'—*that* was what you *said*, Humphie."

"Did I, my lamb?" said Humphie, trying hard to twist into its proper place a finger of the glove which would go on wrong side out.

"Did you?" echoed Maud—"Yes, you know you did. And when I told Major Lucy what you said——"

Old Humphie's attention was attracted instantly. "Miss Maud, you never did?" she exclaimed with her face all aflame.

"But *of course* I did, Humphie," Maud replied innocently. "And the Major said—'Good Heavens, Maud, you don't mean—er—er—to say that Humphie WANTS to marwry *me?*' But I told Major Lucy," Maud went on—"that I didn't think you did at all, for

you always said that you wouldn't leave the Court for anybody, not even to call the Queen your aunt."

Her rendering of old Humphie's favourite assertion was so perfect that Mrs. Halliday went off into weak fits of laughter and the subject of the joke subsided on to a chair where she sat giggling solemnly, as only very fat people can giggle.

Pearl eyed her with severity. "Father is downstairs waiting to see us off," she remarked. "And as he knows we were all ready ages since, he will probably make unpleasant remarks about a person who sat on a wall."

Mrs. Humphie struggled on to her feet again. "Ah! now, Mrs. Halliday, you hear the way the old woman is treated. It's a good thing the Major *is* going to be married this morning, for I shall be fair ashamed to look him in the face after this! There, go along, and don't keep the master waiting any longer. Dear—dear—the trouble I have to get you all together, to be sure"—and thus expostulating, Mrs. Humphie got her brood together and went away with them.

And Lassie had yet another visitor that morning, the bride herself! Mignon, who came in all the glory of her lovely white robes to see her for the last time before she became Major Lucy's wife.

"Shall I do?" she asked, standing before the invalid's chair like a tall young lily in morning sunshine.

"Oh! Miss Mignon, you look lovely, lovely," cried Lassie rapturously. "And I do hope you'll be happy. You're going to marry a good man, and that's everything—everything. I thought of nothing when I married except that Halliday was one of the smartest men in the regiment, but I soon learnt that smartness is naught again' goodness."

"But Major Lucy is smart and good too," said Mignon, smiling happily at her.

"That's so, Miss Mignon. And oh! I hope you'll be happy. I do hope it with all my heart."

"Thank-you so much," answered Mignon, laying her hand for a moment on Lassie's.

She turned herself about that Lassie might see the beautiful crystal embroideries of her gown, the effect of the sweeping train, the shower of *tulle* which fell from the golden coronet of her hair, and the lovely posy of real orange-blossoms which she carried in her hand.

"You think I look nice?" she asked.

"Nice? Oh! my dear, you look lovely,' Lassie cried rapturously.

Then, with a laugh and a gay word of farewell, Mignon went away with never a tear or cloud to dim the lustre of the lovely sapphire-coloured eyes which had never given thought or glance to any other than the gallant bridegroom waiting her in the old church across the park.

"It was a lovely wedding," said Pearl to Lassie an hour or two later.

The Ferrers children did not happen ever to have seen any other wedding; but everybody had declared it to be the prettiest wedding they had ever beheld, and so it was all right.

"We waited in the porch," Maud explained. "And Humphie sat down in Mrs. Gadaby's pew and got her gloves on at last. And then, when Mignon came with Father you know, we made a procession. Madge first, then Pearl and I together, then Father and Mignon, and last of all Bertie and Cecil carrying Mignon's gown at the back."

"Her *train*," corrected Pearl.

"Yes, of course. We got all placed and ready to start, and then Mignon said 'Go along' and we started Madge off up the aisle. Madge very nearly tumbled down at the chancel steps, she was so taken up with her posy and her new bangle; but Pearl caught her in time and we got there all right."

"Father was the most nervous of anybody," said Pearl twisting her bangle round and round her wrist.

"Father nearly cried," added Maud with appalling candour. "I was watching him all the time, for I never saw Father look like that before—just like Cecil does if he gets a scolding. And once I heard a queer little sound in his throat and I almost think Mother must have heard it too, for she smiled at him

as she always does if she thinks he's vexed about anything. But I don't think Father saw that, for he didn't take any notice until Mother moved a step nearer to him and took hold of his hand, and then he turned and smiled back at her. I don't think anybody but me saw that, for Mother was holding Mignon's posy and that kept her hand hidden; but *I* saw it and I believe Father was crying, or all but. Mrs. Halliday, why should Father cry because Mignon was getting married?"

"Marriages are very serious things," answered Lassie. "And fathers and mothers are often very nervous about them because no one can ever tell how they may be going to turn out."

"But it isn't like some marriages," Pearl cried. "Now when Jane Carmine married Mr. Landover, she really didn't know him. Why, she had never even seen him three months before. But with Mignon and Major Lucy it's quite different. She's known him all her life, and he's Father's great pal."

"You had better not let Fraw-line hear you talking about a pal, my lamb," remarked Humphie wisely.

"But he *is* Father's great pal," expostulated Pearl, "his very greatest pal! I *must* know more about it than Fraulein."

"It's not exactly a nice word for a young lady to say," explained Humphie, with a feeling that Bootles' children were more of

a handful to her than Bootles' baby had been.

Maud took advantage of the discussion to explain matters to Mrs. Halliday. "Jane Carmine was staying here when she got engaged to Mr. Landover," she said. "She and Sophy had been here a long, long time, and when they went away it was on a Thursday afternoon, just after lunch, you know. Mr. Landover was staying here too, and just before lunch I was lying on the hearth-rug in front of the hall-fire with the dogs, and Mr. Landover came in and began to write a letter at the table. And then Jane Carmine came too, and she sat down at the table too and began to look at *Punch*. 'Don't mind *me*, Geoff dear,' she said in a queer little shy voice; 'I won't disturb you. I'll be as quiet as a little mouse.' And then Mr. Landover said, 'Darling—Dar-ling!' and Jane put her head on one side and she said '*Dar*—ling!' too. It was very funny," said Maud in a puzzled tone, "for I heard her tell Sophy less than a week before, that she hated Mr. Landover like poison and she didn't care if he was as rich as creases. I'm sure I don't know why creases should be thought rich! I know if I get a crease in any of my things, Humphie always says I've ruined them."

"She meant Crœsus," put in Pearl, who had come to a triumphant end of her discussion with Humphie—"don't you remember he was that very rich person that Fraulein tells a

nice little story about in German sometimes? I say, Humphie, wasn't Jane Landover smart to-day?"

"I thought Mrs. Landover looked real handsome, dearie," Humphie replied.

"I wonder why she didn't like Mignon's presents?" said Maud in a musing tone.

"Oh! she must have liked them," cried Lassie, who had been downstairs for a few minutes that she might see the costly array of bridal gifts.

"But she didn't—she walked all round the room, but all she did was to give a little sniff and say, 'Really, Mignon has been most fortunate—*most* fortunate'—and then she gave another sniff and walked off to the drawing-room again."

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CHAPTER X.

THE TURN IN THE GAME.

He felt at that moment how sweet a thing it would be to possess one who should seem beautiful to him alone, and yet be to him more beautiful than all the world beside !

—*Hyperion.*

After this time, Lassie began to mend fast! She felt as if with her freedom had come new life and new interests ; she felt as if she had cast off the past as a serpent casts his skin ; she was able to breathe without fear at last.

And there was now no question of her going any further in search of that sphere of quiet usefulness for which her soul had longed, no question of her appealing to her cousin at Landover to find her a place in which to lay her head ; for, although they had gone on very comfortably for a good many years without knowing it, the household at Ferrers Court suddenly discovered that they were, and had been for a long time, sadly in need of a superior needle-woman! Not a common sewing-

maid, mind you, but someone who could help Mademoiselle Fanchette if necessary, who could mend lace and make all manner of odds and ends for the numerous bazaars which Mrs. Ferrers was called upon to help by having a stall herself or contributing largely to the stalls of those who did; and very often Mrs. Brandon was badly in need of help in similar ways, and so long before Lassie was sufficiently well to exert herself beyond wandering from her own room to the nursery or from the nursery to the snug little apartment where the house-keeper reigned supreme, or in putting a few stitches to the little square of delicate cambric which she was embroidering as a wedding-gift for Mignon, it was arranged and looked upon as quite a settled thing that she was to remain for good and all at Ferrers Court.

"It's awfully good of you to make a place for the poor soul, my darling," said Bootles to his wife after Mrs. Bootles had broken the news to Lassie that there was to be no more wandering about for her, but that she was to look upon the place into which a merciful Providence had led her weary feet as her home for the future—"I should think not another fellow in England has got such a kind-hearted generous wife as I have."

Mrs. Bootles sat herself down on the arm of her husband's chair and twined her arm about his neck. "And very few women in the world, I should think," she retorted, "have

husbands who make it so easy to be generous as mine does. And oh! Algy, if you had seen the poor thing's delight; she couldn't speak for ever so long; and then little Madge ran in, and she clutched hold of her and hid her face against her shoulder—'I've dreaded so to leave you all,' she sobbed. 'I've hardly dared to let myself get fond of the children'—she said to me—'I knew it would be such a wrench to leave them when I had to go.' And oh! Algy, dear, the children *are* so pleased about it, you can't think."

"Oh! yes I can—they're *your* children, you know," he answered. "And, after all, you know, it's a very simple arrangement, as you are able to find something for her to do. She'll go on a little bit as she is—potter about with the chicks and pick up her looks as she gets stronger. And then when the horror of what she has gone through with that brute—well, well, he's dead and I won't say that quite—but she'll forget the bad time she had with Halliday, and Terry and she will make a match of it and then they'll set up in the set of rooms over the west stables and it'll be all right."

"And you think that Terry is——"

"Not a doubt about it," answered Captain Ferrers promptly. "Of course, I always knew there was a woman at the bottom of his gay Lothario ways but now, without joking, as I told him only the afternoon that poor Lassie turned up here, it's about time

now that he settled down and took life seriously. All the same," he went on meditatively, "I expect there will be a terrible to-do among the girls when they find out he's married and done-for, for Terry has been popular, to say the least of it."

But, although Captain Ferrers had quite made up his mind about Terry and Sergeant Halliday's widow, Terry himself had as yet no ideas about Lassie, except as a poor soul who had fallen upon uncommonly evil days and whom he had known long, long ago. It was difficult for him to realize that the wan invalid whom he went occasionally to visit in an upper room at Ferrers Court was the blithe and bonny lass who had stolen his heart away years and years before and had forgotten to give it back to him again.

But as the winter days grew shorter and shorter, Lassie gained strength and was able to get further than the kind old housekeeper's room, to go out into the stables and see the horses, to be taken by Pearl to see her pony, and by Maud to see the St. Bernard and her pups—not roly-polies now but great clumsy fellows with considerably more heart than discretion or manners; to be dragged by the lordly young Bertie to be shown a particularly nasty smelling ferret which was the coveted possession of one of "the lads," and to be coaxed by little Cecil into a visit to his guinea-pigs which lived in a corner of

the loose-box just then given up to the grand-daughter of poor young Houp Là's cat, who still led a dignified existence in Mrs. Ferrers' boudoir and lived on the fat of the land in honourable old age.

And there was another visit a little further from home which Lassie paid, a visit to a wee grave in the church-yard across the park; but that was not until she was well enough to give her evidence as to the poor little baby's death, when a merciful jury returned a verdict of "Death from natural causes."

For some days the poor mother shrank from going there; but Mrs. Ferrers and Humphie persuaded her to go just once, feeling that when once the ice was broken she would be glad that she had seen her little child's last resting-place. So one afternoon just before Christmas, when the sickly winter sun was feebly trying to shine through the grey clouds which hung in the sky, she set off with Terry and walked across the park to see the place.

"'Ere it is," said Terry, pointing to a little grave set round with marble edging, on one side of which ran the words—"Kate Halliday—a baby, who went home to God, November 16th, 1887."

There were several bunches of fresh hot-house flowers lying on the sods which filled the space within the edging, and Lassie pointed to them.

"Who has done all this?" she asked, with a sob.

"The little ladies brought the flowers this morning as they knew you was coming," Terry answered; "but the edging was the mistress's notion and the Captain had it put just like she said."

"My little child—my baby," the poor mother whispered in broken tones.

"Nay, now, don't take on so," pleaded Terry, his voice growing gruff in his anxiety not to break down as she had done. "Don't my poor girl! It's desperate hard to bury 'em out of sight—I know it myself by what I felt when the regiment came home from Egypt and left my little lad lying out there alone, but life ain't all dark though it seems so at times. Only try and bear up, my girl, and you'll find there's them as'll stand by you and care for you like the Captain does by the mistress. I know it's early days yet and your heart's sore with all you've gone through; but only bear up and it'll all work smooth yet."

So Lassie dried her eyes and they went home across the park together, neither speaking a word for the new joy which had sprung up in the heart of each!

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CHAPTER XI.

TERRY'S—SISTER.

Something there was in her life incomplete, imperfect, unfinished—

Filled was her heart with love, and the dawn of an opening heaven
Lighted her soul in sleep with the glory of regions celestial.

—*Evangeline.*

It wanted but three days to the festival of Christmas and Mrs. Halliday was already in such general request that she seemed neither to have found nor desired to find that sphere of *quiet* usefulness for which her soul had craved a little time back; life, in fact, was a continual bustle, and everybody in that large household seemed to be in want of her help at the same time.

For Christmas-time was made a great festival at Ferrers Court, everybody made everybody else presents no matter what their age or degree, and it was the custom—a custom which had been brought into use by the love of fun and the great kindliness

of the master of the house—to give the remembrance of the day with as much of a surprise as possible. Consequently, as Mrs. Halliday had shown herself to possess a dainty taste and two deft hands which amounted almost to genius, it was not surprising that she should be consulted by nearly every man, woman and child in the house.

"Lassie," said Pearl, going into her little sitting-room one day,—and, by-the-by, Mrs. Halliday had asked as a special favour that the children might call her so; she never wanted to be reminded of her unhappy married name again, she said—"we want you to do something for us, Maud and I."

"I'll do it, dearie, if I can," Lassie replied—"but what is it?"

"Well," Pearl returned—"first of all we want you to make us a surprise to put Father's Christmas present in, but that we have got all planned out, and it won't take very long because we have bought him a stud to wear in the evening. But it is Terry's present we are bothered about."

Lassie became, if possible, still more interested in their plans.

"Tell me what the present is, dearie," she suggested, "because then I shall be better able to help you."

"Well, it's a photograph album," answered Pearl with an important air. "We thought, and thought, and thought, Maud and I, and

then we told Mother we thought an album would be about the best, because though you see Terry is not married and so doesn't take much pride in his rooms, which he always *says* are too untidy for us ever to see, he has lots of photographs and they get thrown about the desk in the saddle-room and so are spoilt in no time. And we thought if we bought him a nice album he would be able to keep them all together and it would be there if he ever did get married. Well, when we went to get the presents at Farlington yesterday, the only decent album, except a very, very expensive one, was covered with pale blue plush, so we bought that and thought Terry would be delighted with it. But Mother says it is *most* unsuitable and that it will be dirty in a week if he leaves it throwing about the saddle-room, and really we don't know *what* to do. Still Maud and I were talking it over and we thought, at least Maud did, that if you were to make us some kind of a cover that would look prettier than brown paper (which is horrid; I know I always hate my books if I have to have them in brown paper), and yet be more useful than pale blue plush—why—it would be all right, don't you see?"

"I see exactly. Supposing I make a cover of this pretty bit of silk that Mrs. Ferrers had spared from the linings of the bags she is sending to Mrs. Brandon," said Lassie, taking a piece of dark royal blue silk from

her work-basket. "The mistress does not want it and said, indeed, that I was to keep it by me in case any of the children wanted something making."

"It would be lovely," cried Pearl rapturously.

"And I could work Terry's initials on it in pale blue silk to match the plush," Lassie added.

"Exquisite," exclaimed Pearl almost breathless from excitement — "Isn't it, Maud? *Now*, Mother will be quite satisfied, and, as I told her, we had to think of the money."

"And it wasn't altogether the money, either, you know, Pearl," said the truthful Maud reflectively. "We had to think of the kind of photographs that we know Terry has and whether the album would have the right kind of holes for them. Now there's that one of his sister, Polly——"

"His *sister*," cried Lassie, speaking almost involuntarily in her extreme surprise— "*Terry's* sister!"

Maud turned her big blue eyes upon her.

"Yes. Didn't you know her?"

"No," shaking her head.

"Well, that is funny! But still she's so *much* younger than Terry that I daresay he did not talk about her very often; but he has a sister and her name is Polly and it's very odd—but there is a disparity between them."

"A disparity!" repeated Lassie getting more and more puzzled every moment.

"Yes, a disparity," answered Maud, who was not a little proud of her new word. "It means age!"

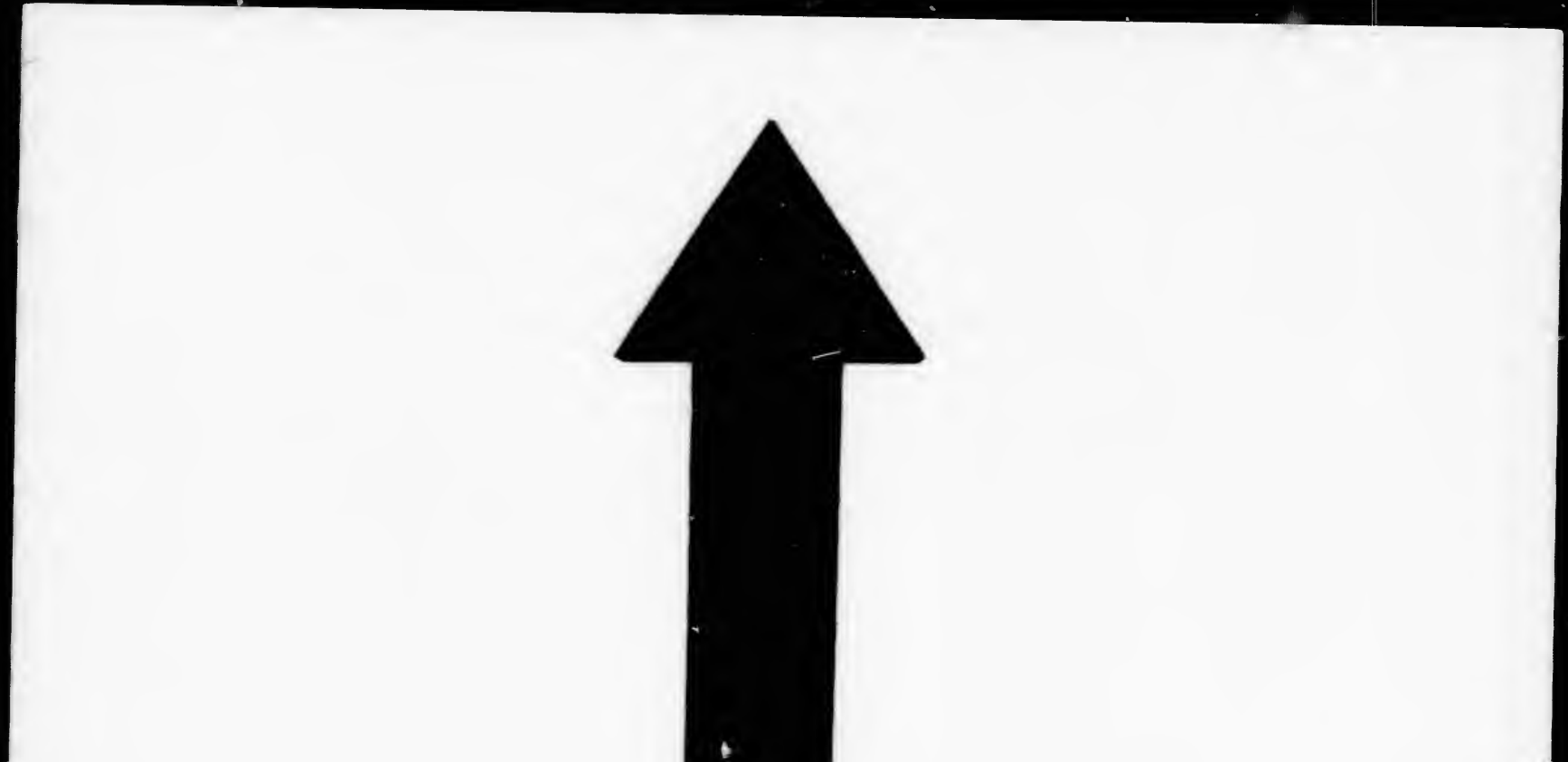
"And not less than twenty years," supplemented Pearl. "Years don't begin to be a disparity until there are twenty of them."

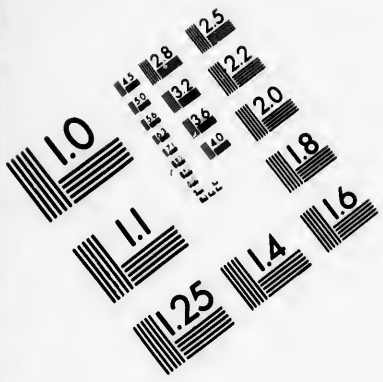
"And Terry is just twenty years younger —no—no—I mean older, just twenty years older than Polly, so that there is just a disparity between them," Maud continued. "Polly is eighteen and she is very pretty. Terry is quite proud of having such a sister."

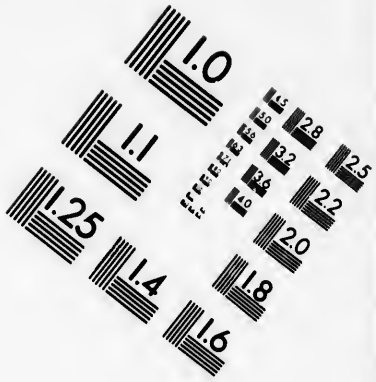
"It is odd I never heard of his having a sister before," murmured Lassie.

"Well, it is odd, but we never did either," remarked Pearl—"Not until the very day that you came here, Lassie! Do you remember, Maud?"

"Of course I do," Maud answered, and forthwith entered into a detailed account showing precisely how Terry had come to tell them when he did. "It was this way—Pearl and I went to ask for the St. Bernard pups, Juno's pups, you know, to show Madge, who was poorly and not let to go out of the nurseries; and, of course, we had to go into the saddle-room to ask Terry if we could have them. Well, whilst we were there I was looking about and I saw this photograph on the desk and, of course, I asked Terry







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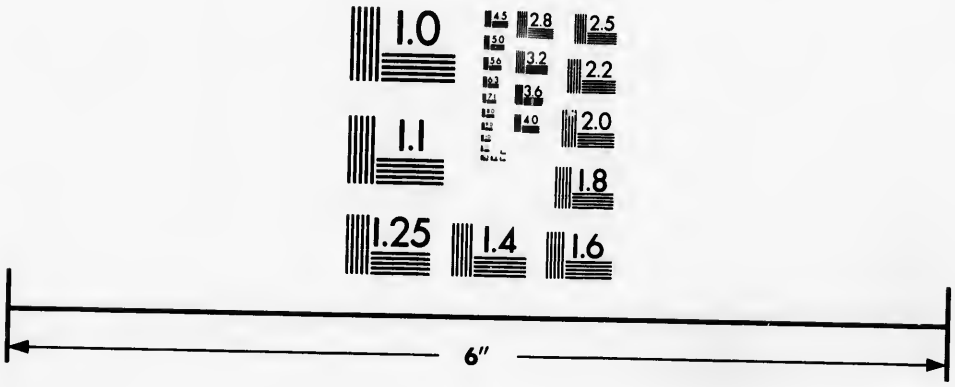

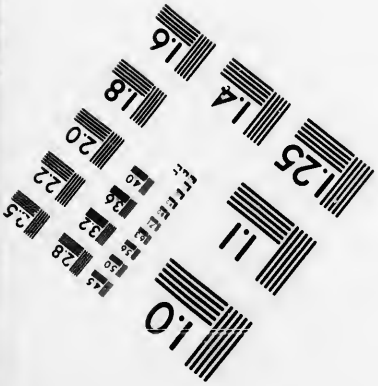

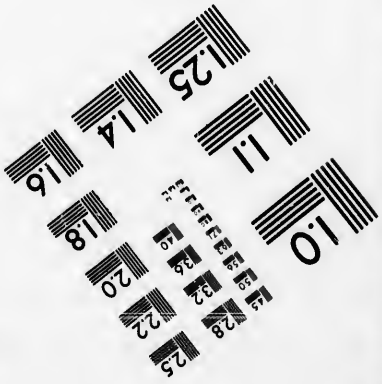

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who it was, and Terry told us that it was his sister and that she was eighteen. And he hasn't any other brothers or sisters at all."

"It is quite news to me that he has one at all," said Lassie, in a strangled kind of voice. "Then if you will bring me the album, I'll set to work on the cover at once and make it as pretty as I possibly can."

"Yes, please, Lassie. And you won't let Terry see it?"

"Not I! Besides there is no fear of that, my dear—Terry does not come up here now."

"And you promise not to tell him?"

"Not for the world," then added tenderly —"Why that would spoil all your fun, dearie."

"And you won't tell him that we told you he has a sister will you?" Pearl persisted anxiously—"because if you once begin, you may forget and tell him about the album."

"I won't breathe a word," said Lassie decidedly, and with their minds thus set at rest the children went and brought the album, which they gave into her safe keeping and left there.

As long as they were in the room, Lassie kept her composure pretty well, but when they were fairly gone and she knew that they would not be coming back for some little time, she let her hands fall into her lap and gave herself up to the full bitterness of the blow which had fallen upon her.

His sister — *his sister!* Oh! how the innocent babble of the children had crushed her—crushed the very life and light out of her heart, the poor, sore, aching, bleeding heart which in these last days had begun to think that the summer might bloom for it again! Oh! fool, fool that she was! After such a long and dreary autumn as her life had been, how could she be so mad, so mad as to look even for an Indian summer? Fool that she had been, she had mistaken the kindly pity of one who had known her in her better days for a deeper and more tender feeling than either he or any other man could ever feel for such a broken-down wreck as herself! Fool! Fool!

At last she could bear her miserable thoughts and self-reproaches no longer; she got up and went to the glass which hung over the chimney-shelf, where she stood and looked at herself closely, aye, long and earnestly.

"What a fool I was," she muttered, shaking her head sadly—"what is there left about me for such as him to see aught in?"

There was a good deal and Lassie would have been the first to see it, could she but have looked at herself with Terry's eyes. There was a pretty refinement of appearance, a piquancy of feature, a pretty wave in the dark hair so fast turning grey, and an equally pretty shy expression in the dark eyes—a way of looking up from under the thickly fringed

eyelids which if she had but known it, had stirred Terry's heart just as it had been used to stir it years and years ago; nor had he ever seen the same charm in any one of the Lizas and Pollies and Susies, the suns who had at one time or other lighted his heart's firmament. But Lassie did not know it nor, for the matter of that, did she recognise the charms of her face at all; she only saw, as she stood steadfastly regarding her reflection, that her hair was turning grey, that her face was sad and worn, and that her once plump and rounded figure was frail and wasted.

"It was only pity," she murmured, as she turned away from the glass—"his heart is with this Polly—*his sister!*"

She sat down again at the table and took up the piece of blue silk of which she was to make a cover for Terry's album. It was soon planned out and she threaded a needle with pale blue embroidery silk and sought out a little book of ornamental initials which was at hand in her basket.

"I must have my iron for this," she murmured, and put her work down that she might set the iron to get hot; then whilst she was waiting for it, she began restlessly to examine the album which the children had chosen for Terry's Christmas present.

It was a rather large one, holding four small photographs on a single page, or one of cabinet size; at the corners of the leaves were coloured floral designs, and the spaces

for the cabinet photographs were almost surrounded by wreaths of flowers.

"I wonder if they will put his name in it?" said Lassie to herself, in a dull attempt to put her bitter thoughts aside and be interested in what was going on around her. "Yes—here it is—dear little souls!"

The name was written in Pearl's round child's hand—but with the exception of Madge's name, the signatures were autographs.

"To Mr. William Terry,

"With love and very best wishes from his little friends—

"Pearl Winifred Ferrers.
"Maud Ferrers.
"Bertram Algernon Ferrers.
"Charles Cecil Ferrers.
"Helen Madge Ferrers.
"Ferrers Court, Christmas, 1887."

For a short time Lassie stared at the page which bore the inscription with dry, miserable eyes which saw and yet did not see; then her head drooped lower and lower and a great scalding tear fell with a splash upon the page, just below little Madge's name.

It recalled her to herself with a start and she hastily wiped it away and closed the book.

"I am a fool," she said aloud and dried

her eyes resolutely—"crying for the moon!" and then she put her handkerchief away and fetched her iron from the fire, and having taken the impression from the pattern-book of the letters W and T, sat down and began diligently to embroider the initials for the cover of the album wherein the portrait of Terry's *sister* was to be enshrined.

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CHAPTER XII.

LASSIE'S SACRIFICE.

With a light heart Terry started out for the jewellers on High street, and entering the shop in a somewhat embarassed manner, asked to be shown some rings. Mr. Bond, the jeweller placed before him a tray of tempting looking jewels, but Terry

quickly rejected sparkling diamonds and delicate pearls not because they were beyond his means, for he had an uncommonly good berth at Ferrers Court and had accumulated a very tidy bit of property, but because they were not exactly what he wanted.

"These aren't what I want, Mr. Bond, any of 'em," he said pushing the trays away from him towards the jeweller. "I want the ring to be quite plain and heavy, with three stones set in level with the gold—like gentlemen wear sometimes."

"Oh! you mean gipsy-rings, Mr. Terry," said the jeweller who knew Captain Ferrers' head-groom well.

"Yes, I daresay I do—and I want those pale blue stones—turk-waw, don't you call 'em?"

"Yes—turcquoises," returned the jeweller.

He cleared away the trays of rings and brought out another which was entirely filled with rings set with the pretty blue stones which are the emblems of good luck.

"Green's forsaken and yellow's for-sworn,
And blue is the bonniest colour that's worn."

"Aye! that's it!" said Terry, with much satisfaction—"I like them sort o' rings, Mr. Bond, they're neat and 'andsome."

He finally decided on a massive gipsy, set with three good-sized stones, and paid down five golden sovereigns and twice as many silver shillings with a pleasant feeling that he could afford to be extravagant for once, and

that rings were articles that he did not have to buy every week of his life.

"And shall we be supplying you with another ring before long, Mr. Terry?" inquired the jeweller pleasantly.

Terry grew a fine scarlet instantly. "I can't say, I'm sure, Mr. Bond."

"Well, I hope if you should find yourself in want of such a thing, that you'll give us the order," said Mr. Bond, polishing up the ring which Terry had chosen, with a leather, and just as he held it out and regarded it with admiring eyes and his head on one side, the door opened and Bootles' two little daughters entered the shop.

"Good morning, Mr. Bond," said Pearl—they had beautiful manners, the Ferrers children—"may we wait here for Mother? She has gone to call on Mrs. Fordyce at the Rectory—her little boy is very ill."

Mr. Bond bustled round the counter, for like every one else in the neighbourhood he was sincerely attached to every one of the family at Ferrers Court and particularly to the polite little daughters of the house, in their smart seal-skin coats and all the beauty of their shining blue eyes and their abundance of pretty fair hair.

"Certainly young ladies—let me set you a chair."

"No, thank you, Mr. Bond, we like to stand best," returned Pearl, then looked at Terry. "Good morning Terry—we did not

expect to see *you* in Mr. Bond's shop. What have you been buying?"

In the presence of the attentive shopkeeper Terry could not very well prevaricate "I've been buying a little present for—for—a friend, Miss Pearl," he answered, awkwardly.

"Oh, yes—a Christmas present," said Pearl.

"Is it a present for a man—is it a breast-pin?" asked Maud.

"No, it's a ring," cried Pearl. "May we see?"

Now Terry would just have given the world that they should not see, but he did not quite like to say so or to snub them by reminding them of the difference between their station and his, and trying to make them understand that although it was very nice that they should be pleasantly friendly to him as Mr. Terry the head-groom in their father's stables, yet that they ought when they met him abroad clearly to remember that he was Terry the servant who touched his hat and expected scarcely a recognition in return.

Even the most pleasant traits of character may have their disadvantages sometimes, and on this occasion Terry certainly found himself wishing heartily that his master's family were in the habit of observing the general rule.

But it was no use. Bootles never passed the youngest and most insignificant man or woman-servant of his establishment without

a kindly recognition and would as soon have thought of meeting any woman without at least touching the brim of his hat with his stick or whip, as he would have thought of leaving his wife for the day without kissing her; and his children had been brought up on very much the same lines.

Thus it never entered into their honest and polite minds not to be as keenly interested in what Terry was about when they met him in the jeweller's shop at Farlington as they would have been in their father's saddle-room. But though the fact that such was the case made them delightfully open and well-bred little ladies, it had its disadvantages, and Terry felt them!

However, he had to give the ring into Pearl's outstretched fingers and to stand by with the best grace he could and listen to their outspoken and frank comments, in momentary expectation the while that Mrs. Ferrers would open the door and walk in.

"It's very pretty," said Maud.

"Mother has one like it. She always wears it; its the only *coloured* ring that she *always* wears," said Pearl.

"Mother's isn't *exactly* like it," put in Maud, with her usual regard to accuracy of detail, "her's is a *little* narrower, and the stones are a *little* bigger, and Mother's has 'My darling' written inside—because Father gave it to her you know when they were married."

"It wasn't her engagement ring, was it,

Mr. Bond? You will remember Father buying that, he bought it here, didn't he?"

"Yes, I remember it well, Miss Ferrers," answered the jeweller, "the Captain gave eighty guineas for it—it was a beautiful ring. And I remember the blue one too—he bought that of me and had the words written inside it. I remember it well."

"I've often noticed it on the mistress's hand," remarked Terry, hoping devoutly that the conversation would now drift gently and naturally away from him and his ring alike. Vain hope! Pearl's very next question brought him back sharply to the subject again!

"And are *you* going to have anything written inside, Terry?" she enquired.

"No," broke in Maud, without waiting for Terry to reply, "people only put words inside rings when they're going to be married to the other people, and Terry said this was for *a friend*."

"And a friend means a man," said Pearl, holding the ring out for inspection almost exactly as the jeweller had done a few minutes before, then added, "And what little hands he must have, it is not *very* much too large for me."

"But a man is not always a friend. I mean a friend is'nt always a man," cried Maud. "Is it, Terry?"

"Not always, Miss Maud," answered Terry, keeping an anxious eye on the door.

"No, because I remember I came into the

saddle-room once—just before Mignon came home from Paris—and you were reading a letter and you said it was from a friend, and when I asked you what he was like, you said it wasn't a him."

Terry fairly groaned. "I think I must be getting along, Mr. Bond," he said desperately, "for I've several things to see to in the town yet. Thank you, Miss Pearl, if you'd let Mr. Bond put the ring up for me—thank you, Miss." And before Pearl could recover from her astonishment, Terry had touched his hat first to one little lady and then to the other and was gone.

"Terry was vexed," gasped Pearl, staring with eyes full of dismay at the door through which he had beaten a retreat.

"No, I don't think he was really vexed," replied Maud, "but he didn't want us to ask any more questions, that was all."

The jeweller smiled and set out some trays of pretty inexpensive brooches to attract their attention from Terry and his ring; but when Mrs. Ferrers came in a few minutes later they —after their custom—blurted out the whole story to her.

"You worry poor Terry nearly to death, my darlings," said Mrs. Ferrers, who knew very well that the ring was for Lassie. "I am sure he is very good to you all, but you should not be inquisitive and ask so many questions."

She looked so fair and womanly, and smiled

so pleasantly at the jeweller, that he wondered no longer at the attractiveness of her charming children. "One might almost have thought," said he, in relating the incident to his wife afterwards, "that she knew all about the ring and who it was for and everything! Aye, but I should think the servants at Ferrers Court do get a good time, they're the most pleasant-mannered people ever I knew, are Captain and Mrs. Ferrers."

Meantime, Mrs. Ferrers had specially charged her two little daughters not to say a word to a single soul about Terry or his ring. "Because, my darlings," she wound up, "we don't know who it is for, and you may just spoil a surprise he wants to give someone; so be *very* careful not to breathe a word to a single soul."

"Mother, we won't even tell Father," cried Pearl, earnestly.

"I should think not," exclaimed Maud. "Why as likely as not, it's Father he is going to send it to."

Mrs. Ferrers smiled at the idea of Terry presenting his master with a turcquoise ring but said nothing; she was essentially a woman who knew when it was best to keep silence.

And in due time Christmas morning came! Great was the excitement all over the Court, and especially in the nursery department, for the five youngsters had not only their own presents to receive and admire but also to keep an eye on the various surprises which

they had prepared for the different persons in the house—to take note how Humphie liked the new silk gown which the Master and Mistress were sending her, how Stephanie, the young ladies' maid, liked the pretty silver brooch made of her own pretty name which was sent to her by Pearl and Maud—to find out how long Captain Ferrers was in discovering in the recesses of an imitation cat the little box which held the handsome stud set with pretty coral which was his children's gift to him—to see how their mother liked the silver-bound prayer book with her crest and monogram engraved upon the back of it—in short, to be here, there, and everywhere at one and the same time if possible.

And within the saddle-room was one Terry turning over his offerings—the album bound in pale blue plush and its dainty silken cover from the five children, a cheque from the master, a silver-mounted riding-whip from the mistress, a pair of dog-skin gloves from his old friend and comrade, Browne, a showy breast-pin of doubtful gold set with a diamond that was not doubtful at all, "with fondest love" from Polly, and a book, a birthday-book, with her own name written very badly and the size of her gloves below it from Liza, a dozen or so of more or less tasteful Christmas cards from other young ladies of his acquaintance—but not one word, not even the smallest token of goodwill or remembrance from his old friend, Lassie!

CHAPTER XIII.

SANTA CLAUS AT FERRERS COURT.

Patience and abnegation of self and devotion to others,
This was the lesson a life of trial and sorrow had taught her.

—*Evangeline.*

Now although Lassie had not thought fit to send her old friend Terry any token of kindly remembrance of the day which is, of all days, that of general peace and good-will, this did not alter the fact that on the previous evening he had made the little box containing the turcquoise ring into a neat parcel and had given it to the good-natured and motherly Mrs. Humphie, with instructions that she should convey it to her, with any other parcels or letters which she might receive on Christmas morning; and Humphie had faithfully fulfilled her trust.

So, when Lassie awoke, she found that the days of good old Santa Claus had come back for her and that her bed was spread with offerings. It seemed as if everyone about the place had sent her some token of their regard; even Mrs. Lucy—Miss Mignon, that was—

had remembered to send her a pretty card and a pair of nice black gloves to show that she had not forgotten her! There was something from the master and something from the mistress, and the dear children had sent their gift in a surprise of their very own invention.

And Mr. Browne, the Captain's own man, had not forgotten her, nor Mrs. Humphie!

In spite of her sadness, Lassie's heart throbbed with pleasure to find how much consideration and affection seemed to have flooded in to her life.

"I ought to be happy—I am happy," she cried, as she leaned back among her pillows and looked at her treasures again; and then she saw that there was still another one which she had overlooked among the larger parcels.

She broke the seals which secured it and opened the box—"Oh!—*oh!* how lovely!" she cried aloud in her surprise.

For a moment she was almost bewildered by the gift. She slipped it on to her wedding-finger and gazed at the pretty toy as women do, even when they are crushed and sad beyond words to express. And then she turned the box over and over to find out (for certain, that is, for her heart told her plainly enough) from whom it came. But there was no note with it, and at first it seemed as if it had brought no sign of its giver; then in turning over the paper in

which it had been wrapped, she perceived some writing on the inner side.

"To my old friend Lassie, with Bill's love.' Yes, that was what it said—"To my old friend, Lassie, with Bill's love."

"He has only sent it as a friend," she thought bitterly, "it's good of him and generous—but it's that Polly that has his heart, his love," and then she put the ring up in her box again and thrust it for safe keeping under her pillow while she dressed.

But all the time she kept thinking about it and wondering why he had chosen such a gift for her.

"For a ring's like naught else," she mused.

However, thinking and thinking did not solve the riddle for her and presently she went down to her breakfast, where she found Terry!

There happened to be nobody in the room, and Terry had but just looked in in search of Browne and perhaps with just a hope of getting a glimpse of Lassie. He grew very red at the sight of her but stood his ground like a man, and she went up to him.

"Bill, you sent me a pretty present this morning," she began—"and I felt ashamed of not even having sent you my good wishes. I've little else to give now, but I've plenty of them."

"There's always your——" Self, he was going to say but the entrance of Browne

made him stop short. But presently, after one or two others had come in, Lassie moved towards him again. "I wish it had been aught else but a ring, Bill," she said anxiously. "it might make mischief and——."

"There's always a way to prevent it's making mischief, my girl," said Terry promptly.

"And that is——?"

"To put a plain one along of it," Terry blurted out bluntly.

He looked so big and frank and manly as he said it that any woman might have been forgiven for liking him too well. But Lassie was not looking at him at all, only at her own nervous fingers; and just at that moment the housekeeper turned round to Lassie and said—"Come, my dear, come, all the breakfast will be cold. Come, sit down. Come, Mr. Terry, are you going to breakfast with us this morning?"

The kitchen-meals were quite a function at Ferrers Court and were held in the Servants' Hall, a large and spacious room conducted very much on the lines of a sergeants' mess. At the head of the table sat the housekeeper —at the foot the cook; the pantry-boy and the two kitchen-maids waited and replaced the dishes and took their own meals at a side-table in the same room because there were more servants in the establishment than the principal table could accommodate; but this only applied to breakfast on Sundays and

festivals and to the three o'clock dinner Other meals, such as tea and supper, were taken by some in the housekeeper's room and by others at this same table.

It did not happen that Terry was able to secure the seat next to Lassie and before the meal was at an end, a message came for him to say that the master was out in the stables and that he was wanted.

"We're so awfully late this morning," said Terry to the housekeeper, as he rose to go.

There were several things that Captain Ferrers wanted to say to Terry ere he went off across the park to the eleven o'clock service, and Terry had not a chance of speaking to Lassie again or indeed of seeing her until they met in church when she carefully avoided meeting his eye. Nor did he see any chance of getting a word in private with her at all, for the servants' dinner was at six o'clock that day being Christmas time, the company feast being always on that day at half-past eight.

However, he had the chance sooner than he thought, for that afternoon, when the dusk was just beginning to fall, the door of the saddle-room was pushed gently open and Lassie herself entered.

Terry jumped up from his chair and went to meet her, thrusting his pipe hastily into his pocket the while.

"Why, my girl," he cried joyously. "I'm

right glad to see you. Come and sit you down by the fire."

But Lassie, though she moved into the circle of light cast by the fire, did not sit down in the chair which Terry dragged forward for her. On the contrary she stood on the hearth and let her eyes wander round and round the room where she had found her firm friend on the awful night when her last little child died.

"It's Christmas Day," she said in a low voice, "and I went to see my little Kate's grave this morning. There were flowers, white ones as pure as snow, put there for her by the dear little ladies; but there was one little posy of violets that they had not taken and I think I have to thank you for it, Bill."

"Well, I did carry a few flowers with me when I went to church this morning, Lassie," Terry admitted in a shame-faced way and with a half apologetic tone, "you see I thought you'd like it, my girl."

"I did—I do," Lassie cried earnestly, "and I thank you from the very bottom of my heart, Bill. Nobody but you would have thought of it—you and the little ladies! But it wasn't altogether for that I came out here to-day. You sent me this, this morning, Bill. I didn't quite understand it till you said what you said at breakfast, and I came to tell you that it can't be, Bill—and to bring it back to you. I know it's good of you to offer me it and the one to put along of it, but it can't be. I'm

old and weary and very worn, and there's plenty of good girls who are fresh and young and have all their lives in front of them. Give it to one of them, Bill, and I'll stand her friend and yours as long as I live."

"Hers—Whose?" cried Terry, struck by some special significance in her tone.

"That one they call Polly, Bill," said Lassie very meekly—"the one that passes for your sister sometimes."

For a moment, Terry stood staring at her in open-mouthed puzzled amazement. "Polly —passes for my sister," he repeated blankly —then a light began to dawn upon him as he recalled the day when the little ladies had cross-questioned him about the photograph which Miss Maud had discovered lying on the desk—"My sister," he said again—"my sister— d—— her!"

CHAPTER XIV.

HANGING IN THE BALANCE.

"Strange is the heart of man, with its quick mysterious instincts!
Strange is the life of man, and fatal or fated are moments
Whereupon turn—as on hinges—the gates of the wall adamantine.

—MILES STANDISH.

"D—— her!" Terry cried, with a sudden blaze of passion when he saw what was passing in his old sweetheart's mind; then pulled himself up short for he saw a shudder pass through Lassie's frame and guessed with the quick instinct of love that he had too painfully re-called the past to her—"I oughtn't to have said that, Lassie," he said humbly—"but I couldn't help it, I was so vexed for the minute to think that aught about any other girl should have come to your ears. But I see how it's been—the young ladies have been chattering to you and they've told a little more than they knew—isn't that it, Lassie?"

"It was them told me about her," said Lassie very meekly. "It wasn't that they

meant to be telling anything only they brought their album to me to get a cover made for it and they just happened to tell me about your sister and how pretty she is—and —and—I knew you hadn't a sister, you know, Bill."

"Ah; I guessed as much! I oughtn't to have told them that she was my sister at all —and whenever I tell a lie, I always wish I hadn't afterwards—but what could I do? The Captain lets them come about the stables freely, and I'd left the thing lying about and they wanted to know all about it, and who it was, and—and I just said it was my sister by way of stopping their mouths. All the same it didn't, for the Capt'n come in and little Miss, she up and showed it to him; and the Capt'n he says, 'Well—here's your—*sister*, Terry.' *He* knew right enough that I'd neither a sister nor any other relation in the world."

"But if she's fond of you, Bill," cried Lassie, who was positively afraid to let herself drift on to this sea of happiness. She stood hesitating like one who hesitates to draw up a blind which hides the morning glory of the sun from her half awakened eyes—"If she's fond of you," she repeated.

"Fond of me," cried Terry scornfully. "Pooh! She cares no more for me than for a dozen other fellows here-abouts; and if she did, what of that? I've walked out with her, and I may have given her a kiss now and

again, but as to *marrying* her, why I never thought of it."

"But maybe she does," faltered Lassie.

"Not she!" cried Terry. "And if she does, why I can't help it. I never meant to marry her and I'm not going to marry her, and I don't believe she'd 'ave me if I was to go down on my bended knees and beg and pray of her. Why, my old sweetheart," he continued in a softer tone—"don't you think I should have been married and done for long since, if it hadn't been that I've never met the likes of Lassie Wilcox again? Of course, I should; but that was just it—that was where the rub came in! I've been about in all sorts of places at one time or other, and I've trotted 'em out, all sorts of girls—but I never could bring myself to feel that I could tie myself to any one of 'em for good and all, from this end of my life to the other. And then when you came back again, so altered that I hardly knew you, I began to feel—well — I don't rightly know. But I do know that day I went with you to the little 'un's grave, I felt all at once as if, if you didn't stop with me for the rest of my life, I should just chuck up everything, the Capt'n and all."

"You felt like that—for *me?*" murmured Lassie, a soft rosy colour stealing all over her pretty face.

"Just like that, my darling," Terry answered—"and you'll let me put the ring on

and, after a bit, put another one again it, won't you?"

"Do you think it's *right?*" she cried, in a positive agony of doubt.

"Right, of course, it's right," Terry returned promptly. "Why, see here—here I am, head-groom to Capt'n Ferrers, his right-hand among his 'orses—with a set o' rooms over here," pointing to the ceiling—"and all snug and comfortable. And the Capt'n always at me—'Why don't you get married, Terry? Why, don't you follow my example and settle down?' and so on. Well, as I've said to the Capt'n, times out of count—'If only I could meet with the right woman, I'd settle down fast enough.' But even that's not every thing there is to be thought of! I not only want to find the right woman but I'd like to find one as 'll please the Capt'n and the mistress, d' you see? And," in triumphant conclusion — "where'll I meet with a woman who'll do that as well as you will? Tell me that!

But Lassie did not tell him that for she could not truthfully! So she gave up the battle against herself and let him draw her into his strong true arms and laid her head down upon his faithful heart like a bird which had fluttered to rest or a storm-tossed ship that had suddenly got into port!

Some men might have been very angry that just then there was a sound of young feet scampering down the yard, but Terry

was too thoroughly happy to mind an interruption from the two little ladies whose sweet friendliness had done so much to bring the light back to his sweetheart's eyes and the roses to her cheeks.

"Oh! You here?" cried Pearl, as she saw that it was Lassie who was standing on the hearth talking to Terry.

"We came to see Terry's Christmas-presents," said Maud. "And oh! Terry, we do like our books very much. We are enchanted with them."

"I'm very glad, missie. I thought you'd like 'em," said Terry beaming.

"You look very happy, Terry," observed Maud scanning him closely.

"Yes, missie, I am," he answered.

"H'm! And how many presents did you have? Oh! that from Father, and that from Mother, and—why, which is Lassie's then?"

Lassie looked up at her sweetheart in mute distress, but Terry faced the situation boldly with his future's wife's hand in his. "Lassie has given me the best of all, missie," he said gladly—"she has given me—*herself!*"

"Herself!" repeated Maud, not quite understanding him—"Oh! and are you going to *marry* her?"

"Yes, missie," answered Terry proudly. "I'm going to marry her."

"Then that was why you bought that ring—it is on her finger—" cried Maud—"Oh! Lassie, how nice, how nice. You'll stay here

always now, won't you?"—and then somehow the dear little arms found their way round Lassie's neck and Lassie could not help shedding a few happy tears on the tender and innocent haven of the child's slender shoulder.

"When Major Lucy said to Mother that Mignon had given herself to him," said Pearl, "Mother called out—'Oh! Cecil, my dear Cecil, let me kiss you'— so I think," with a very dignified copy of her Mother's manner, "that I should like to give you a kiss, Terry!"

THE END.