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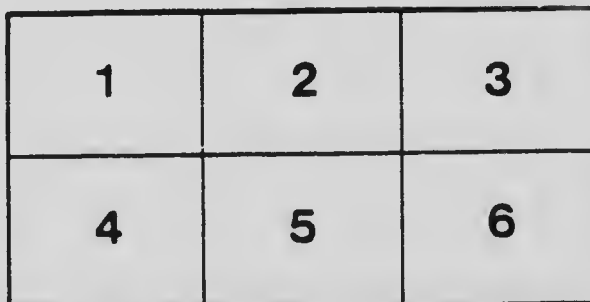
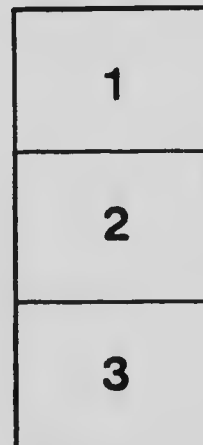
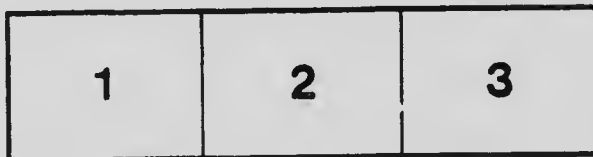
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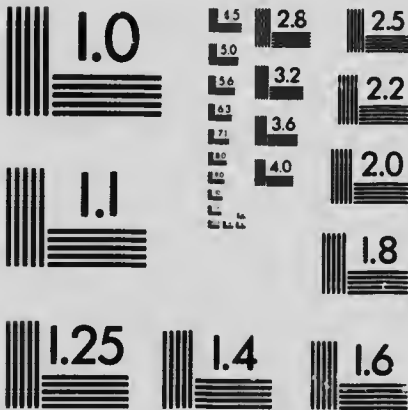
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A DREAM OF BLUE ROSES

A DREAM OF BLUE ROSES

BY
MRS. HUBERT BARCLAY

AUTHOR OF
"TREVOR LORDSHIP," "THE GIANT FISHER," ETC.

TORONTO
THE MUSSON BOOK COMPANY LIMITED
LONDON: HODDER & STOUGHTON

[1912?]

L.C. & B.M. B.M.: London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1912.

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RICHARD CLAY & SONS, LIMITED,
BRUNSWICK STREET, STAMFORD STREET, S.E.,
AND BUNGAY, SUFFOLK.

TO
A. W. F.
IN GRATITUDE AND AFFECTION

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CHAPTER XXXI

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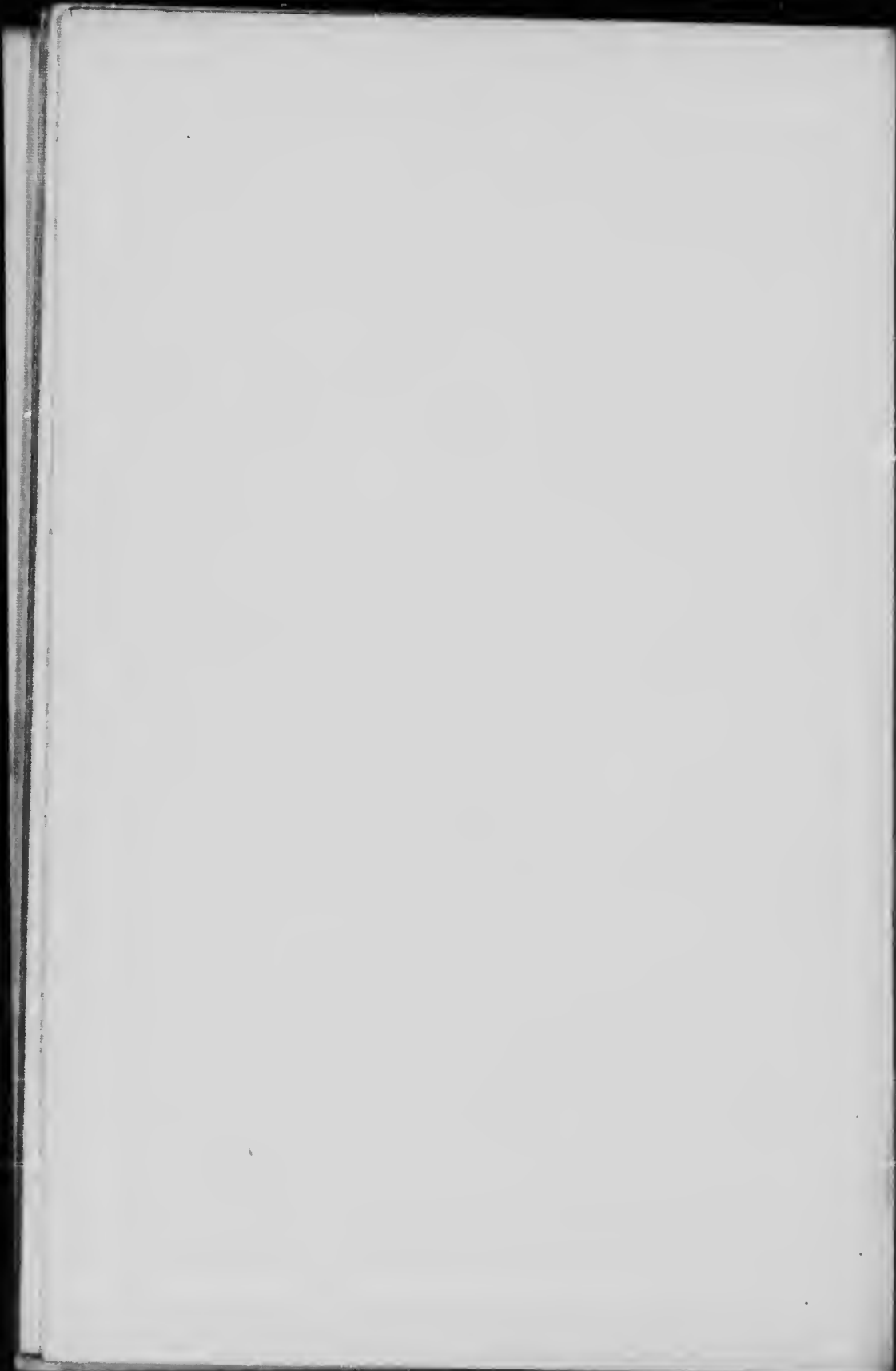
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CHAPTER I

A DECISION AND A PROPOSAL

“Lachen, Weinen, Lust und Schmerz
Sind Geschwister-Kinder.”

GOETHE.

PETITE MÈRE leaned forward in her chair, and, placing both her hands on the shoulders of the girl who knelt beside her, said gently—

“Eh bien ! ma fille, so it must be, since thou wilt have it so !”

“Ah ! No, Petite Mère,” was the quick reply, “say not so ! Thou knowest it is not I would have it so ! Loved one do not cry—I cannot bear to see thee cry ! Since there is no other way, I must go.”

Two slow tears brimmed from the older woman’s eyes and coursed down her furrowed cheeks. She fumbled for her handkerchief and brushed them away impatiently.

“Bah ! a foolish old woman, n’est-ce pas ?—Voilà ! c’est fini ! we make no more complaint. Since there is no other way, thou goest !” she said briskly, and then, lifting her head with a quick birdlike movement, characteristic of her, she asked, “Thou art sure there is no other way ? not, par exemple—Jean Paul ?”

The earnestness underlying her would-be jesting tone made the question rather pathetic.

The girl laughed—a ripple of laughter, with all her youth in it.

“Petite Mère ! If there were but one man in the world, and that man were Jean Paul, I would not marry him. Nor, of a certainty, even if such were the case, would’st thou counsel me to become Madame Jean Paul !”

They rose to their feet. "C'est vrai, Mignonne!" said Petite Mère sturdily, with a little laugh that was more than half a sob, "Toi! Madame Jean Paul! Jamais de la vie! Sooner would I see thee go, though it tears my heart to part from thee. Bah! this money! it is a cursed thing, and causes half the trouble in life. My Joseph always said so, and he knew!" she nodded her head wisely as she spoke. "Where parting is, it is for one of two reasons, death or money!"

"Say rather, the want of it, and that is now a point for consideration; I must have money for the journey."

"That is true. Thou must have money . . . much money . . . for it is an affair of great expense, truly, with the train and the boat, and God knows what beside!"

Petite Mère crossed the room to where the girl stood gazing out of the window. Taking her arm with a loving gesture, she stood for a while in silence. Then she said softly, "There is the ring, Babette!"

"There is the ring, Petite Mère," was the quiet answer. "It must be, since there is no other way."

"It is worth much money!"

"So much the better."

"Monsieur Legrand—he would do it for us——"

"Bien! Petite Mère."

"Then we will go to him next market day."

"Bien, Petite Mère."

"And now, embrace me, my child."

Babette threw her strong arms round the slight figure, and kissed her fondly. For a moment they clung together. Petite Mère sighed heavily.

"Enfin!" she said. "It is not easy—this life—of a truth it is not easy! My Joseph always said so, and he knew! Come now, ma fille, Melanie will be returning."

She hurried from the room, followed by the girl, but on the threshold she stopped suddenly, as a familiar sound met her ears. A donkey brayed loudly and discordantly.

"It is the voice of Cléopâtre!" Petite Mère said,

smiling. "Vraiment elle a beaucoup de caractère! It is without doubt Melanie who returns."

Babette ran to the porch and glanced in the direction of the sound. The next moment she was back on flying feet.

"Là! Là! Petite Mère, it is Madame Laurent who arrives!"

"Then, without doubt, she comes once more on the business of the bon garçon, Jean Paul!" announced Petite Mère calmly. "What reply wilt thou have me give to her?"

Babette gave her a playful shake. "Go thou to meet her, naughty one, I go to prepare coffee!" and with that she disappeared into the tiny kitchen.

Petite Mère greeted her guest with her customary cheerfulness and courtesy. No one would have guessed from her demeanour that the heart under her worn black bodice was aching sorely. She escorted her to the salon and invited her to be seated.

"Madame had walked? Madame was doubtless fatigued. The day had been fine—but yes, and warmer than usual at this season of the year . . . but in truth there was already a feeling of spring in the air!"

If Petite Mère's calmness was a cloak donned to cover her inward feelings, it was very evident that her visitor possessed no such garment, or if she did, that she had dispensed with it for the afternoon. She was much agitated, and her hostess's attempts at pleasant conversation fell on deaf ears.

Madame Laurent was a large gaunt woman, with a large bony face. On seeing the expanse of square forehead unblushingly revealed by the scantiness of her hair, and the angle at which her beaded bonnet was perched at the back of her head, you were irresistibly and at once reminded of a horse—and the way in which her wide nostrils worked in moments of excitement, such as the present, heightened the resemblance.

She was plainly, even shabbily, dressed, but there was no hint of poverty in her appearance. The large

cameo brooch, heavily set in gold, and the massive gold watch-chain which she wore, gave an air of opulence. . . . It was as though they said, "There is no lack of wealth, don't think it for a moment . . . but why waste it on the things that perish? Gold will out-last raiment!"

The equine forehead was beaded with moisture, and the large bony hands plucked restlessly at the tips of the black cotton gloves which covered them. And still Petite Mère chatted on, her bright eyes roving this way and that, noting every detail of dress—every symptom of distress of mind. Outwardly she gave no sign of comprehension, but inwardly she was enjoying herself. In consequence she made no effort to assist the agitated lady, who, at last, unable to suffer any longer in silence, interrupted her suddenly, almost rudely—

"Madame, I come on business!"

Petite Mère bowed with admirably simulated surprise, but with a twinkling eye.

"I come, Madame, on business—to speak with you yet once more of the affair of my unhappy son."

"Monsieur Laurent is not ill, I trust," inquired Petite Mère, with polite concern. And then, as though the question shattered some obstacle which dammed the torrent of her emotion, words poured from Madame Laurent in a resistless flood.

"My son is ill! . . . mais oui! it is a malady . . . it is an obsession! He sleeps not! he eats not! He grows pale and thin! To-day, once more, I urge him to take courage . . . to combat this foolishness, but it is useless. 'Chère Maman!' he said, 'I cannot live, I die!' Again I beseech, I implore . . . but no! it is useless. . . . I cannot reason with a man possessed. It cannot continue. . . . I dread what may happen to my unhappy son. So loving . . . so obedient. . . . Who knows but that he may be driven to dreadful deeds! And so I say to myself, this must cease, I will be magnanimous. I come, Madame, to ask of you the hand of your ward, Mademoiselle Vincent, for my son, Jean Paul."

Petite Mère essayed to speak, but was waved into silence with a decided gesture.

"Permit that I continue. On my last visit I think I expressed my sentiments—the marriage is not all that I desire! Mais non! Mademoiselle is stranger—Engleesh! For my part, you understand . . . I should prefer a compatriot . . . but in this unhappy affair it would seem that for me and my sentiments there is no consideration! Bien! We pass that!—I will be magnanimous. Then . . . mademoiselle is hérétique! that is for me une horreur! I, for me, am a faithful daughter of the Church—but that is a point which could perhaps be arranged. She is young, and has doubtless no knowledge of the truth. . . . I will consult Monsieur le Curé, who will, I trust, find her docile and obedient and will consent to admit her to the arms of Mother Church, ever ready to receive those who truly repent of error. Then . . . encore. . . ." Madame drew her chair a few inches nearer and dropped her voice almost to a whisper, "The dot? Madame, what of the dot? You understand that it will be the subject of the closest scrutiny. For me . . ." here she tapped her flat chest with a hard forefinger to emphasize her words, "for me, I am a woman of business, and I will not disguise from you, Madame, that some day . . . some day my Jean Paul will have a noble heritage, and in such an alliance as this the bride must bring a portion worthy of such a husband—fully worthy, you understand." Here she shook her hollowed hands as if they contained coin which rattled with the movement. "I will instruct Monsieur le Notaire to go carefully into the matter later. . . . I wish you merely to understand that I have my opinion, and that it is no undecided one! Truly a girl does not get a husband like my Jean Paul every day. Ah! if he would only be guided by me! There is Marie Bigot . . . she is rich! rich, I assure you! and not too ill-favoured, and she would be thankful to have him to-morrow, but he will not be persuaded! 'Maman,' he says, 'for me it is Babette Vincent, and no other.' He desires her madly . . . I speak of matri-

mony . . . of my desire that he should range himself, of my desire to see the children of my Jean Paul beside the hearth before the good God calls——” Her voice faltered, and Petite Mère, watching intently, forgot for a moment the grasping, usurious hands, forgot the horse-like figure, and saw a glimpse of the mother-love pleading for a dear son, and that son’s happiness. Not many people had ever seen that side of Madame Laurent, woman of business. “And he said, ‘Maman, I too desire with all my heart to see my children beside the hearth . . . give me Babette Vincent!’ My son. . . . Ah! Madame, I can assure you that there is no other so good in all the country-side . . . so industrious . . . so obedient . . . he would make a most docile husband!”

She paused, and for a moment there was silence, and then resuming her former decisiveness of manner, she said, “But affection is not everything. You understand, Madame, I must be satisfied on all the considerations I have named, and also that the family of Mademoiselle is entirely suitable. I must know that by birth she is the equal of my son!”

Petite Mère’s turn had come. She rose to her feet, her diminutive figure drawn to its full height, her appearance more bird-like than ever—like a little brown wren smoothing her plumage before engaging in an encounter.

“Madame,”—she spoke with the most deceptive calmness—“I thank you for the proposal you have made to my ward, Mademoiselle Barbara Vincent—but I am compelled to decline it. Mademoiselle is leaving me . . . she goes very shortly to England. . . .” Petite Mère wetted her dry lips, and lied bravely. “Mademoiselle goes to join her relatives . . . she has relatives and friends . . . the most distinguished, in England.”

Madame Laurent collapsed into the chair she had just quitted as if her knees had given under her involuntarily, and emitted what could only be described as a neigh of surprise.

“You understand, Madame,” continued Petite Mère, “that while entirely appreciating the most worthy prin-

ciples of Monsieur your son, I feel that when Mademoiselle Vincent marries she will form an alliance in her own country, and in the exalted rank to which she is by birth and by nature entitled. On the two previous occasions on which you have favoured me with your views and the sentiments of your son, I informed you without hesitation that he could hope for no encouragement. I was not prepared at that time to state the reason, but now, Madame, I give it to you in full. Thanking you for your magnanimity, and trusting that Monsieur your son will speedily find consolation elsewhere, I would now suggest a cup of coffee."

Leaving her adversary thus completely routed, Petite Mère crossed the little salon with all the dignity of an empress in miniature, in order to summon her sister with the desired refreshment. Engrossed as she had been in the conversation, or rather in her rôle of listener, she had failed to notice the voice of Cléopâtre, that ass of character, who invariably announced all arrivals, and she only devoutly trusted that Melanie had returned. The appearance of Babette at this juncture would be inadvisable, to say the least of it. Questions might be asked which it would be impossible to answer—a hundred things might happen.

But what actually took place was entirely unforeseen, for, hardly had she reached the door, when Madame Laurent rose, a flush upon her face, and hot anger in her gleaming eyes. Past speech . . . past good manners . . . conscious only of the fact that an alliance with her Jean Paul had been refused, when she, Jeanne Laurent, had in her magnanimity demanded, nay, almost implored it, her one desire was to depart without further parley with the imbeciles, who knew not good fortune when they saw it. Pushing past Petite Mère in spite of her protesting, "Mais, Madame!" she seized her bulky gingham and a basket which she had deposited in the porch upon her arrival, and deaf, dumb and furious, fairly cantered to the gate.

In vain Petite Mère, her sense of hospitality outraged, pursued, imploring her to return if but to taste a cup

of Melanie's excellent coffee, or a glass of cider . . . she paid no heed, and, moving with a rapidity extraordinary for one of her age and bulk, disappeared down the lane. Petite Mère walked slowly back to the house, and by the time she had reached it, she had regained her composure. "Phut! . . . a foolish woman! Let her go . . . an avaricious woman!"

But one thought troubled her. She had lied! Magnificently, it was true, but lied, nevertheless! But there! what would you? Was Babette to be lightly considered by a miserly bourgeoisie? *Jamais de la vie!* God grant that the recording angel would rub an effacing finger across the slate before making up his books that night! What was done, was done! Joseph had always said so—and he knew!

CHAPTER II

AN OLD STORY

“La jeunesse vit d'espérance
La vieillesse de souvenir.”

French Proverb.

It was evening. The trio had partaken of their frugal meal, which consisted of bread and fried potatoes. The fact that it had been accompanied to-night by hot and fragrant coffee, should have made the simple repast something of a festivity, a thing to be lingered over and enjoyed, for good coffee was not a luxury for every day . . . for a visitor, yes! and since on this occasion the visitor had scorned it they would drink and be merry. So said Petite Mère; but, somehow, the merriment was lacking. Babette was unusually silent, engrossed in the thoughts of an unknown future. Petite Mère was busily occupied in making plans, and Melanie—well, Melanie was never given to much talking . . . being stout and lethargic.

Petite Mère pushed back her chair, and proceeded to gather the crumbs for the birds. “Eh bien!” she said, “we must tell Melanie the news, ma fille. Ma sœur, figure to thyself the change, the great change, that comes to us! Babette is leaving us; she goes to England!”

Melanie's fat, sallow face was not prone to changes of expression, but now the surprise was so great that the little colour she possessed faded, and her small beady eyes grew round with consternation.

“La petite is leaving us?” she repeated stupidly.

“La petite has business which must be attended to,” continued Petite Mère briskly, “business which cannot be arranged through the post, so she has decided to go herself to transact it.”

Melanie stared at her sister. All she said was, "Là! Là! Là! Là!" Petite Mère blinked furiously. Babette stared at her empty plate. In the corner the high oak clock ticked with irritating persistence. For a few moments no one spoke. Then Melanie's voice broke the silence, "Là! Là! Là! Là!" and again "Là! Là! Là!"

Petite Mère rose hastily . . . her nerves were frayed to-night.

"For the love of God, Melanie, since thou canst do nothing but make a noise like the dripping of water from a leaky tap, go thou and wash the plates!"

She spoke so sharply that her voice surprised Babette, who rose with the crushed Melanie. Never in all the years had she known Petite Mère speak like that . . . not even when Père Joseph died and all the trouble began. Then she saw the tear-filled eyes, and the worn hands that trembled so that even the crumbling of bread was a task of difficulty—and understood. Crossing to her, she kissed her fondly, but without speaking. Petite Mère returned the embrace. "I am stupid to-night—me! but what would you? Melanie can be on occasion most trying, but," she added, as if repenting of her words, "she has a good heart. Now, my child, go thou and finish what has to be done, and then we will speak together once more. Is it not so? Also I have a letter which must be written to-night."

The table was cleared, the little *salle-à-manger*, which was also the hall of the cottage, was tidied, and Petite Mère carried the lamp to the salon and placed it on the round table which occupied the centre of the apartment. Then, drawing a bunch of keys from a pocket concealed under her skirt, she selected one, and opened an old-fashioned bureau which stood against the wall. Taking out a writing-case, she laid it on the table—a small bottle of purple ink and a pen were set beside it. Then, putting on her spectacles, she seated herself and prepared for her task.

On the top right hand corner of the paper she wrote the address, carefully and in a neat, flowing writing.

Le Pavillon des Fleurs,
Mentheville,
Seine Inferieure,
France.

and commenced in English,

“MY DEAR MOLLY.”

So far it was easy, but then she paused and sat for a long while, her eyes fixed on the written words, without moving, lost in thought.

It was so long ago, that day, and yet how clearly she remembered every incident as though it were yesterday. Fifteen years ago! Joseph had gone to Paris—that in itself was a thing to be remembered—an extraordinary thing, Joseph seldom went to Paris!

A letter had come from his brother Georges requesting his presence, and so, wonderingly, he had gone. She recalled it so well. Just as he was starting she had noticed a stain on the sleeve of his best black coat. There had been no time to attend to it, and he had been forced to depart, stain and all, but it had troubled her, and during the three days of his absence she had thought of it continually.

And then he had returned. Petite Mère had not known which day to expect him, and she had been sitting by the fire, sewing, with Napoleon the black cat purring contentedly beside her, when she had heard his voice.

“Chérie! Chérie! What thinkest thou that I bring to thee? Come, see! See the little cat that I have brought!”

She well remembered her answer. “Tiens! Joseph! why a cat when we already have Napoleon?”

She had hurried to meet him, and then she had understood. Joseph had ever loved his little jest, his *plaisanterie*.

He stood there, his massive form filling the narrow doorway, and before him, still clinging to his friendly hand was a little child, a tired, frightened child, who stepped straight into Petite Mère's heart, never to leave it.

And later that night, when the little one was sleeping, he had explained. His brother Georges, who was, as Chérie well knew, a notary of distinction in Paris, had sent for him. It appeared that "un Monsieur Anglais," of good family, desired to place his motherless girl with kindly French people of the Protestant Faith, and Georges had at once thought of them. The child was seven years old, amiable and charming.

A certain sum of money would be paid yearly for her maintenance during her minority, and at the age of twenty-one there would be "une bonne petite fortune" awaiting her. There were but two conditions: the first was that the child should continue to speak English fluently, the second, that on no account should the English lawyers, whose name and address were given, be communicated with, save on a matter of grave import.

Circumstances compelled the Englishman to travel abroad in a country most inaccessible, where letters could not reach him. Communications were unnecessary—in fact undesirable. In the event of the child's death—which need not be thought probable, she was strong and healthy—the lawyers were to be advised and the money would cease. Joseph had known that his wife was capable of fulfilling the first condition, she had lived for several years in England before her marriage, and after some hesitation he agreed.

He had shown her the papers he had received with the child. They were very few. Merely the certificate of the marriage of her parents, and that of her baptism, and, on a sheet of writing paper, the address of the English lawyers, and the full name of his little charge—Barbara Claudia Vincent.

Joseph had read the words, and the syllables had come haltingly to his unfamiliar tongue.

"Tiens! c'est drôle! what would it mean to say, chérie?"

Chérie had explained.

"Bien! c'est bien! Babette she shall be," had been his answer. And Babette she had been albeit on state occasions only; at other times pet names, such as Little

Cabbage, Little Cat, Mignonne, and who knows what besides had been fondly employed.

Petite Mère had timidly asked if her Joseph had any assurance that the yearly allowance would be paid, and he had replied that Georges had given him every assurance on that point. He was entirely satisfied. Whatever her doubts had been they were lulled to rest. Joseph was satisfied, and he knew.

So, through the long years Barbara Claudia Vincent had remained to be the joy of the childless couple.

But now, all was altered: Joseph was gone, the little house beside the gleaming river knew them no more, it was exchanged for the home of Petite Mère's childhood, Le Pavillon des Fleurs, a tiny domicile for all its high sounding name. And worse than all, since there was no other way, Babette must go! The allowance which had arrived every year punctually, for so long that it seemed as imperishable an institution as the village church itself, suddenly failed. For two years now they had waited, patiently at first, but with ever increasing anxiety, for, in the untoward way in which troubles come, never as spies but always in battalions, a financial disaster had robbed Petite Mère of the larger part of her income, soon after the death of Joseph. A mere pittance remained—quite insufficient for their daily needs should they continue to live in the style and comfort to which they had been accustomed. The little pavilion, which had previously been let, fell vacant, and no tenant could be found. Melanie too was growing feeble, and could no longer support herself in the employment in which she had been engaged. Altogether it seemed wisest to move. To part with 'Toinette, the faithful servant of years, was a wrench, to leave the little house so fragrant with memories a greater, but there was no help for it.

And finally, Babette realized for herself that her childhood was over, that without contributing to the general purse she could no longer stay. For months Petite Mère refused to agree. "Why speak of it?" she urged.

"What thou eatest, what is it? A bagatelle! I cannot part from thee." But at last she agreed.

Babette should go to the lawyers in England, and obtain possession of the "bonne petite fortune" which was to be hers when she was twenty-one. But she was very sad—truly, as Joseph had said, "It was not easy, this life!"

The door opened, and the entrance of Babette recalled her to herself.

"All is finished, Petite Mère," she said cheerfully. "Melanie has gone to bed; she has a headache. I will bring my knitting, and sit beside you as you write. I must not be idle, for I have still two pairs of stockings and several other things to finish."

"Come, Mignonne," responded Petite Mère brightly. "For me, I write to Molly Seymour, or, to be exact, to Molly Arkwright. Thou knowest that for seven years she was my pupil in a part of England that calls itself Hampshire. We have always corresponded, although for some time now I have not heard from her, and for years I have not seen her. Alas! how many years? But once since my marriage, when Joseph took me to England. But he loved it not—the 'land of rain and fog,' he called it always. There were two sisters when I lived with them—Molly and Evelyn. . . . Evelyn was intelligent, but Molly had the good heart. She, too, has been married this long time; she has a good husband, and now four children. We saw Monsieur Arkwright, and Joseph was well content with him. Mademoiselle has made a good choice, he said. . . . So I write to Molly; I say thou comest to England on business which may detain thee, or, again, it may not! Who can say? But she will be a friend to thee. She lives in the country, but what matters it? There are always trains in these days. I say that thou wilt come in three or four weeks, and that thou wilt write or telegraph from London. N'est ce pas?"

For a while nothing was heard but the scratching of Madame Mère's fine pen and the click of the knitting-needles.

"Chérie!" said Babette suddenly, "I think that no girl ever had such a happy childhood as I."

"I thank God for it, little one."

The girl leaned forward, and, resting her elbows on the table, framed her face in her hands. Her large grey eyes were full of light.

"Truly, so do I," she said gently. "Every day has been happy."

Petite Mère gazed at the sweet face as if her eyes could never take their fill of gazing. It was not a beautiful face—no, the features were too irregular, the mouth a shade too large, but it was more than redeemed from plainness by the eyes, and by the wide brow beneath the brown hair which rioted in waves and curls, and caught the reflected fire-light in bright gleams of gold. The expression was remarkable—youthful radiance shone in every curve and line, hope, fearlessness, joy, and, above all, a sweet sensibility—wholesome, loving and pure, and supremely attractive.

A little shiver shook Petite Mère's slight for "Mignonne," she said, "suppose—only suppose that shouldst fail and that there is no money! what wilt thou do then?"

"Then I will obtain employment," replied the girl quickly. "I am young and strong, I can easily earn money."

Petite Mère nodded. "Yes, perhaps, by teaching. French is a language always in demand, and thy French is of an accent the most pure. It would without doubt be wise for thee to furnish thyself with letters of recommendation. I myself will write one for thee. Monsieur Danton and Madame Menoux also, who have known and loved thee. I myself went to England at no greater age than thine—but I was friendless, and thou wilt have Molly, who will be a friend to thee, of that I am very sure." She paused, and then in a voice which was scarcely audible, she asked, "And—if thou hast the money—if thy heritage is sure?"

"Chérie!" cried the girl eagerly, "thou knowest! I will return—return at once!—immediately, and then,

Petite Mère!"—she clapped her hands—"we will travel—just thou and I—all over the world—to Venice, to Japan; I have always wished to see Japan."

The older woman made no reply.

"Thou would'st come, Petite Mère? Thou would'st enjoy it?" asked the girl wistfully.

"But of course," said Petite Mère, with a little sobbing laugh. "We will go to the ends of the world—thou and I together—to find the fairies, and all our castles in Spain will prove themselves to be of solid stone! Assuredly, my child, I shall enjoy it. Now be silent while I finish my letter. I will put it in the box to-night, ready for the postman in the morning."

CHAPTER III

DAYS GONE BY

Days glad in life, and sad in memory."

P. B. MARSTON.

THERE is a certain railway junction in a quiet part of the sunny land of France, where the traveller, should he, or she, as the case may be, be of an observant nature, may espy upon one of the platforms a square black board, on which are written in white letters words which may be translated as follows—

"This train directs itself towards Les Andelys."

A simple statement this, and strictly non-committal, giving as little information as possible. Nothing is said about time or stopping-places; it merely goes in that direction. Also, no promise is made as to ultimate arrival!

But if the traveller is of a sufficiently intrepid spirit to embark on this somewhat indefinite journey, he will be amply repaid.

The train directs itself—truly, no other verb would so accurately describe its progress. It does not "go." The verb to "go," when connected with a train, signifies hurry and bustle and no little noise. It "directs itself" at a leisurely pace—almost a saunter—through smiling orchards and sunny pastures—green woodlands and quaint villages; stopping here and there as if it were fatigued and would fain rest awhile. There are no shrill whistles, no hooting yells of the locomotive, nothing to disturb the peace: the faint note of a horn indicates that it is prepared to resume its progress when it has rested long enough. Time does not count—it directs itself when it is ready—not before.

But sooner or later it arrives at its journey's end; the

little quiet town of Le Petit Andely, just a cluster of red roofs nestling round the "heavenward pointing finger," the slender spire of the village church.

If, however, the traveller is wise, or has been instructed beforehand by some better informed friend, he will leave the train at the previous station, and turn his steps towards the gleam of water which he will observe upon his right. It is the Seine—flowing serenely in the gentle afternoon sunshine—it must be afternoon! two hours before sunset is the proper time to arrive at the end of every journey!

Taking the broad path along the bank, he will stroll, noting, again, if he is wise, the wild flowers—the blue-bells, the honeysuckle, or the bryony, according to the season; the swallows skimming over the limpid water, which reflects so clearly the tall poplars fringing the opposite bank—and here and there a cypress tree.

On his left are high cliffs, covered for the most part with short sparse grass, with, now and then, a great white chalk buttress standing out from them, as though Nature had originally planned and indeed commenced fortifications, and then had come to the conclusion that they were not necessary and had left them unfinished.

Presently he will turn with a bend in the river, and will see before him, towering high and majestic above the little town, Château Gaillard, its massive keep shining white and clear against the azure of the sky.

The river is wider now, its course intersected mid-stream by a small island covered with trees. Soon he will be able to distinguish the quay, and maybe a few barges lying beside it, and further on a bridge, its four great arches spanning the wide waters. It is possible that he may notice a small cottage as he passes, where, every year, bloom great beds of iris, the *fleur de lys* of France, pale silvery mauve, and glowing purple; he cannot fail to observe the hospital, an imposing and very modern structure, and then, very soon, he will see a small green iron gate, through which glimpses may be caught of gay flower beds and behind them a little house with green jalousies.

In this little house, with the green jalousies, behind the little garden, lived for many years Père Joseph, Petite Mère and Babette.

This, of course the traveller will not know, so he will pass on, doubtless, to the hotel on the quay, but we will linger here a little while to revisit the old home, and picture to ourselves the scenes of every day.

He was no heroic figure, le bon Père Joseph, with his shambling form, his corpulency and his thick grey hair, which he wore "en brosse," standing up like a bristling *chevaux de frise* above his fat red face. But you forgot it all! forgot, too, the general air of untidiness which characterized him in spite of all Petite Mère's efforts to the contrary—the traces of snuff, even, maybe, the traces of his last meal upon his wide expanse of waistcoat—when you knew him, when you knew the generosity of his great heart! He had a genius for loving-kindness, had le bon Père Joseph! No unkind word, no harsh criticism had ever been heard to pass his lips. Of simple faith and unfailing cheerfulness, loving his little *plaisanterie*, full of a whimsical and wholly delightful humour, small wonder he was so beloved by all who knew him.

It was an ideal home for a child, this little house beside the shining water, so full of unpretentious comfort and simple gaiety. Just two sitting-rooms and the kitchen below, with four bedrooms above; and over these, again, the *grenier*, fragrant of apples and of herbs, and such a place for hide and seek on a wet day!

But it was in the garden that the greater part of Babette's days were spent; the garden that they all loved, so full of blossom and of fruit. The pansies in the corner bed were known as Petite Mère's children, she loved them so—and Babette had her own little plot full of roses and mignonette.

On one side of the house was the orchard where the golden apples grew: "the garden of the Hesperides." Here Toinette spread the gleaming linen on fine Tuesdays, and here, on a little wooden chair with a table before her, Babette learned her early lessons.

At the bottom of the garden was the gate which led to the river, and beyond this she might not go, but what matter? since by climbing up a little mound close by, she could get an excellent view of all the passing boats. This little mound was called Mont Parnasse, and the tiny summer-house on the summit was La Temple de la Réflexion. Here Père Joseph would sit on warm summer days after his *déjeuner*—not infrequently with his spotted blue and white handkerchief over his face, and ominous sounds would then give due warning that he did not care to be disturbed.

Babette had no companions of her own age, but how could she miss them? with all the devotion of three faithful hearts, for 'Toinette must not be forgotten! She did her lessons as a child with Petite Mère, and when all her tasks were finished, then all the fun would begin!

Oh! those walks with Père Joseph! the thrilling interest of them!

In vain they begged Petite Mère to accompany them, but she loved not walking on foot! Oh, no! So with a smiling face she would watch them start. "Two babies!" she would say. "Verily I know not which is the younger!"

So off they would go, a curious pair: Père Joseph, huge, unwieldy, in his short black alpaca coat, with the roomy pockets, and a small black and white straw hat, with, on hot days, a cabbage leaf tucked into it to keep his head cool, and the happy, chattering child in her check frock, with low neck and short sleeves, and a wide hat tied securely over her rioting brown curls.

Hand in hand they would climb the steep path that leads to the castle, over the short, slippery grass, until they reached the great battlements overlooking the wide range of mountains and forest and gleaming river.

And Père Joseph would tell of ancient days—how Richard Cœur de Lion, King of her country, raised the massive pile on his return from captivity, after Blondel, the sweet singer, had managed his escape; of Philippe Auguste, of the English King John, of Roger

de Lacy, a brave leader of the garrison, of blows shrewdly dealt, of courage, of treachery, of bloody fights. And Babette wept for the starving peasants, aged men and women and children, driven from their homes by the besiegers, refused shelter at the castle, crouching in the hollow of the hillside, perishing between the devil and the deep sea.

What games they played! One, a favourite one with Babette in the early days, was to re-enact the French attack, the mining of the walls, the storming of the breach, the desperate defence and the final victory of the defenders.

Babette could not understand why Père Joseph never played this game with quite the same zest as others, until she discovered that his kind heart was torn between his patriotism and his love for his little enemy!

After that, they played no more at war between French and English—they did the Field of the Cloth of Gold instead, with Père Joseph as Henry VIII, to console him!

And when the interest in history waned, he had other stores of learning upon which to draw—other tales to tell and games to propose. Together they sailed with Jason in his quest of the Golden Fleece, together they fought with Achilles at the siege of Troy, or rode through the air on the golden arrow of Arabis.

Down in the dark recesses below the Castle, which Babette was certain were dungeons, but which tradition stated were merely the ancient stables, was the cave where dwelt the giant Polyphème. What delicious fears would assail her at his fierce roarings out of the gloom, until one, extra ferocious, would drive her screaming to bury her face in the capacious waistcoat of Polyphème, who would gather her in his great arms and assure his little Cabbage that it was no monster, but merely her old Père Joseph, and console her with non-pareils—the sugar-plums in which her soul delighted.

Sometimes they would take a boat and cross to the wooded island—a veritable wonderland! The island of Calypso, where the ruins of fortifications were covered

with a tangle of roses and honeysuckle, and the ancient walls were so thick that they had gardens of snapdragons and wall-flowers on the top of them. Here in an angle of the masonry was Phocis, where the Delphic Oracle might be consulted in any doubt or difficulty.

But, alas! Père Joseph's excursions into the realms of mythology were discountenanced by Petite Mère after one sad day when supper time came and Babette was nowhere to be found. After prolonged search a little woe-begone figure was discovered by the aid of a candle, crouching in a far corner of the orchard under some brambles. After much questioning, she sobbingly announced that she was Persephone in Hades, and having eaten pomegranate seeds, was unable to return. The child was carried into the house, undoubtedly suffering, and Père Joseph, Petite Mère and 'Toinette endured some hours of acute anxiety, until it was proved by conclusive evidence that the cause of her indisposition was a surfeit of unripe blackberries!

One cloud alone dimmed the brightness of Babette's early childhood, and that was the dread of being torn from the loving couple who had accepted her so entirely as their own. She never willingly spoke of her father. It seemed as though she had never known him really intimately. He was to her a dreaded being—an ogre who might appear at any moment and snatch her away. The mere thought of it was for awhile a terror, and on several occasions Petite Mère found her sobbing, wide-eyed in the silence of the night, declaring vehemently that she would not go away! she would not go with "him!"

But gradually the fear faded, lulled to rest and security by the affection which surrounded her.

In all the happy years Babette never knew what it was to receive an unkind word. When any act of childish naughtiness rendered correction necessary, it was administered by Père Joseph in the form of what he termed "une petite conversation."

He would lead her to the summer-house on Mont Parnasse, place her in a chair, then seating himself

opposite to her, would commence somewhat after this fashion.

"Tiens! Mignonne, there is then a weed in thy heart's garden. Let us seek it together, thou and I, that we may destroy it. It is perhaps that little plant of selfishness at which we dug so earnestly a little while ago! Bah! he is a villain! that little fellow, with creeping roots for which we must be ever on the watch. Or is it, maybe, a tiny shoot of pride, with thorns and prickly leaves? It is, without doubt, a serious matter, for know, my little one, that of such small beginnings come all the big evil things. Come, then! let us discover the enemy, that we may uproot him, so that he trouble us no more, hein!"

That was the best of Père Joseph—he was always an ally. He never said, "Fight thou!" but always "Let us fight together," and the alliance was a strong one.

And as time wore on the habit of mutual sympathy and mutual understanding engendered by these "petites conversations," led these two, so dissimilar in point of years, to a very close companionship of heart and mind. Although one was standing on the threshold of the halls of childhood, and the other treading with firm steps the gentle incline which slopes down to the great Crossing, yet there was so much of the eternal child in the simple heart of the man—so much of the straightforward fearlessness which is the panoply of youth, that the girl, while leaning on his superior wisdom and honouring him above all, could meet him on equal terms and claim him as her friend.

For his part, it was his delight that she should open her heart to him and lead him into the secret places of her thoughts, to those Castles of Faerie which childhood builds, and which are so real until the vision fades. Alas! only till then! Père Joseph never laughed at her dreams, never checked the constant questioning, the whys and wherefores of her inquiring mind.

When Babette was fifteen, her education passed into the hands of the good nuns at the Convent, a fact which she deplored, because the lesson hours left her little

leisure for her walks and talks with Père Joseph, or for the household tasks in which it was her delight to assist Petite Mère. But in the evenings when work was over they would sit, the three of them, in the little salon, their chairs drawn up round the table, whose polished surface reflected equally 'Toinette's zealous care and the glow of the lamplight.

Babette would read aloud, and Petite Mère, nodding over her sewing, would rouse herself to listen to the animated discussions which arose between the girl and the old man at the close of every chapter. The field of literature in which they roamed was a wide one—a varied assortment of books, French and English. La Fontaine, Shakespeare, Racine, Sir Walter Scott, Dickens, and many more beside, and Babette wept with Père Joseph over the sorrows of "Little Nell," and laughed with him over the adventures of the person whom he called "le bon Peekveek!" Also, following Petite Mère's idea of what was correct for a well brought-up young woman, she shed many tears in the solitude of her own room over the *Heir of Redclyffe*, and Père Joseph made a little gentle fun at her when he heard of it.

In the many long and intimate talks she and Père Joseph had together, one in particular remained in Babette's memory in after years, for although by God's mercy the future is hidden from us, and she did not know it at the time, it was destined to be their last.

They were sitting together as they loved to sit when time allowed in the little summer-house on Mont Parnasse. It was summer time, and under the clear blue of the sky the river flowed serenely and peacefully between its grassy banks. The girl's outspoken thoughts had been darting from this to that as freely as the saffron butterflies she was idly watching, fluttering now high, now low, in the warm scented air, and at last settled on the future—that word which holds so much magic for the young. Père Joseph leaned back in his chair, only occasionally rousing himself to take a pinch of snuff, or blow his nose loudly, with his blue and white spotted handkerchief. He listened intently, nodding his head

sagely now and then, while the eager voice ran on, painting glowing word pictures of all its owner would do some day—some day. Of all the wonders which life should hold for her, all the dizzy heights of knowledge to which she would attain, and all the splendours she would see.

She paused and glanced at her companion as if waiting for his approval and encouragement, but he pursed his lips together in a tender, doubtful fashion and offered words of counsel and caution.

They were familiar to Babette, for they were a favourite saying of his.

"It is not wise to seek blue roses, my child, they grow not often in this world of ours. Also perchance the search may lead us to overlook the pink ones which we may find in plenty, very full of scent and fragrance, all along the road."

"So thou hast frequently said, mon père," she answered, "but is it really wrong to seek the blue ones?"

"It is not wise," he repeated, "and it is wrong to think that life holds no good if we do not find them."

"But," she persisted, "some people have found them?" It was more an assertion than a question.

He nodded. "Maybe. But who knows if they were really blue? Roses that are just the most ordinary pink ones to some people, may seem wondrously blue to the eyes of others."

"I should like to find blue roses," Babette said wistfully. "I do not think that it would matter to me if other people thought they were pink, so that I myself knew them blue."

"Well, well, ma fille! Who shall say that with the good God anything is impossible! Some hearts must ever seek, and to these come sometimes realizations beyond their imaginings, most beautiful. I pray that so it may be for thee. Yet, I repeat, despise not the pink roses! Heaven is ever with us; still, even so, we are not yet in heaven, and on this earth it is ever wise to value the good things which assuredly are with us in

abundance. Be not ever yearning for what thou hast not."

"But all are not so happy as I am!"

"Happiness is not for all, yet all may know contentment. Some would still find cause for complaint were the stars to turn into louis d'or at their bidding. Ever melancholy! ever grumbling! Bah! I cannot endure to hear grumbings! the devil's paternosters, no more, no less!"

"But many are in trouble!"

"That cannot be denied. It is not easy, this life—of a truth it is not easy. But I say, pray to the good God to clear the clouds away. And always remember, Mignonne, that it is the clouds that bring the rain, without which no plant can grow. Note also that it is after the rain that the scent of the flowers is sweetest."

"It is after the rain that we gather the slugs, thou and I," the girl said mischievously. "How I adored gathering slugs when I was little."

Père Joseph chuckled. "Letter the gathering of the slugs than the learning of thy tasks. Eh! it was so sometimes, petite, if my memory is true!"

The girl leaned forward, her elbows on her knees, her chin supported by her clasped hands. "I did not dislike my lessons—at least, not always," she said, with a smile.

"They were at times a serious difficulty to thee," continued the old man. "That, par exemple, is also the way of life. What was once a mountain and very steep to climb becomes in retrospect a mole-hill. A thing to remember, n'est-ce pas? Come, I have moralized enough for to-day. We will go to seek Chérie."

Arm in arm they walked towards the house, and then, hearing the voice of Petite Mère, the girl ran forward, leaving her companion to follow. At the end of the path she turned and blew him a kiss from the tips of her fingers.

Père Joseph stood still and watched her, then, removing his hat, mopped his forehead with his handkerchief.

"Dieu merci," he said reverently. "She is still a child for all her seventeen years."

A few more weeks passed, each day with its round of simple duties—each another link in the chain which bound them, old and young alike, in loving unity. Home life and home—a life which nothing could disturb or alter, or so it seemed then.

And then quite suddenly overwhelming sorrow fell upon the little household—a bolt from the blue.

It was August, and the heat had for some days been most oppressive. Père Joseph departed to enjoy his nap after *déjeuner*, and when the hour for his return arrived he did not come.

They sought him, and there, in the Temple de la Réflexion, they found him, his massive head bowed forward upon his chest, his eyes closed, sleeping—the sleep that knows no waking here on earth.

And then all the troubles began.

CHAPTER IV

NEXT MARKET DAY

"Make short the miles,
With talks and smiles."

CLÉOPÂTRE was an ass with much character; Petite Mère frequently said so, and it was undoubtedly true. Whether, however, character is an attribute to be desired in this domestic animal is doubtful. It makes for independence and vagaries. The fact that she had, entirely uninstructed, taken upon herself the rôle of watchdog to the Pavilion des Fleurs singled her out from others of her breed. Never before have I known a watchdog ass heralding all comers with a loud and fearsome bray. But it cannot be denied that she was greedy. It would have gone hard with the fowls if Cléopâtre had not been strictly watched during their mealtime; alone, they were unable to defend themselves. However fast they gobbled, she invariably secured all the choicest scraps. It was a standing grievance with Alcibiade, the yellow cock, that for all his valour and his assaults he and his wives should be robbed in this way. It depressed him. After a more severe encounter than usual he almost envied Paul and Virginie, the doves, who lived in the big wicker cage under the porch. They were captive, it is true, but well fed and secure. Alcibiades, given opportunity, would have been a gourmand.

To continue, Cléopâtre was variable. On some days she would come in answer to Babette's call with the abject expression of a martyr going to the stake; on others she would be coy, starting this way and that, and, if pursued, she would career around the orchard, dodging the low branches of the gnarled apple-trees

with maddening dexterity, her long ears waving, her tail erect.

There was no counting on her. It was the same in the shafts: she might trot along gaily, her little hoofs click-clacking merrily on the road, as if life was a pleasure; or, again, she might not!

She could be gay, or she could be serious. On occasions she seemed to be possessed of a devil, and, shying wildly at nothing, would come to a standstill, her feet planted securely, her ears well forward. Both Babette and Petite Mère well knew that when once she took this attitude there was no hope. They might attempt to drag her, but, as Petite Mère said, it would require a locomotive. In vain blows thundered like hailstones on her back and sides, they were disregarded; words of vehemence and dire import were showered upon her in vain. And then, all of a sudden, when she chose, on she would go with most irritating composure, and smiling (if asses can smile) with overwhelming satisfaction. Ah, no, Cléopâtre may have possessed character, but she was not dependable.

And so, next market day, Babette, wise from bitter experience, was up betimes. And because she had got up early, and because there was plenty of time, Cléopâtre came to her call like a lamb, and behaved with exemplary propriety, allowing herself to be harnessed and led to the front door.

Presently Petite Mère and Melanie appeared. The latter was full of instructions. "Thou wilt not forget, ma sœur, we need candles and rice. Ah! and did I tell thee of the féculé? The sort that they sell in packets—not in tins. Also a little nutmeg would be useful."

Petite Mère stepped into the cart. "Rest assured, ma sœur, I will not forget."

"Adieu, ma petite," continued Melanie, "be content. I will make thee 'little wings of angels' before thy return. Des aillettes d'anges."

"That will be good. I adore the little cakes, as thou well knowest." Babette took her seat. There was an

element of uncertainty about these expeditions—all depended on Cléopâtre; but the little animal gave a wave of her ears and a flick of her tail and trotted off most cheerfully.

"Tiens! she is gay to-day, the little Cléopâtre," said Petite Mère in a tone of satisfaction.

To which Babette, who was driving, replied fervently; "God be thanked."

Petite Mère opened the bag she carried. "Let us see. What was it that Melanie said at the last moment? Rice and fécule—and something else?"

"Candles, wasn't it?" replied Babette.

"Candles, that was it. Here I have the list of the other things. Now, Mignonne, if Cléopâtre will but trot to the station in time to catch the train, all will be well."

"We have nearly an hour in which to do three miles," said Babette, glancing at her watch.

The ass trotted on, up the lane with the high banks on either side, past the thatched cottage, past the little Calvary where the country people were wont to pray for the success of their crops, past the little church, and so, with a turn to the left, out on to the high road, where a band of straying pigs nearly shattered her equanimity, but they were safely passed.

"Petite Mère, you never told me of your conversation with Madame Laurent; what did she say?"

"She came, little one, to demand thy hand in marriage for her son, Jean Paul. She said it was not her wish—you were English, you were heretique; this last, by the way, she seemed to think could be remedied, but she had decided to be magnanimous. She spoke well of her son, of her desire to see his children—of this and that; but I explained to her that thou art going to England, and that it is quite impossible. She was very much vexed, and that is why she would not wait for coffee."

"The children of Jean Paul," said the girl reflectively. "Oh, Petite Mère, canst thou not see them—small editions of Jean Paul, with pale hair and watery eyes,

wearing shiny sailor hats and knickerbockers and striped socks, and all very much in awe of Grandmamma?"

"Do not laugh, ma fille," urged Petite Mère, "he is a good son."

"He is a feeble, downtrodden thing without the courage of a mouse."

"Non, non, thou hast wrong, he has been brave in this matter: he has defied his mother—he loves thee well!"

And because it is not unpleasant to be loved, even by the Jean Pauls of this world—at a distance, be it understood—the girl was silent and relapsed into thought.

"I have no desire to marry, Petite Mère," she said at last.

"But why? thou wilt find a good husband when the good God wills. A good husband like my Joseph, that is what I wish for thee."

"Ah, but," and the girl's voice grew tender, "I do not think that the world can hold another like Père Joseph! No, I have no desire to marry. Or, when I do," she added lightly, "he shall be tall with blue eyes, and I think he must be a soldier. But that will not be for many years. First I find my fortune, and then we travel, thou and I, Petite Mère. Oh! I have so many dreams about that happy time."

"God grant thou art not disappointed, my little one!"

"Have I no right to dream?" asked Babette quickly. "Do I but seek blue roses, Petite Mère? Is it all impossible?"

"No, no," said Petite Mère soothingly, "nothing is impossible. Dream thy happy dreams, Mignonne, the dreams of youth." But in her heart of hearts she was praying—praying that there should be no disappointment, no sad awakening for her beloved—that strength might be given to the child to meet whatever the future had in store.

In consequence of the gay mood of Cléopâtre they arrived at the station in ample time to deliver her into the custody of Emile Martel, the friendly blacksmith, who lived just opposite. Every market day he received

her with the same words, "Rest assured, Madame, she shall be safe with me," and always in the evening he returned her, saying, "Tiens, Madame, you find her safe, n'est-ce pas? Ears and tail all complete."

The train was, as a rule, a little crowded on these days, but what matter? since most of the travellers were well known to each other, and so full of cheerful gossip that the journey—a distance only of a few miles—was all too short for what they had to say.

"Bonjour, Madame! Bonjour, Mademoiselle!" said a stout farmer's wife, as she hoisted herself into the high railway carriage, with many a grunt and not a little friendly assistance from behind. "Assuredly it is good weather we are having. Some days of this, and we shall see the green buds peeping out on every side. Excellent weather, too, for the poultry. Verily, my young ducks grow as if they were in a hurry for their turn for market. Ah! there is news this week; Bien, sure! Have you not already heard it? It is Jean Paul Laurent, who marries himself to Marie Bigot! Ha, ha! she is a clever woman, Madame Laurent, for the girl has a good 'dot' and a nice little piece of land."

"That marriage," rejoined another speaker, "but she has a body as crooked as a faggot-stick and two eyes which cross each other like a pair of shears!"

Petite Mère and Babette exchanged glances of amusement. Madame Laurent, woman of business, had evidently proved herself equal to the occasion—she had wasted no time.

"Well, well, that may be so," said the farmer's wife placidly, "but beauty is worth little after all. For me, give me something in the bank, that is the first thing. Take, par exemple, Jules Leroy; he must needs go dancing off to Rouen, and return with a wife with nothing in the world to recommend her but a pretty face. And what now? a house like a pigsty, and neglected children! I tell you she is an imbecile! Hardly knowing the difference between a carrot and a turnip; and as for making butter, my faith, it is a thing impossible for her! Marie Bigot may not be beautiful,

but when all is finished she is as the good God made her—and the money is there, right enough!"

"That is a question for the husband to decide, after all; but for my part I pity him, poor devil, to wake up to a face like that every morning."

"Tchut! tchut! No m^an remembers the colour of his wife's eyes a fortnight after the honeymoon, and in the dark all cats are grey!"

And then the arrival of the train at Fécamp put an end to the discussion.

"Oh, Petite Mère," said Babette as they walked out of the station, "canst thou not smell the sea? How good it is!"

"I smell fish," was the decided reply. "But now, my child, hurry ourselves. We will attend to the household business, and then we will go to Monsieur Legrand. Thou hast the ring safely?"

"Yes, I have it secure under my glove. Oh, Petite Mère, it is hard to part with, but Enfin! it cannot be helped, so why grieve?"

The market place was crowded with stalls. Later on in the year umbrellas would be fastened up to protect wares of a perishable nature from the sun; huge umbrellas, red or blue or green, like giant mushrooms in some fairy pantomime, but for the present they were unnecessary. Buxom dames in spotless white caps sat knitting, their tongues going all the while in cheerful badinage with their neighbours and friends. Stalwart fishermen lounged about, their loose brown overalls stained to a rich umber, which showed tones of orange and even of vermilion in the sunshine. Children pattered about with a clatter of their wooden sabots, shouting and gesticulating, and everywhere there was gaiety and noise.

Petite Mère did not linger. She had plenty of experience to guide her, and knew to a nicety the value of all she wished to buy, so her bargaining was short and decisive. If her price was not acceptable, Bien! she went elsewhere. She trotted round, exchanging friendly greetings here and there, until all was done,

and then they walked quickly down the Rue Alexandre Legros, until they came to a small jeweller's shop. The doorway was low and the interior very dark. Behind the narrow counter stood a wizened little old man, who greeted them civilly. They were no strangers.

"I come not as a purchaser to-day, Monsieur," Petite Mère began. "On the contrary I bring a ring. It is your habit on occasions not to sell but to purchase—is it not so?"

"That is sometimes the case," he replied, bowing. "If Madame will permit me but for a moment to see the article. . . ."

Babette had taken off her glove, and now drew from her finger an old-fashioned ring in which was set one large diamond surrounded by a design of blue enamel. It was her most cherished possession, and had been bequeathed to her by an old lady in Le Petit Andely who had been much attached to her. The legacy had been quite unexpected, and both Père Joseph and Petite Mère had been surprised that the girl had been left so valuable a souvenir.

M. Legrand took the ring, and fixing a glass in his eye, examined it in silence. A silence which lasted so long that Petite Mère grew alarmed.

"It is old," she remarked, in a voice which, in spite of all her efforts, sounded anxious. "It is old, and of great value."

"It is old, Madame, but it is not antique," returned the jeweller.

"But it is of great value," insisted Petite Mère again.

"Permit me, Madame, that I take it to a better light. Pardon me a little moment only."

Petite Mère and Babette looked into each other's eyes, but said no word. Why should Monsieur Legrand hesitate even for a moment to buy so beautiful a ring?

Then he returned. "I ask pardon, Mesdames, that I detain you. I regret that I am unable to purchase this article; it is pretty—of that there is no doubt—but, enfin, I regret much."

Petite Mère took the ring. "The stone is large," she urged.

"The stone is large," he agreed, "but I assure you, Madame, such a thing as this would be difficult for me to sell—it is not marketable." He spoke kindly but decidedly.

Petite Mère controlled herself, but her face was rather white. "Well, well, Monsieur, since that is your opinion, there is no more to be said. I thank you. I wish you good day."

And with this she walked out of the shop, followed by the girl, still holding the ring. Once on the pavement they turned and faced each other.

"Oh, Petite Mère," cried Babette. "What shall we do? The money I must have—or——"

"There is no one else here that I know of to whom we could take it. Wait, my child, let me think for an instant."

Then a friendly voice raised in cheerful greeting surprised them, and they both started at the sound.

"Bonjour, Madame! Bonjour, Mademoiselle! I hope I see you well." A dapper little man, with a bristling and very fierce white moustache, stood before them, holding out his hand.

CHAPTER V

KINDLY MEETING

"Friendship, 'tis said, is love without his wings,
And friendship, Sir, is sweet enough for me."

ALFRED AUSTIN.

PETITE MÈRE was the first to find her voice. "Why, Monsieur Menoux," she exclaimed, "I am rejoiced to see you."

"It is good fortune that we meet," responded the newcomer, wringing her warmly by the hand; "and now you must both come to déjeuner. The Abbey Church clock has just struck the hour. Mais non, I take no refusal. My wife would indeed be chagrined if I told her I was unable to persuade you to partake of our hospitality. Truly, Madame, I insist! In truth, I do not now care to go home alone!" He spread out his hands in mock horror. "I assure you that above all things I dread my wife when she is angry. I tell you in confidence that she can be, on occasion, most violent!"

Babetie burst out laughing. The little man's droll way of speaking, the mischievous twinkle in his eyes, and, above all, his ridiculous description of Madame Menoux, kindest of women, were irresistible.

"Voilà!" he continued, highly delighted. "Mademoiselle is on my side; the victory is mine. That is excellent. Come, Madame, take my arm. So! I doubt not that, like myself, you find the first sunshine of spring a little trying. You have an air of fatigue . . . permit that I relieve you of the merchandise. So! All is well, n'est-ce pas? And the other arm is for Mademoiselle, if she will avail herself of it."

Babette laughingly declined, and, chattering gaily the

while, Monsieur Menoux escorted them down the Rue Théagène Bouffart, that long street which traverses the site of the Benedictine Monastery, once so famous for its manufacture of liqueur.

On arrival at his house, which stands about half-way down the street on the left-hand side, his wife came hurrying to meet them in answer to his call.

"Tiens," she said, "I am delighted to see you, and Mademoiselle Babette . . . you are most welcome. Déjeuner will be ready at the instant. Annette just breaks the eggs into the pan."

The warmth of the welcome and the kind words of the worthy couple soon raised the drooping spirits of Babette, but Petite Mère seemed unlike herself, *distracte* and silent, and she was, to Madame's distress, unable to do justice to the excellent fare set before them.

After a while Babette communicated the news of her approaching departure.

"What! Impossible!" cried Madame Menoux, throwing up her hands in surprise. "You go to England . . . across the sea?"

"Ah! Mademoiselle, do not leave us, I pray," begged her husband. "Are there not, then, sufficient distractions for you here, in the land of France? Why must you go?"

To which the girl answered, half in jest and half in earnest, "I go to seek my fortune!"

"Ah!" said the little man, "it is, then, an adventure! Mademoiselle Jason! Permit me to salute you!" He rose to his feet, and made her a low bow. "I wish you good luck, and may you speedily return, bearing the Golden Fleece."

"God grant that it be not 'un peau de chagrin,'" said Madame Menoux devoutly. "This England, it is a barbarous country."

"But Mademoiselle has been there before, is it not so? I am not sure; I cannot well remember."

"Verily it is an adventure," ejaculated Madame Menoux.

Petite Mère, who had hitherto taken no part in the

conversation, roused herself. "But she speaks English with ease. She has, I can assure you, a most thorough knowledge of the language."

"C'est bon! And now, Madame, another cup of coffee, or a little glass of anisette. Oh! but yes, I pray you; you have eaten nothing."

Presently they moved into an adjoining apartment, and Madame Menoux excused herself for a moment. She had an order to give, and would return without delay.

"Be seated, Madame; be seated, Mademoiselle," said their kind host. "Stay just a little while, I pray you." Then, drawing a chair close to them, he sat down and said gently—

"Madame, pardon me if I appear intrusive. I assure you that it is from no idle curiosity that I ask, but it has appeared to me that you were somewhat troubled. I may have been mistaken, but will you not confide in me? If there is anything that I could——"

Petite Mère did not reply for a moment, and then, speaking more impulsively than usual, she said, "I will not disguise from you, Monsieur, that we have this morning had a—slight—embarrassment. We visited Monsieur Legrand——" she stammered, and looked piteously across at Babette.

"It was a question of a ring, Monsieur," explained the girl; "a ring of which we desired to dispose, and Monsieur Legrand felt unable to assist us. Perhaps you might tell us of some one who might be willing. You see, it is necessary that I have the money for my visit to England."

"It would be a convenience," corrected Petite Mère. "The ring is old and of great value."

"Will you allow me to see it?" asked Monsieur Menoux. "I know a man in this town who might, perhaps, interest himself."

Madame handed it to him, and, taking it to the window, he held it first this way and then that, in order that the light might play upon the stone.

"It is—charming," he said at length. "If you will

allow me, I will go and speak with the man I mentioned. He lives close by. You will excuse me? Hein!"

At this moment Madame Menoux entered, nearly colliding with her husband in the doorway. "Ah! thou art here; that is well. Engage Madame for a few minutes in conversation. There is a little affair to be arranged." And he hurried off.

"There is a favour we would ask of you, Madame Menoux," said Petite Mère. "It is this: it is necessary that Babette shall carry with her to England a few letters of recommendation, for purposes of identification merely, and I thought that perhaps you would oblige us with one, having known her for some years."

"Why, of a certainty I will do so," replied Madame Menoux. "I wish with all my heart she were not going to that barbarous country; but since she will go, let us do all in our power to help her. Also, an idea arrives to me. Mademoiselle stays in London, perhaps, in passing to her friends. I can recommend to you an hotel where she may safely stay. It is small and quiet, and the wife of the proprietor is French, and a native of Fécamp. That would be useful, n'est-ce pas?"

"I thank you a thousand times," said Babette warmly. "You are most kind."

"When do you take your departure?" was Madame's next question.

They continued chatting pleasantly till Monsieur returned.

His face was a little flushed, and he spoke with some hesitation. "Ah! dear Madame! I fear I have had no great success! My friend was interested. Oh yes, he said the ring was charming, but alas!"

"He will not buy it?" asked Petite Mère anxiously.

"He will buy it, yes—but only at a price. Indeed, Madame, I fear to mention the sum he names. It is so small!"

"What was it?" asked Babette. "Please tell us."

Monsieur Menoux spread out both hands in a deprecatory gesture. "Enfin. Madame," he said, "he will but offer three hundred francs!"

"Three hundred francs only!" repeated Petite Mère in a dull, strained voice.

"Three hundred francs!" repeated Babette in a tone of satisfaction. "Oh! Petite Mère, let us accept it! It will take me to England!" And in truth the sum seemed a fortune to the girl.

"Three hundred francs!" repeated Petite Mère again, very low. "I had hoped for at least a thousand."

"How much is that in English money, Monsieur?" asked Babette.

"Three hundred francs equals about twelve pounds sterling." He put his hand into his pocket and drew out some notes. "I have it here; my friend suggested I should bring it, in case you decide——"

"Oh yes, Monsieur, we decide," she cried quickly. "Is it not so, Petite Mère? Yes, we thank Monsieur, your friend, and we will accept what he offers."

"Bien! I am glad," he said, as he handed over the notes. "The ring I will deliver to him a little later, after your departure. For that there is no hurry."

Petite Mère rose to her feet. There was a curious look of determination on her face. "Mignonne," she said, still speaking in that odd, strained voice, "I leave you for a few minutes with our kind friends. I have a little commission. . . . I am sure, Madame, that you will not object to my leaving her here for a little moment."

"But certainly!" exclaimed Monsieur and Madame with one voice; and the latter added, "I will occupy myself by writing the letter, while Mademoiselle converses with my husband."

"Shall I not accompany you, Petite Mère?" asked Babette, wondering a little at the unusual proceeding.

"Mais non, mais non!" replied Petite Mère, and in another moment she was gone.

Once in the street, she retraced her steps by the way by which they had come, up the Rue Théagène Bouffart, and along the Rue Alexandre Legros, until she came to the little jeweller's shop. Glancing quickly, almost furtively, to right and left, to make quite sure that she was unobserved, she opened the door and stepped inside.

Monsieur Legrand gave her his customary greeting, making no allusion to her previous visit. Petite Mère spoke no word. She laid her little bag upon the counter, she drew off her gloves; then, stooping low, she fumbled for the pocket under her skirt. The shop was very quiet, and in the silence her breathing was very audible, quick and fast, like that of a man who has been running. At last she pulled out a small washleather bag, tied at the neck with a piece of black tape. It took her some moments to disentangle the knot, for her hands were shaking as with a palsy, but at last she succeeded, and slowly, and with infinite care, almost as though she would fain linger over the task, she drew out a large gold watch, which she placed in the old man's outstretched hand.

And still she spoke no word.

"Madame desires to sell?" he said gently.

Petite Mère nodded; her eyes were fixed upon the watch, as Monsieur Legrand turned it over and opened the back to examine the works.

"It is a good Geneva watch," he said at last. "Old, of course, and much worn, Madame, but by a good maker. A man's watch will command a higher price in these days than a lady's. I will give one hundred and twenty-five francs, if that is agreeable to Madame."

Again Petite Mère nodded.

Monsieur Legrand laid it down, and with a murmured word of excuse walked away into his little back parlour to fetch the money. He was gone for a few moments, and when he returned Petite Mère was standing as he had left her. She was holding the watch in one trembling, toilworn hand, while with the other she stroked it, gently and tenderly, as one might stroke the face of an old friend in the hour of parting, or maybe the hour of death. Her eyes were full of tears, her face ashen white, and her lips were moving, forming a stream of tender words, quite inaudible, but infinitely pitiful to see.

The man stood in silence; she did not appear to notice his approach. He waited a little while; then he said quietly, "One hundred and twenty-five francs, Madame."

Petite Mère started; a little shudder passed over her slight form. Then she laid the watch down on the counter, and took the money he offered. She opened her bag to place it within, and then she stopped as if struck by some sudden thought. Raising her face to his for the first time during the interview, "Monsieur has by chance some English money?" she asked.

The question seemed to rid the moment of the emotional strain of which the man, with the ready sympathy of his nation, was only too conscious. "But yes, Madame. By a lucky chance it happens that on this occasion I have. It is not very often the case, but only yesterday an American gentleman bought from me a piece of antique silver, and paid me part of the purchase money with a note for five pounds sterling. I shall be glad to hand it to Madame, if she desires it."

"It would be convenient to me," said Petite Mère.

The exchange was soon effected, and, wishing the man good-day, she walked out of the shop.

Mechanically, almost as if without any conscious volition on her part, she turned in the direction of the Rue Théagène Bouffart.

A mist floated in front of her, blinding her old eyes to her surroundings. Only this one thought filled her mind: that there, behind her, in the shop of Monsieur Legrand, she had bartered for a paltry sum what represented to her far more than the wealth of all the Indies: something so charged with memories of days that could never return—memories of her husband and her home—that it seemed as if some vital part of her was left behind with it. It seemed to her, in her anguish of mind, as if she had betrayed her love.

An almost irresistible impulse seized her to return, to fling the money in his face, to cancel her sacrifice. How could she bear it? What consolation was left to her for the long, lonely watches of the night, without even the familiar sound that she had known for all these many, many years, so long, indeed, that it had seemed like the voice of a friend in the darkness!

Then she remembered. The flimsy square of paper

meant also much. More than betrayal of the dead, it meant security for the living—for the purpose for which she designed it was the safeguarding of all that was left to her to love in life. Regrets were selfish things at best. What she had to do now was to thank God that the money had been obtainable; and for the rest—well, Joseph knew, and would understand. Joseph had always understood.

It was later in the afternoon, and Monsieur and Madame Menoux were alone. They had been gently discussing the visitors who had just left them. "It is a great enterprise," Monsieur was saying, "this journey of Mademoiselle Babette. Madame Maurice was troubled—I could see it well."

"What of the ring?" asked his wife. "I was not present during some of the conversation regarding it."

Monsieur Menoux took it from his pocket, and handed it to her.

"The price was small for so beautiful a diamond," she said sorrowfully.

"It is not a diamond, my wife," was the quiet reply.

"Thou art sure?"

He nodded. "It is not for nothing that Monsieur Bertrand, the lapidary in Rouen, has been my intimate friend. It is so palpable an imitation; but they, poor souls, did not understand. How should they?"

There was a pause; then Madame Menoux said shrewdly, "If, then, it was an imitation, it was not worth three hundred francs?"

Her husband rose. "Enfin!" he said. "What matter? It will not hurt us, a sum like that!"

Madame smiled at him affectionately. "That is true, mon cher. Thou hast done well."

CHAPTER VI

THE LAST DAY

“Must we part?
Well, if we must—we must—
And in that case,
The less is said the better.”

SHERIDAN.

THE last day had come, as last days must, in spite of all our desire to postpone them; in spite of all our longing to arrest the passage of time, which seems to fly on wings when we count every tick of the clock, and knew that every second marks the approach of the grey shadow Parting.

Babette had no fear with regard to the future, so sure was she in her own mind of the success of her enterprise. After all, what was it?—only a few weeks or months, at most, and then she would be back again. Yet it was but natural that her heart should ache at the thought that those few weeks must be spent far from those she loved. If Petite Mère could have come to England with her all would indeed have been delightful, but that was impossible, she must go alone. The money for a double journey was not forthcoming; already their slender resources had been strained to the uttermost, and the girl knew that the most rigid economy would have to be practised by the inmates of the Pavilion during her absence.

The knowledge distressed her, but she took comfort from the certainty that it would not be for long: only until she returned to shower the fruits of her newly acquired wealth on Petite Mère and Melanie, who would then lack nothing that loving thought could suggest for their comfort in their old age.

Meanwhile, on this the last day before the great adventure began, Babette gazed at each well-known object with eyes that strove to fix every detail firmly in her memory—tender recollections to be stored up against the time when every face would be strange and every sight unfamiliar.

Early dawn had found her standing on the high ground behind the house, watching the sun rise, gazing across the wide valley, away over the forest of Elbœuf, towards Fécamp and the sea—that sea which she must cross to-morrow to seek a fortune in an unknown land.

Already the great brown fields about her were showing touches of tender green. All the promise of spring was in the air. How different would be the scene which now lay before her, when, a few months later, that promise should be fulfilled. Babette tried to picture it. Not a house would be visible then, where now the brown roofs of the homesteads could plainly be seen through the bare branches of the trees which surrounded them—then they would be securely hidden and sheltered from wind and weather by the thick foliage. Brilliant yellow patches of colza, so brilliant as to be almost dazzling under the summer sun would stand out in striking contrast to the young green of the flax and the varying tints of the forest trees. There would be long lines of tethered cattle, standing knee-deep in the rich red clover; blue-clad figures would be at work, hoeing or digging, or weeding the young crops with a gigantic, curious implement like a huge pair of wooden pincers. Where all was now hushed and expectant, then the cheerful voices of the busy toilers and the singing of birds would resound on every side.

“Ah!” she thought, “we must wait till the summer here is over: it is too beautiful to miss. In the autumn when the earth looks sad Petite Mère and I will start on our journey to find the fairies.”

She had visited the little thatched cottage in the forest, where lived old Durot, the charcoal burner. The old man had been absent, but she had lingered to gather a sprig of rosemary, for remembrance, from the bush

that grew beside his door. He was a friend, old Durot—humble old fellow as he was, full of quaint humour and with his mind a veritable storehouse of old-world lore about the denizens of the forest where he made his home. She was sorry to go without bidding him good-bye; but never mind, before the great clump of saxifrage on the mossy roof bloomed in all its golden splendour she would be back again.

She walked slowly along the narrow path between the tall trees, over the stile and across the meadow until the Pavilion came in sight, and then, once more, she wondered, as so often before on this same spot, who had lived in it in days gone by. There was no doubt that at one time it had been the hunting-box of some rich and noble seigneur who had bestowed much thought and not a little money on its adornment. It was very old now, and although it had been erected in the days when workmen took pride in their craft and builded for generations to come, strongly and with care, it was falling into disrepair.

The little square bell-tower had lost some of its slates, and had a crooked, even dissipated, appearance, while the lead figures, which had once beautified the roof, were broken and displaced.

Cupid still stood poised in the act of flying upon one leaden foot, but his bow was missing; while Venus, who for so many years had smiled at him from the opposite corner, had fallen from her high estate and now lay, in a most dejected attitude, on a small rockery in a corner of the garden, with a kindly growth of periwinkle draping her recumbent form.

The glory had departed.

If only the little house could speak, what tales it could tell! Tales of merry parties starting off to the chase—gay cavaliers on prancing steeds, escorting fair ladies in flowing habits and tricorne hats; tales of the days when the silence which now echoed only to the voice of Cléopâtre, had rung to the gay *tirra-lirra* of the horn.

Even now, in the heart of the forest, game was plentiful, and Babette well remembered how, on looking out

of her window very early one frosty morning during their first winter at the Pavilion, she had seen a great wild boar crossing the meadow just beyond the little lawn—a weird spectral monster in the cold haze.

The girl had peopled the quaint place with dream folk, had visualized for herself scenes which might have been enacted in the past, and had loved its atmosphere of ancient days and faded grandeur.

To-day she wandered round the garden, noting the green shoots pushing through the brown earth like venturesome inquisitive gnomes; she had marked the havoc wrought by the winter's cold on one or two favourite shrubs and sorrowed over it; she had spent the day in bidding all farewell, and now the night had come.

Petite Mère had placed a handful of dry colza twigs in the stove in the salon, and then seated herself in her accustomed chair with her sewing, and Babette had taken her usual position on the floor, leaning against the older woman's knee.

Now and then the sewing would fall, and a gentle hand would stroke the brown head with a loving caress. At a little distance Melanie sat, her hands folded in her lap, half asleep and half-awake, after her day's work.

For the hundredth time that day Petite Mère asked anxiously, "Thou hast everything, Mignonne? Thy clothes, thy books? Hast thou forgotten nothing—needles and thread, perchance?"

"I have everything, Petite Mère. All is prepared."

"Thou hast the letters in a secure place?"

"Chérie, nothing is forgotten."

"Thou wilt write from London?"

"Surely, without delay."

"I cannot well remember the name of the station by which thou wilt come to London. It is a great city, greater than Rouen and thou wilt wonder at the greatness of it. It has even many railway stations, so many that I cannot now recall the names of them. So many things thou wilt see which will surprise thee."

"I do not doubt it, Chérie!"

Presently Melanie roused herself. "Sing to us, then, Petite, once more," she said.

"But of course I will sing," answered the girl quickly. "What shall it be?"

"Sing the 'Mon âme à Dieu,'" replied Melanie.

Babette's voice was quite untrained, but she sang naturally and sweetly with her face a little raised, and the clear notes came liquid and true as a bird's song—

"La voile est a la grande hune,
Dit un Breton a genoux.
'Je pars pour chercher la fortune
Çu ne veut pas venir à nous.
Je reviendrai bientôt, j'espère,
Sache tes yeux . . . prie, attends moi.
En te quittant, ma bonne mère,
Mon âme à Dieu, mon cœur à toi!"

and again the last line repeated, lingeringly, softly—

"Mon âme à Dieu" . . .
. . . "Mon âme à Dieu, mon cœur à toi!"

Her voice broke on the last words, as a stifled sob came from Petite Mère. Melanie rose suddenly and hurried from the room as if she could bear no more, and Babette hid her face and burst into tears. Petite Mère laid her hand gently on the bowed head, and strove for words. They did not come easily. The sorrow of age is for the most part silent, and while youth can find relief in words and tears, age, denied that relief, suffers dumbly.

At last she said, "A sad, sad song for this night, ma bien aimée."

"But indeed, indeed it will not be for long," the girl's confidence rang out bravely through her tears. "So soon I will return, Chérie, almost before thou knowest that I am gone."

"God grant it!" was the reply.

Then Petite Mère picked up her sewing, which had fallen to the floor, and laid it on a table close at hand.

"Thou must move a moment, little one," she said. "I have something to show thee."

They rose and walked to the old bureau, which Petite Mère unlocked.

"Oh, Chérie!" cried Babette, as she opened it, "here is my old book! I have not seen it for so long; I had forgotten all about it." She took it in her hand as she spoke, and turned the pages thoughtfully.

It was a thin volume about the size of a copybook, bound in faded green cloth, with the word "Journal" stamped in gold letters upon the cover, and it had been the only thing in any way resembling a plaything which Babette had brought with her to L. Petit Andely.

The leaves were ruled and divided into spaces for days, and the first few pages were covered with a childish straggling handwriting.

The owner had seemingly not possessed the patience necessary to continue the entries, for the writing soon ceased, and the rest of the leaves were covered with a miscellaneous collection of scraps of paper and highly coloured pictures, pasted in quite at haphazard and with more decision than neatness.

On the flyleaf was inscribed the words—

Mary Verroll, from her mother, January 1, 1877." and underneath, in the same childish hand which had filled the first few pages—

"Mama has promised me a florin if I keep my journal for a year."

The promise Mama had evidently never been disposed upon to fulfil. Babette, who had been in her childhood more interested in the pictures than in the writing, reading the first few entries with attention.

"Oh, it is curious!" she exclaimed. "Chérie, my mother also went to London!"

But Petite Mère was preoccupied, and made no reply, and the girl continued reading to herself—

"January 2, 1877. Went with Mama to Madame Hussaud's to see the wax figures.

"January 3. Went with Mama to see the beasts in Regent's Park.—Chérie, what sort of beasts are there in Regent's Park?" asked Babette curiously.

"Comment?" inquired Petite Mère absently.

"January 4. Mama took me to see the church where she was married. Why is Papa never with us now? He is staying so long in Paris. Mama says that we shall go to him presently. We wished so much that he had been with us to-day. The church stands in Smithfield, close to the spot where the martyrs were burnt at the stake. It is very curious and ancient and very dark, and the houses all round it are very old. The man in charge was very civil and explained a great deal to us, and I heard the blacksmith working in the church. I saw Mama's name in the big book where they write the marriages. Her name before she married was Prudence Eager, and she married Papa—

"Ah! voilà!" said Petite Mère suddenly. "At last I find what I have sought. See, my child, here is the envelope which contains all the papers we received with thee. The certificates of the marriage of thy parents, John Stewart Vincent and Mary Verroll, also that of thy baptism. Here is the address of the lawyers, and on this piece of paper I have written the date of thy coming to us. It may be that the lawyers will wish to see these. The letters of Madame Menoux and Monsieur le Pasteur thou hast already, n'est-ce pas?"

"I have them safely. Chérie, may I not also take the old scrapbook? I think I would like to take it."

"But certainly; is it not thine?"

Petite Mère opened a small drawer and took from it a piece of folded paper.

"See, I have something to show thee, Mignonne. This that thou seest here is money—English money. It is a note for five pounds sterling. I give it thee—I will that thou take it. Thou must keep it very safely, but always must thou understand that it is not to be spent. Dost thou hear?"

"I hear, Petite Mère," said Babette wonderingly. "But, truly, I have sufficient money—"

"This is not thy money," Petite Mère spoke earnestly, almost sternly. "I give it thee for one object and one alone—it is this: If by any evil chance, which the good

God forbid, thou shouldst find misfortune—if thy fortune is not to be obtained, or if thou art in trouble, this money is for thy return, and for nothing else. It is not, for example, to be used to keep thee for a certain time, while awaiting this or that—not even if thou art certain that the waiting will be short. It is for thy ticket and the cost of thy journey. It is sufficient to bring thee from any part of England where thou mayst find thyself. Promise me, Mignonne, that for no other purpose shall this note be changed, so shall I rest quiet in the knowledge that thou art secure—that in any case thou hast the means to return to thy Petite Mère. Thou wilt promise?”

“Indeed, indeed, I will promise; rest assured that the money is always thine, it is a trust, n'est-ce pas?”

“It is a trust,” repeated the old woman solemnly, “for the rest it is to the good God that I commend thee. Shall He Who cherishes the little birds not cherish my little loved one? Surely! Also, thou wilt remember the counsels of my Joseph—so thou wilt be wise, and in God’s care, secure. But go, my child, sew this envelope safely inside thy bodice—the bodice of the dress thou wilt wear to-morrow, so shall I be sure that all is well.”

CHAPTER VII

THE SAILING OF THE *ARGOSY*

"Youth! Youth! How buoyant are thy hopes,
They turn
Like marigolds towards the sunny side."

JEAN INGELOW.

THE first stage of the journey was over, the second just commencing, and as the steady throb, throb of the engines and the sound of rushing water fell on the girl's ears, she realized that there, with the land that was fast disappearing before her eyes, she left also, as it were, her own identity. Babette, Mignonne, Little Cabbage existed no longer, and in her place stood Barbara Claudia Vincent, Englishwoman!

The *Argosy* had started, the great adventure had begun! and with the exhilaration of the sea, and the tang of the fresh salt air upon her face, her spirits rose, in spite of all!

Oh, the unbounded confidence, the utter fearlessness of youth! a priceless possession of which the years rob us only too surely as they pass, and what do they give us in return? Experience—saddest of time's gifts! Wisdom?—perhaps a little—and caution and creeping fears.

Barbara Claudia Vincent gave no thought to the toll of the passing years as she stood leaning against the rail, a slight figure in a neat grey travelling coat, and a small black hat round which she had wound a veil of grey gauze. The veil was thrown back from her face, and a few curls, escaped from its bondage, were blown this way and that by the ever-increasing breeze. Her grey eyes were fixed on the restless water.

The sun was shining; but a few clouds overhead, the

advance guard of a great mass in the horizon seemed harbingers of coming storm.

Presently voices attracted her attention: so far, she had hardly noticed that there were other passengers on board, so engrossed had she been in her own thoughts. Two girls walked past her, and then stopped not far from where she stood. Barbara watched them with interest—they were English, so much was evident. Their looks, their carriage, and above all their clothes betrayed their nationality. "I hope it is not going to be rough," she heard one of them say, rather anxiously.

"Oh, no!" answered the other lightly, "it's simply ripping."

"Ripping!" repeated Barbara to herself, "what is that, then? A word I do not know," and then all at once it struck her that it would be pleasant to know girls like these, so pretty and cheerful, to know their daily life, and be friends with them. Where did they live? she wondered, and what were their interests? Did they go to balls and parties, such as she had read of? How did they pass their time? Did they wear evening dresses, cut low like the ladies in the fashion books? She had never possessed a real evening dress. It must feel strange. She had always understood that English girls of her age spent much time in games—games which she had never seen, but which *Petite Mère* had attempted to describe. From her description they sounded rough and not very amusing, but doubtless that was not so in reality—truly she had much to see and learn!

Presently an elderly lady, presumably their mother, joined them, and they all three walked away together.

The sight of the two girls afforded her food for thought, she, who in all her life, had known no playmates of her own age. In this new life which was coming she would make new friends—the idea was delightful. Then, quite suddenly, she was recalled to the present in a moment by something striking her full in the face. It proved to be nothing more alarming than a sheet of newspaper flying in the wind, but for a second

she was startled. Releasing herself hastily from its enveloping folds, she looked up to meet the eyes of a man who stood before her.

"I beg you ten thousand pardons," he said, rather gruffly, "a most stupid accident—the wind tore it from my hand."

"Do not mention it, Monsieur," she said, speaking instinctively in French. "It is of no consequence."

She handed him his paper as she spoke, and he raised his cap and walked away. Barbara glanced at his retreating figure, struggling with the mirth which bubbled up within her. "What an absurdity!" she thought. "My first words with an Englishman after an introduction by the *Petit Journal*! I must really remember to speak French no more! I am English! English! English! He is not good-looking, no, certainly not, but he has kind eyes, also he is rather old—his hair is turning grey. Truly these Englishmen are solemn! I have always heard so. Now a Frenchman would have laughed outright at such a ridiculous episode, but not so!—he never even smiled! What an extraordinary coat he wears! never have I seen one cut in such a curious fashion, with so many seams on the shoulders! but he walks well—a little as if the whole world belonged to him!"

When a couple of hours later she descended to the saloon in search of a cup of tea, she was ushered to a seat, and found herself next to "the newspaper man," as she named him in her own mind. He was engaged in a political discussion with his neighbour, and Barbara listened with interest, although much that she heard was Greek to her. Tariff Reform and Imperial Preference were something quite unknown.

"He is still solemn," she thought, with amusement. The friends of Père Joseph when discussing the affairs of the nation had been wont to become more than a little excited, and to make considerable use of gesture by way of emphasizing their statements and impressing their opinions on their hearers, but not so these Englishmen. Although they were undoubtedly arguing from different

sides of the question, they did so coolly and quietly, and they neither raised their voices nor gesticulated.

Barbara gazed longingly at the sugar, which was reposing just out of her reach, and wondered if she could venture to ask for it. She had just decided to be courageous when the newspaper man turned towards her.

"Will you give me the sugar, if you please?" she said shyly.

"I beg your pardon," he returned, passing it as he spoke. Then he added, "We shall be in in good time if this wind continues."

"It is blowing strongly now," she said, thanking him.

"This is a good boat; I have crossed in her before. Do you know this route?" he asked casually, as though he felt it incumbent on him to make some polite conversation.

"No, it is the first time I travel. It is new to me."

"Your first visit to England?"

"Yes, my first visit." Barbara did not think it necessary to explain that she imagined she had been in her native country in childhood, and her neighbour could apparently think of nothing further to say, so they relapsed into a silence which lasted till she left the table.

She came up on deck to find that the sun had disappeared, and a cold shower of rain was falling. She selected a sheltered corner and sat down, wondering how soon she would see the shores of England, and what Petite Mère was doing now. Had she remembered to feed the new batch of chickens which had hatched out only yesterday? Had Cléopâtre trotted home without one of her evil humours? Poor Petite Mère! she was not fond of driving Cléopâtre! But now she would have to do so, since Babette was no longer with her, and nothing on earth would have induced Melanie to undertake the task. Melanie never even got into the little cart, if she could possibly avoid it. When she had found her fortune, she would buy a pony, a docile animal, who would not be prone to humours, and perhaps a new little cart, with leather cushions and bright-red wheels, like one she had seen on her last visit to

Fécamp. The tears welled in her eyes at the thought of all so dear and so familiar that she left behind, and she blinked them away, and turned her mind resolutely from the past to the future. She was going to England! She strained her eyes into the cold wet haze, and presently she was rewarded by the sight of high cliffs under a lowering leaden sky. Decidedly her country was not greeting her with any overwhelming display of welcome, so far as the weather was concerned!

At last, her spirits damped by the dismal outlook, she took her place in the line of passengers, and the process of disembarkation began.

A civil porter took charge of her, found her luggage, and finally showed her to a seat in a second-class carriage reserved for the use of ladies only, and informed her that the train would start in ten minutes.

She felt very lost and lonely as she stood on the platform watching the busy scene. It all seemed so strange: every detail was so different to everything she had ever seen before. She did not even understand the words she heard spoken, unless they chanced to be very clearly pronounced. That man in the smart uniform over there, with the silver buttons and the curious helmet, must be a policeman. Petite Mère had told her about the English policeman, and how she could always appeal to them in any difficulty—they were always polite to foreigners. And Babette had laughingly said that she was no foreigner! Now she felt surprisingly foreign and strange!

The bookstall with its display of papers was interesting, all English papers! She would have liked to have bought one, but feared to lose her seat if she moved from the carriage door.

Presently she saw "the newspaper man" walk up, throw down a coin, and possess himself of a bundle of literature, then he turned back towards the train, passing quite close to her. Possibly something in the girl's attitude struck him, she looked young to be travelling alone, and rather forlorn, for he hesitated, and then stopped.

"Can I be of any service?" he asked shortly. "Any information you want, about luggage or anything?"

"I shall be glad to know if this train goes direct to London, or will it be necessary for me to change?"

"Oh, no, no change! this train runs straight up. You get to London, Victoria, that is, at seven o'clock. You have friends in London, I suppose; they will meet you?"

"No," she said, "I have not friends in London, but all is arranged, thank you." And then feeling instinctively that his inquiry was kindly meant, she added, "I am not at all nervous travelling alone, although this is my first——"

Alas! for Petite Mère's boast! Alas! for Barbara's thorough knowledge of the English language! She stammered, hesitated, failed to find the word she needed, and then changed the phrasing of her sentence. Looking at him with frank grey eyes, "I am an adventuress!" she said.

Then a warning whistle sounded, an official stepped forward, the train was on the point of starting. As she sprang into her seat the man hurried off to his own compartment, without vouchsafing any reply to this astounding statement!

Barbara watched the flying landscape until the gathering dusk hid it from view. It was quite dark when she reached London, and her first impression of the Metropolis was a confusion of bright lights and a Babel of strange sounds. She longed for daylight, that she might see her land of promise as it really was, but tonight all was indistinct, blurred by the darkness and the rain.

The Bourbon Hotel, situated in an obscure street in Pimlico, was doubtless, as Madame Menoux had said, most respectable, but it was certainly more than a little dingy.

The wife of the proprietor proved to be a kind, if somewhat voluble Frenchwoman, who was only too delighted to welcome a visitor from her own country. She was evidently very proud of her establishment, and

insisted on showing Barbara all the glories of the public rooms, which appeared intolerably stuffy and heavy with lack of air and the odours of food, past and present. Finally, she conducted her to a small bedroom on the third floor, explaining, as she flung open the door, that she had many other and more luxurious apartments, but that Mademoiselle had expressly stated that she desired something not too expensive, to which Barbara readily assented. In reply to the good woman's offer of food, she asked for a cup of soup, saying that having been travelling all day she was fatigued, and would prefer to go to bed very soon.

Once alone, she sat down on the edge of the bed and surveyed her surroundings. A faded drab paper, with an almost obliterated design, covered the walls—two chairs, a small painted chest of drawers on which stood a looking-glass, a washstand and the bed completed the furniture. There was a worn carpet on the floor, and before the window hung two stiff lace curtains, which had presumably once been white. The blind was down, all was clearly revealed in undisguised cheerlessness by the light of one flaring gas jet, innocent of globe or shade. She walked to the window, but could distinguish nothing in the darkness.

The cup of soup revived her considerably, and while she unpacked a few necessaries, she considered her plan of campaign for the morrow. She decided that eleven o'clock would be the most suitable time for the lawyers. The address with her precious papers was safe in its hiding-place, and she drew it out and consulted it.

“MESSRS. BOLT AND LAWRENCE,
“240 *Lincoln's Inn Fields.*”

Was that far off? She could not tell. It would be best, however, to take a cab. She would start at about half-past ten, that would allow her plenty of time.

Should she write to Petite Mère? No, not to-night. She would do that in the morning and post it on her way out. Poor little Petite Mère, and Melanie, all

alone, thinking of her, as she thought of them, with longing.

After she had been to the lawyers she would go and see the shops, and find some presents to send them, something beautiful, but at the same time useful. She would like to get a coat for Petite Mère, a warm, comfortable coat, with, if possible, a fur collar. Petite Mère's old one was almost threadbare, and she would be so delighted to have a new one. And what for Melanie? That was a more difficult matter, since Melanie seldom went beyond the garden, and was not given to self-adornment. But doubtless there would be many lovely things, and when it came to the point, the choice would not be difficult.

After she got into bed she lay awake for some time listening to the strange sounds in the street, moving restlessly from side to side, acutely conscious of the lumps in the mattress, which felt as though it were filled with potatoes, or even with stones! She missed the soft feathers to which she was accustomed, and, above all, she missed the tender "Good-night"—the kind ministrations which had been hers from childhood.

But at last sleep came—the sound, untroubled sleep of healthy girlhood.

So ended the first day of the great adventure.

CHAPTER VIII

BLUE ROSES

"Experience teaches slowly, and at the cost of mistakes."

FROUDE.

THE next morning Barbara awoke with a start. She gazed round her in surprise. What catastrophe had stripped her room of its pretty wallpaper with its bunched pink roses, and left it drab and bare? What could be the reason of that terrible noise, like the continuous roll of thunder, accompanied by the tramp of myriad feet?

And then suddenly she remembered that this was London! She sprang out of bed and ran barefoot to the window. Her hasty pull at the blind brought it tumbling on to her head, and many efforts were required before she succeeded in opening the window, which was as stiff as though it had not been raised for months; and indeed, from the atmosphere of the room, she thought it probable that this was actually the case. A breath of welcome air brought in with it such a whirl of smuts and dust that for a second she drew back in dismay. What a dirty place! They were then not over-careful as to cleanliness, these people of London!

She peeped out, keenly anxious for her first sight of the great city, but drew back, disappointed. The view was not extensive—just a straight brown wall and above it a series of roofs, surmounted by regiments of chimney-pots of every shape and size.

Small wonder there were smuts! In the gutter of the nearest roof a couple of sparrows were fighting over a straw, arguing and chattering in their struggle for victory. A little ripple of laughter broke from the girl's lips, the anger of the tiny birds seemed so utterly out of proportion to their size. They were the only sign

of life. Overhead a faint yellow glow seemed to indicate that the sun was not far off, and that it was making a gallant attempt to pierce the grey smoky pall which shrouded everything. Not a scrap of blue sky was to be seen, not at any rate as far as she could see, but that in truth was not very far. All was drab and grey and dingy.

"No trees!" she mused, "nothing but roofs and chimney-pots; it seems droll, but perhaps in the quarter where the lawyers live it will be otherwise. Lincoln's Inn Fields sounds like the country. I should have supposed that for convenience in their business they would live in a central part of the city."

After some reflection she decided to put on her best coat and skirt. It was new, and it seemed almost a sin to expose it to the dust and dirt, but, on the other hand, the enormous importance of the coming interview demanded suitable attire. As for her hat, why the one she had travelled in must serve. Her best one was trimmed with a white feather, and she ruefully realized that one day in this atmosphere would prove its ruin. No, the feather should be reserved for her visit to Mrs. Arkwright, perhaps even for her introduction to pretty English girls like those she had seen on the boat yesterday.

This momentous question once settled, she dressed herself hastily. Taking the precious papers from beneath the pillow where she had placed them the night before, she stowed them carefully in the same place as yesterday—inside her bodice. To no handbag or pocket would she entrust them. And then, her preparations concluded, she sat down to write her promised letter home.

It was not very long, but it was loving and hopeful. Up to the present she had met with no difficulties—all had gone well. She wrote of the journey and the strangeness of it. She could at present say little of London, but her next letters should fully describe its wonders. She sent a caress to Cléopâtre and Paul and Virginie, and affectionate messages to kind old Melanie,

and all the love of her heart to Petite Mère. This done she descended in search of coffee.

An hour later a servant announced that the carriage Mademoiselle had commanded awaited her. It proved to be a dilapidated four-wheeler with a most dejected horse. After having given the address to the driver, Barbara gathered up her skirts and stepped inside. This was decidedly out of keeping with the occasion, she thought, but alas! she had no fairy godmother to wave a magic wand and summon a splendid equipage like that of Cinderella in the nursery tale, so she must perforce do without. Small matter, after all, so that she reached her destination!

She tried to prepare herself—to rehearse the speech by which she would introduce herself, to imagine the lawyer's reply, and so on. She raised her hand from time to time to assure herself of the safety of her papers, proof of her identity would surely be necessary. Altogether her thoughts were so engrossing that she saw little of the streets through which she passed, and was quite surprised when the cab drew up with a jerk. Not in the country, by any means, but still there were some trees.

She got out and questioned the driver. Was he sure that this was Lincoln's Inn Fields? "Oh yes, that was it right enough. There it was written up at the corner. The lady could see for herself. There was No. 240 on the door." So she paid him, and he drove away.

She walked up a few steps into a little entry where names printed on a board indicated the different firms whose offices were located within. She scanned it eagerly, once—twice.

Bolt—there was no such name. But Lawrence—ah, there was Lawrence; Lawrence and Green, second floor. But Bolt and Lawrence were the people she sought! Never mind, she would inquire. Mounting to the second floor she found a door marked "Messrs. Lawrence and Green, solicitors." Just as she was in the act of ringing the bell the door opened, and a boy emerged.

"Messrs. Lawrence," she began.

"Inquiries first door on the left," he called hurriedly as he passed, and with that he was gone, swinging down the stairs two steps at a time.

Barbara gathered up her courage, which seemed to be most unaccountably failing her, and knocked at the door he had indicated.

A man, evidently a clerk, appeared, and she explained her errand.

"Perhaps you had better speak to Mr. Lawrence," he answered civilly. "If you will take a seat I will inquire if he can see you. What name, please?"

Barbara sat down and in a few moments he returned.

"Will you step this way, please?" he said, and almost immediately she found herself entering a long narrow room. At a table under the window at the far end sat a man, who rose as she approached. He was small and bowed, with white hair, and he wore spectacles.

"Good-morning," he said. "You wished to see me? Please be seated."

Barbara took the chair beside the writing-table, and he resumed his seat.

"I have called to see Messrs. Bolt and Lawrence," she began. "They have—I think—information for me."

"I am Mr. Lawrence," he replied. "The name of the firm has been changed for many years. What was the nature of the information you desired?"

Barbara hesitated. She found the question rather hard to answer. "My name is Vincent—Barbara Claudia Vincent. My father was John Stewart Vincent. Perhaps you remember his name?"

"Vincent!" he repeated thoughtfully; then he shook his head. "No, we have no client of that name."

"It was understood that should any difficulty arise Messrs. Bolt and Lawrence were to be communicated with. I am now one-and-twenty."

Mr. Lawrence looked at her carefully, and then, taking off his spectacles, he polished them carefully with his pocket handkerchief.

"I am afraid I am quite at a loss," he said. "Will you tell me a little more?"

And then, in halting phrases, Barbara told her story. It did not take long, for when it came to the telling there was painfully little to say.

"Now," said the lawyer, when she had finished, "let me just see that I understand you rightly. You were left when a child of seven with guardians. Your father's name was John Stewart Vincent."

"Yes," cried Barbara eagerly, "I can prove it," and as she spoke she raised her hand to draw out the papers.

"I do not doubt that for a moment. Never mind it for the present. Your guardians were informed that in any difficulty they were to write to us?"

"To Messrs. Bolt and Lawrence."

"That was the old firm. Mr. Bolt has been dead for three years. And you say that it was understood that at the age of twenty-one there would be a fortune awaiting you? During all these years they have never written. How was that?"

"There was no necessity. The money was paid."

"What money?"

"The money for my maintenance."

"And now?"

"It has ceased. For two years it has not come, and so, instead of writing——"

"You came yourself?" He nodded kindly. "But I am sorry to tell you that we know nothing of your affairs whatever."

Barbara lifted a white face and moistened her dry lips. A great dread was slowly but surely arising in her mind. She fought it with all her might; surely the firm must know all about her. Perhaps it was only that this old gentleman did not remember.

"Perhaps you have forgotten——" she began desperately.

"No, I am afraid not."

He rose, and, crossing to the fireplace, he rang a bell. The clerk appeared in answer to his summons.

"Jervis, have the name Vincent looked up. It may be fifteen or twenty years ago."

Then he turned again to the girl. "I have too good a memory to have forgotten, I fear. Now tell me, what more do you know about your father?"

"Nothing," she faltered.

"From whom did your guardians receive you?"

"From my guardian's brother, Monsieur Georges Maurice, an advocate in Paris. My guardians always understood that it was my father who had instructed Monsieur Georges to place me in their charge."

"But you do not know for certain? It might have been your uncle or your grandfather."

"I am sure Monsieur Georges Maurice said it was my father."

"Why do you not ask him?"

"He is dead."

"You have absolutely no papers? . . ."

"Yes, yes," she cried. "I have papers. I have that of my baptism and—"

The lawyer held up his hand. "I mean that you have absolutely no papers relating to any sum of money to which you are entitled at the age of twenty-one?"

"No."

"You do not know whether your father is still alive?"

"No."

"Or whether he ever possessed money?"

"He must have possessed money," said Barbara shrewdly, "since he sent us some every year."

"But you have no proof that it was he who sent it—it might well have been some one else. Do you know of any living relative at the moment?"

"No."

There was a long pause—a silence which Barbara was unable to break. Somewhere in her brain a little pulse was throbbing with maddening regularity. It reminded her of the screw yesterday. Bump, bump, bumpity, bump. The lawyer sat diligently polishing his spectacles.

"What made you decide to come?" he asked at last.

"Monsieur Maurice, my guardian, died a few years ago. His widow is very poor—the money was not paid. Also I was twenty-one, and there was this matter of my fortune," she said simply.

"Which you expected to find here?" asked Mr. Lawrence dryly.

Barbara did not answer.

At last the clerk returned, but Barbara never heard his report. She seemed to have known for ages what it must be.

"You see," Mr. Lawrence's voice reached her as if from a great distance, "I was right. I rather pride myself on my excellent memory. I knew that during my connection with the firm, and it is a long one, we have had no client of the name of Vincent. It is possible, of course, that your father was a personal friend of Mr. Bolt. That I cannot say. Now, the question remains, what are you going to do? Your case is briefly this: you know your father's name and nothing else. You do not even know where he resided. We are at your service, of course, should you desire to institute inquiries, but—" he hesitated, "I must tell you that it would be a matter involving considerable expenditure. You could, of course, instruct a firm who make a business of such investigations."

"It would be a matter of much money?"

"It would be a matter of considerable expense," he repeated. "Of course I do not know what means you have at your disposal, but from what you have told me, I gather that they are limited. If, however, you are in a position to spend, say, a few hundred pounds in tracing a man whose whereabouts are quite unknown, well and good. But I cannot advise you to do so unless you have the money to play with. You do not know whether your father is alive. One might almost be safe in presuming that he is dead, for if alive, you would surely have heard of him, or at any rate the allowance would have been paid as usual. Nor have you any proof that there is money awaiting you. You

risk what you have in order to seek a fortune which is more than likely non-existent. I don't say you will not find many people willing to undertake the search and more than willing to take your money, but my advice to you is, keep it in your pocket, my dear young lady, and return to your guardian."

He stood up and held out his hand, as if to intimate that the interview was over; he could do no more.

Mechanically Barbara thanked him, and then, holding her head very high, walked out of the room. A sense of dizziness was coming over her, and with it a longing to escape.

She ran down the stairs at a pace which would have humbled the heart of the office boy, had he been there to see, for up to the present he prided himself on holding the record for speed, and she was just flying out of the door when she encountered a lady on the point of entering.

Why is it that when two people meet, and are each only too anxious to stand aside and allow the other to pass, that they both invariably step in the same direction? I cannot tell, but it often happens, as it did on this occasion, that you dance a sort of reluctant *chassé croisé* with an equally reluctant partner.

During the few seconds occupied in this performance a vision of blue roses swam before Barbara's eyes. The whole world seemed full of them. In truth they were but a huge bunch which adorned the lady's hat, but as Barbara was standing on a higher step they were exactly in her line of sight. Her face had been white and strained, but now a vivid flush rose and stained it from throat to temples. *Blue Roses!* Again she heard Père Joseph's familiar voice—

"It is vain to seek blue roses, my child. They grow not in this world of ours."

And Barbara fled from the sight of them.

Her one conscious feeling was shame—shame that she should have been such a fool, such an imbecile, as to embark on such a venture without evidence, without reliable information! To imagine that fortunes were

to be had for the asking, and not to have realized that the whole expedition was nothing more or less than preposterous folly. Ignorant, credulous fool that she had been!

Surely she, with all Père Joseph's training and wisdom to guide her, ought to have known better.

It was all very well for Petite Mère in her gentle simplicity, her sweet unworldliness, to suppose that her child must necessarily be successful in anything that she undertook. Petite Mère, who believed so implicitly in mankind and the worth of their intentions. But she herself should have known better.

By good luck the lawyer had been kind. He had refrained from telling her in so many words that she was the fool he must have thought her.

Her fortune! Again the red surged into her face at the recollection of his question. "Which you expected to find here?"

She asked herself fiercely: "What was it, then, that I expected?" Often in days to come she asked herself the same question. Was the lawyer to produce a sack of gold and hand it to her with a bow, saying: "Miss Vincent, your fortune, if you please!" She really did not know, she had never pictured anything in detail; she had merely come to find the fortune, which, in the words of her song, "would not come to her."

She could hardly have blamed the man if he had laughed outright, but he had been kind—far kinder than she had deserved. He had made it quite clear to her that her expectations were vain and absurd. There was no fortune, that was the end of it. Not for one second did she contemplate any search for her father: in the first place she had no money to spend on it, and in the second she was not sure that she had any wish to find a parent whom she did not know—who was merely a name to her. It was the money she desired and the happiness it would have brought to Petite Mère.

On one thing she was determined: she would never speak of her fortune again; she would never mention

it—she would try not even to think of it; she would bury the thought here and now, and raise over it a monument to the memory of a colossal mistake as a warning against vain longings in the future.

Then Mr. Lawrence's last words returned to her mind: "My advice is to keep your money in your pocket, and return to your guardian," and Barbara fell with a gasp from the region of fancy on to the hard rock of solid fact.

The first half of the injunction might be difficult to follow: the second was impossible. Return to Petite Mère with empty hands, and, by the same token, an empty pocket, she could not. What was she going to do? She summoned all her common-sense to meet the situation.

She now became aware that in her agitation she had been walking rapidly, whether for five minutes or an hour she could not say, round and round the great square of Lincoln's Inn Fields. Seeing a vacant seat, she sat down and looked about her. There were not many people about at this hour, the place was almost deserted.

A little way off, under a great plane-tree, a man was feeding the pigeons, and they crowded to him, waddling with clumsy haste over the short grass, or soaring in short graceful flights—pigeons of all colours, fawn, French grey, and blue, with the light playing here and there upon the wonderful iridescence of their neck feathers. Round them hopped the mendicant sparrows, greedily seeking for their share of the feast. Their twittering filled the air, while in the distance the hum of the busy streets rose and fell in a deep arpeggio.

Overhead the sun was still valiantly attempting to pierce the grey haze, and a few faint beams lit up the dark stems of the trees and played among the budding branches.

It was very peaceful, this oasis in the heart of a great city. Barbara's agitation faded after a time, and she was able to form her plans. Calmly and methodically she decided on her course of action. She would seek

employment at once. She would consult her landlady as to the best method of obtaining it. There was no doubt some bureau where she could go, and where she would hear of a suitable situation. It would be best to apply for a post as teacher, and with her knowledge of French it would not be hard to find. Had not Petite Mère said that French was always in demand? If necessary she could insert an advertisement in a newspaper. It was true that she had no previous experience, but, after all, every one must make a beginning. She could commence with very young children who would only require elementary instruction. She could well undertake that.

This decision once arrived at, the outlook seemed brighter. She was young and strong and willing; what better qualifications could she have?

She rose from her seat after a while, and by the aid of a friendly policeman found an omnibus which enabled her to reach her hotel without difficulty. It was only when she gained her own room that her courage gave way a little. Was it possible, she thought, as she looked round its cheerless grimy walls, that everything had altered so absolutely during the space of a few short hours? Was she indeed the same girl who had started out that same morning on such a wild goose chase? Then she had been Barbara Claudia Vincent, going with her heart beating high with hope to receive the fortune which was to ensure so much happiness, and gild all the future with the brightest gold; but now she was just little Babette, a desolate, lonely child, far away from those who loved her, a stranger in a strange land.

And this grim busy city, with its multitude of inhabitants, who were profoundly and happily ignorant of her existence, was this her land of promise? What promise did it hold out to her? None that she could see.

But her depression did not last for long; she had made a mistake, but it was now done with, finished; there should be no repinings, no "devil's Paternosters," as Père Joseph would have said.

And with the thought of him she plucked up heart again. Had he not always said that the world was full of roses? There did not seem to be any here in London, but never mind, she would still seek them, and be content with the pink if she could not find the blue.

CHAPTER IX

NEW FRIENDS

"Small cheer, and great welcome, makes a merry feast."
Comedy of Errors.

THE sun was going down in a blaze of splendour. The distant sky was a mass of flame, yellow and scarlet, as though the very heavens were flaring in some prodigious conflagration. Across it hung long, low clouds of darkest grey and purple, drifted like smoke from the burning; their edges sharply reflecting the glow behind them, so that they appeared outlined with a band of gold.

Above, where the azure of day was fading into the pallor of twilight, soft cloudlets, like rose leaves of tenderest pink and cream, floated gently on the evening air.

Molly Arkwright, who was seated near the window, looked up from her work.

"Oh, Dick! she cried. "Look! Did you ever see anything so gorgeous?"

Her husband, who was lying on a sofa, raised himself very slightly on his pillows.

"The inner side of every cloud is bright and shining,
So therefore, turn your clouds about
And always wear them inside out,
To show the lining."

quoted Molly softly. "Look at the lining there. Isn't it wonderful?"

"I suppose you wouldn't like it if I said it was a stormy sky," he said, smiling. "I never knew such a persistently hopeful little woman."

"Well, there always is a bright side, isn't there?" she insisted, with a little laugh.

"Thank God you can find it!" He lay back as he spoke, and a sound that was something like a groan broke from him.

In a moment she was on her knees beside his couch.

"Is the pain very bad to-night, old man?" she asked gently.

"Pretty stiff." His hand moved until it met hers, and clasped it closely. "Molly, have you realized that it is two years—over two years now—that I have lain here like a useless log?"

"Don't say that," she answered quickly. "You are not useless. I know it is desperately hard for you, but—you are going to be better soon."

"Do you think so? Personally, I have my doubts. Watson is a kind chap, but I fancy he is beginning to think I am hopeless, although he won't say so. Molly, it is you I am thinking of! Here I am, absolutely useless, a burden to you, who have everything to bear. You are looking so tired, my sweet! There are lines on your dear face that weren't there a few months ago; I could see them quite plainly just now when you were sitting by the window. And I, who would spare you everything, can do nothing. It is bitterly hard!"

"Dearest," she said tenderly, "don't think about me. I love to be with you and to look after you. You and the children are all my world. If only you could be free from pain I should be perfectly happy. And you mustn't say that you are useless. That last story is good—I know it is good."

"I wish I could hope that the publishers would be of the same opinion."

"They will be—you will see. And all the fine summer weather is coming now, and you will be able to be out in the garden, which will do you no end of good. Don't lose heart, my darling; you have been so wonderfully plucky. I do love you all the more for it." She laid her face down to his as she spoke. "Just think, we have each other and the children! Surely that is riches—great riches!"

"Well, my child," he said, with a touch of his usual

whimsical manner, "if you consider yourself rich in the possession of a sick husband who is most infernally cross at times, and four children with insatiable appetites, together with an income of twopence halfpenny a year, you are very easily satisfied. Forgive me, dearest; I am all to pieces to-night. If you were not an angel, you would give me the rating I deserve."

"I don't think you deserve anything of the kind," said Molly quickly. "Do you think I don't realize what it must be to you to be always in pain—never able to do as other men? There! don't let us talk about it any more. If I talk about it I shall cry, which would be most unbecoming to a middle-aged matron!"

Dick laughed outright at her droll way of speaking. "You—middle-aged! I suppose we have been married for some time, because there is irrefragable evidence to prove it; but you—you have the heart of youth, my Molly, and will have to the end of the chapter."

"After all, money doesn't always mean happiness, although I grant you that a little more would be a convenience. Still, just you think, Dickie, what we have to be thankful for. The boys are most awfully good, and Patsy—Patsy is a cherub!"

"Patsy is a cherub," he agreed. "And dear old Phil, he is a good lad, grinding away in a beastly office, instead of having a good time. He ought to be having the time of his life at Cambridge now. It is fearfully rough on him."

"It won't hurt him; he has been splendid. And, after all, it is good for boys to learn to do without luxuries; they appreciate them so much more afterwards. Of course, I don't mean to say that an office in St. Ethel's is what we should have chosen for him, any more than that the Grammar School is what we should have chosen for Lance and Tony; but it is the best we can do, so it is no use regretting it. They are good boys, and I can trust them anywhere."

"It is pretty different from what I had as a boy. I had such a good time at the old Hill and at Cambridge."

"Well, poor old dear, you have got the rough time

now, haven't you? The boys are starting with it, and they'll have all the fun later on, you see if they don't."

"Invincible optimist!" retorted her husband fondly.

Molly rose and began to tidy the room. "I'll make a fair copy of this to-morrow," she said, as she put some sheets of manuscript away in a drawer.

"I wish I could do it, but I go very slowly as yet. I can't get my right hand to work any pace."

"Oh, it won't take long. I only hope Stephen Grant won't want his typewriter back just yet; I really could not spare it."

"He's a kind fellow, Stephen, although he never says much. I wonder where he has got to? It seems a very long time since we heard of him."

"Mr. Poole told me yesterday that he had been abroad for nearly a year. I suppose Miss Leigh told him. He was on his way back from Fiddler's Green when I met him."

"Oh, well, if Stephen is in England, it won't be very long before we see him."

The door opened, and a maid-servant walked in; a buxom girl with flaming red hair and a pleasant, honest face.

"Please'm," she said, "Tom, he was passing, and seein' as how father he'd killed a pig last Monday, he's brought us a bit of loin as a present. Me an' Allus is passionately fond of pork, and, please'm, Me an' Allus was hopin' that the master might fancy a chop for supper. We could cook a chop for him as nice as nice. Me an' Allus thought as it would be a change."

Dick glanced at Molly with a twinkle in his eye.

"You are quite right, it would certainly be a change. I thank you and Alice very much."

"How nice of your brother!" said Molly.

"Please'm, he just happened to be passing, and I'm sure, when he hears that master fancied it, he'll take it very kind."

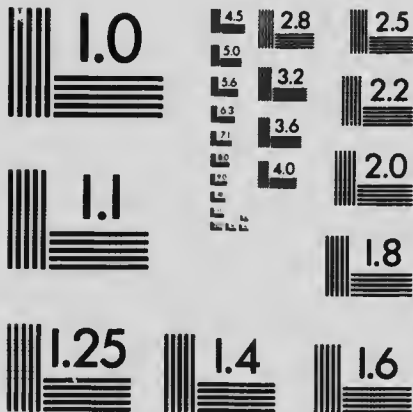
"Has Miss Patsy come in?"

"Miss Patsy's out with Master Lance and Master Tony, please'm."



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"Molly," asked Dick earnestly, as the door closed behind her, "are you passionately fond of pork?"

Molly laughed; she had a most delicious laugh, a low gurgle of merriment.

"Poor dear, what will you do? You can't possibly sup off pork, and survive! We shall have to give it to one of the boys on the sly. It really was impossible to hurt the feelings of 'Me an' Allus.' They meant it so well."

"I shall pin all my hope on Philip," he declared gaily.

"I expect that girl will be here directly," said Molly.

"What girl?" he asked.

"Barbara Vincent."

"I had forgotten all about her!"

"So had I until I had a letter from her saying that she was coming to-day. I had written to old Mademoiselle to say we should be pleased to see her at any time. Poor dear old Maddy, as we used to call her, she was awfully good to me when I was a child."

"What has the girl come over for?"

"I don't really know. Maddy said something about her having business. I don't think she has any friends in England."

At this moment there was the sound of a bell, and Molly added, "I expect she has arrived. I will go and meet her."

Dick prepared to rise. "Oh, don't get up!" she said hastily.

"Nonsense. I may be feeble, but I can still get up to greet a visitor." And he stood up as he spoke.

Dick Arkwright was a striking-looking man, in spite of the havoc that accident and illness had wrought in him. He was tall and very thin, his hair was dark, and the small, pointed beard that he wore gave him rather a foreign look. Constant suffering had drawn a network of fine lines round his eyes, but their expression was bright and alert. There was something virile, almost boyish, in his general appearance. His thin flannel coat and soft silk shirt hung loosely on his emaciated frame. His right arm was supported in a sling of black silk.

There was a sound of voices, and presently his wife returned, accompanied by Barbara. He moved forward a few steps to greet her.

"How do you do?" he said cheerily. "We are very pleased to see you. Excuse my left hand, will you?"

"It is very good of you and Mrs. Arkwright to let me come," said Barbara shyly.

"Now, Dick, lie down again," said Molly. "Miss Vincent will excuse you, I know. He is not very strong yet," she explained, "and I have to be very severe with him. How long have you been in England?"

"Only about a fortnight."

"And was it the first time you had seen London?" asked Dick. "What did you think of it?"

"Yes, the first time. It is a wonderful city."

"You don't seem to have appreciated it much," he continued, smiling. "You speak as if it had disappointed you! Tell us what your impressions were. What struck you most?"

"The first thing was the noise," said Barbara candidly. "I should never have imagined that any people could live in such a noise!"

"And yet some people love it, you know. It acts as a sort of stimulus to their brains. There is something magnetic in the whirl."

"For me, I do not think I could preserve my intelligence," said Barbara decidedly.

Molly and her husband laughed at the girl's quaint way of expressing herself.

"I must honestly confess I should like to be back there again," said Dick Arkwright, with a stifled sigh; "for a while, at all events. But I can understand your feelings if you have always lived in the country. And what else?"

"You will think it strange, doubtless," said Barbara, smiling; her shyness was fast disappearing before his friendly manner. "But the other thing was loneliness!"

"Loneliness?" he echoed.

"Yes; there were many people, truly, but they did not know me."

"I know what you mean," said Molly quickly. "You mean no one knew or cared whether you were there or not!"

"I am sure it was very stupid of me," continued Barbara, "but it absolutely frightened me, and at the last I fled. I could not endure it. I have often been quite alone in the country, many miles away, but I have never felt so alone there."

Dick nodded. "I can understand that; it would be different. However, I am glad you fled to us."

"You are very kind."

"Now that you have come, I hope it will be a long visit," said Molly kindly. "Do tell me all about Maddy—Madame Maurice, I should say. How is she?"

"I always call her Petite Mère. She is very well, and sent you many affectionate messages."

"It is so long since I have seen her; I wonder if she has altered much."

"I do not think so. She has looked just the same ever since I have known her."

"Poor Monsieur Maurice! She must have felt his death terribly!"

"It is an abiding sorrow to all who knew him," said Barbara simply. "He was an angel, Père Joseph!"

"You must tell me everything to-morrow, when you are rested."

"We are very simple people here," said Dick. "I hope you won't be bored."

Barbara looked rather mystified, and he explained, adding, "You speak most wonderfully good English."

"I thought I did," she said ruefully, "but since I have been here, there seem to be so many words that I cannot understand."

"Ah! that is slang. English as she is spoke. You'll soon get used to that," he said, laughing.

"Why, here is my Patsy," cried Molly joyfully.

A little girl entered the room and ran to her mother's side.

"Say how do you do to Miss Vincent. This is Patricia, generally known as Patsy. She is seven years

old, and I won't have you say she is small for her age, because I refuse to acknowledge it."

Barbara laughingly denied any thought of doing so, and, indeed, it would have been difficult to criticize the lovely child. A little fairy form, dressed in a much faded but spotlessly clean blue cotton frock; large blue eyes, with all the mystery and wonder of childhood in them, an aureole of sunny curls surrounding her perfect baby face.

Under her arm she clasped a huge and most particularly hideous golliwog.

"What a wonderful doll you have!" said Barbara, by way of starting the conversation.

"Jolly lucky you did not say ugly," laughed Dick. "Patsy would never have forgiven you."

"It's not a doll," said the little mite solemnly. "It's Lord Roberts. He has not been very well to-day, but the pain is better to-night. It is the wound he got in Kandahar which hurts him.

"Poor Lord Roberts!" murmured Barbara sympathetically.

Patsy drew closer and laid the suffering Lord Roberts on Barbara's knee. "You may hold him if you like. I have three more, and one day I will show them to you."

"What are their names?"

"One is Abracadabra, and one is just plain Jane, but the most beautiful of all is the Apollo Belvidere."

"He must be very beautiful."

"Yes, he is," assented Patsy; "but you cannot see him to-day, because he is in America."

"In America!" said Barbara in surprise.

"Yes he is in America; he travels a great deal. But I expect him home to-morrow. Last week he went to Japan."

"Lucky Apollo! I wish he would take me!"

"I am afraid that would be impossible," said the child politely, but quite decidedly.

"Where are the boys, Pat?" asked her father.

"Washin'," said Pat laconically.

"I am delighted to hear it," said her mother.

"We had a very nice walk. We went to hunt for primroses, but there wasn't none, and then we hunted for snails in the garden instead, till Me an' Allus said it was time to come in. Don't you think he has a very clever face?" asked Patsy, referring to the distinguished soldier who was lying on Barbara's lap, staring at the ceiling with two round, flat, white eyes.

Her mother laughed. "Miss Vincent must be tired. You sit still and talk to Daddy, while I take her upstairs."

"I hope you don't mind a small room," she said, as they entered a tiny bedroom over the hall, "but this house is so wee."

"Indeed not! I only think it is so wonderfully kind of you to welcome me like this, for I am quite a stranger to you."

"Ah! but you won't be for long. It is a delight to me to have a visitor; so few people come to see us here. You see that, owing to my husband's health, we cannot entertain at all."

"I hope he is getting better. Has he been ill for long?" asked Barbara gently.

"He had a terrible accident nearly three years ago. The motor he was in ran into another car, and he was dreadfully injured; and then, just as he was getting better, neuritis set in. We try to think he is getting stronger now." Molly spoke bravely. "He is wonderfully patient, but the pain is very great at times. That accounts for his clothes, which I feel I ought to apologize for; but on some days he can hardly bear the lightest silk to touch him. He was such a strong, active man. But I refuse to give up hope."

Barbara murmured words of sympathy. She hardly liked to offer the pity she felt to a woman she hardly knew, and Molly's simple words were very touching. "Don't go, unless you are busy," she said, as the other rose. "Do stay while I unpack. You don't know what it is to me to hear a friendly voice after so many days away from home! Have you lived here long?"

"Only about two years. We lived near London

before, in a very charming house. My husband is a barrister, and he was doing so well; but after his illness we had to move. This little house belonged to him, so we came here. It is really very pretty in the summer; but, of course, he misses his friends, and feels he is out of touch with all that is going on in the world. But in some ways it is convenient. The younger boys are at school here, and Philip—he is the eldest—goes to his work here every day."

"How old is he?"

"He is nineteen, and hugely tall."

"Is it possible? You do not look as if you could have a son so old!"

"Wait until you see him," was the laughing reply. "By the way, there is a letter and a parcel for you downstairs. You shall have them when you come down. I must fly now. Don't make too elaborate a toilet, please—just a blouse or something of the kind. I don't dress now-a-days; I only clothe myself!"

When, a little later, the party were seated round the dining-table at their evening meal, Barbara thought that she had never imagined such a delightful family. Dick Arkwright, who had entered the room leaning on the strong arm of his eldest son, was seated in an arm-chair at the head of the table. Barbara was next him, with Philip beside her, and the two younger boys, Lance and Tony, opposite. Little Patsy had gone to bed. Barbara noticed that the boys were quite without fear or constraint in the presence of their parents. The two younger ones were, it is true, rather silent, but that was chiefly because they were fully occupied in satisfying the demands of their healthy appetites; but their affection for their father and mother had been easily seen in their evening greeting. Philip, the eldest, chatted away, recounting his day's doings in most amusing fashion, while Dick, who was in excellent spirits, kept the ball of conversation merrily rolling. The fare was simple. The younger boys supped contentedly off bread and cheese, but there was a dish of hash and some potatoes on the table.

The maid had brought in the historic pork chop, and placed it proudly before her master, with the words, "Me an' Allus hopes you'll enjoy it, sir," and had departed, well pleased with some humorous speech on his part; but the invalid's fare of bread and milk was more to his liking, and Philip had proved equal to the occasion.

"I have no doubt you will be amused at our servants," said Molly, "but you will soon get used to them."

"They rule us with a rod of iron," Philip assured her.

"What is it she said?" asked PATTARA. "I could not catch it."

"Me an' Allus. She's Me, and Allus is her sister," explained the lad grammatically. "They're sort of Siamese twins, and Me does all the talking for Allus, who is dumb."

"Not really?"

"Oh, no, not really! But she isn't given a chance!"

"They are very good girls; we mustn't laugh at them," said Molly.

"But we all do," said her husband. "They'd miss it fearfully if we didn't. How was Mr. Roach to-day, Phil?"

"Oh, the old fish was not so dusty," he replied airily. "But that reminds me, I really did have some fun to-day. I don't know if you know Mrs. Sands, who lives in that big house above St. Matthew's Church—a stout old party with an enormous opinion of herself. Well, she sailed into the office and asked to see the old fish, who was out. It so happened that Mr. Wells was out too, and your humble servant was monarch of all he surveyed. I received her most politely, and regretted Mr. Roach's absence, asking if I could be of any service to her. She glared at me through a pair of starers on a long stick. 'Who are you?' she asked, with her nose in the air.

"My name is Arkwright, Madam," I replied.

"Oh!" says she, more graciously. "Any relation to the Arkwrights of Tiddlypush"—or some such place I had never heard of—"an old county family?"

"' My first cousins, Madam,' says I.

"Well, then she told me a long story about a drunken cook she had fired out, and asked me what she ought to pay her, etc., etc., and I gave her a great deal of excellent advice."

"Oh, Philip, you didn't?" cried his mother.

"Wait half a minute; the best is to come. She sailed out at last, and as she went she held out her hand. 'Good-bye, Mr. Arkwright,' she said (here Phil put on a ridiculous imitation of her manner). 'I hope I may have the pleasure of seeing you at Choicelea. I know so many of your cousins so well.'

"' Thank you,' says I, equally politely. 'By the way, are you related to the Sands of Dee, an old county family?'

"' I know them very well by name,' says she, frightfully pleased. 'And I think I met them once at Brighton.'

"With that she stepped into her family coach, and I whistled the opening bars of 'Oh, Mary, go and call the cattle home,' and simply longed for cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, or any kind of music!"

By this time the whole party were in fits of laughter at Phil's irresistibly funny way of telling the story.

"You had better go and call," said Dick at last.

"' Yes!' quoth Philip, rising to help his father into the room.

CHAPTER X

HOPES RENEWED

"Don't cross the bridge till you come to it,
Is a proverb old, and of excellent wit."

LONGFELLOW.

"MOTHER," said Lance, as they walked into the next room, "I took an awful toss off my bicycle to-day, and I am afraid my coat suffered pretty considerably."

"Not really?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes, I'm afraid so. The beastly thing skidded, and I was in the road before I knew I was falling. There must have been some motor oil or something about, because it's a regular stain. I went to the garage and got them to give me some petrol, and tried to clean it, but it was no use."

"Oh, Lance! I had so hoped that coat would last you a long time."

"It was quite an accident," replied the boy regretfully; "I am most fearfully sorry."

"Well," said Molly, stifling a sigh, "never mind, dear boy. It can't be helped. It must turn again, like Whittington, Lord Mayor of London! After my brilliant success with Phil's, I feel I am quite a tailor. I'll do it to-morrow; you must wear your Sunday coat, and be very careful of it."

"I hope you will let me help you," said Barbara quickly.

"I shall be only too pleased," was Molly's grateful reply.

"Miss Vincent," said Philip, who had been listening to the conversation, "when you know my mother better, you will learn that although she is small in stature she is great in expedients. She has a favourite poem which you will hear her quote frequently to her intelligent offspring. It is this—

"The outer side of all your clothes is bright and shining :
So therefore turn your clothes about,
And always wear them inside out,
To show the lining.'

We all turn our coats, but I would like to point out to you that we none of us will submit to be called 'Turn-coat,' being a staunchly Conservative family."

'You are quite bewildering her with your nonsense," laughed his mother.

"Not at all. Miss Vincent is, I am sure, grateful to me for explaining to her the niceties of our complicated mother tongue. But as my old nurse used to say, 'Law, Philip, how you do run on!' Come on, boys, we've all got some work to do to-night."

"Bring Miss Vincent her parcel before you go," said Molly.

"It is from home!" said Barbara, looking at it. "I think I can guess what it is. Yes, I thought so," she added, as she opened it, "some of Melanie's little cakes; do take some, all of you, please; we call them 'Aillettes d'Ange,' little wings of angels."

The delicacies were much appreciated by the boys, who soon after left the room.

"Now," said Molly smiling, "we shall be peaceful. I do want you to tell me all your news. Didn't Maddy say you came over on business?"

"Yes, I did."

"I hope it progressed favourably," said Dick, as the girl hesitated.

"It did not take very long," she answered, flushing a little at the recollection of what she now considered her stupidity. "And now I must tell you I am looking for employment."

"You want to stay in England?"

"Yes, I must stay in England—you see Petite Mère is very poor, and I cannot be at home idle."

"What sort of work do you want?"

"I will take anything I am fitted for," said Barbara simply.

"Why not teaching?"

"There seems to be some difficulty in finding it. I was so very hopeful at first, but now I begin to see it is not so easy. I went to several offices in London. If it had not been so important to me, it would have been very funny. But it was too serious to laugh at the time. I got the name of a place from some one who was stopping in the hotel, and went there. I asked rather nervously to see the principal, and was received by a most severe and very smartly dressed lady, who was sitting at a table, with a large book in front of her. She did not speak, so I said quite meekly—

" 'I desire to find a post as governess.'

" 'Previous experience?' she asked.

" 'I have no experience in teaching.'

" 'What languages?'

" 'English and French.'

" 'What diplomas do you hold?' I did not understand what she meant, so she said, 'What examinations have you passed?' To which I replied that I had passed examinations every term at the Convent where I was educated, but that was all.

" 'No State examinations?'

" 'No.'

" 'Music?'

" 'Yes,' I said, 'I can play a little, enough to teach young children.'

" 'That is no use,' she said haughtily. 'Where did you study—at what Conservatoire?'

" 'I was taught privately,' I said, thinking of funny little Monsieur Le Breton, who used to give me lessons and taught me to play 'Les Cloches de Corneville' and Rubinstein's Melody in F. I must tell you, however, that this last was in a simplified edition! But to continue—

" 'No Italian?' was her next question.

" 'No.'

"At last she got quite cross. 'You have no qualifications for the post of governess. You are more fit for a mother's help. I only accept the names of ladies with the highest qualifications. My clientele is entirely com-

posed of the nobility and gentry, who require most highly educated persons. You are of no use to me. Good-morning.'

"She made me feel very humble, and I had not the slightest idea what a mother's help was. Is it something very dreadful? But in one way she was kind, for she did not take my money, as some others did. I went to many offices, and even saw several ladies in response to advertisements which I saw in the papers, but no good came of it. I went everywhere and did all I possibly could to find something, but there seemed so many poor things doing the same thing. When I called on one lady who had advertised, there were more than twenty women there. So at last, I confess, I could not help feeling a little discouraged. Also, it was so very expensive staying at the hotel. I had not a good room, but my account at the end of a week frightened me. I can assure you that the same money would have kept us all at home for a month! Do you think that it will be more easy to find something in the country? I am ready to do anything: I am very strong, but I begin to understand that I do not know very much!"

"I am sure you know quite enough to teach little children," said Molly kindly. "I will write to my sister and one or two friends."

"Don't be in any hurry," put in Dick; "we are only too pleased to have you here. You ought to have a holiday before you settle down."

"Thank you very much; you are both more than kind, but now I feel that I ought to work as soon as possible. All my life has been a holiday, I think."

"I don't wonder that you didn't find London amusing, poor little thing," said Molly, "if you were hunting round after a post all the time."

"I enjoyed it at first, but nothing is very amusing if you are not successful, is it?"

"Well," said Dick, "my advice is to forget all about it for the present. Something will turn up, never fear."

The kindness of her new friends put fresh courage into Barbara's heart. She was ready to blame herself now

for having been too easily cast down, but in truth her time in London had been the most trying she had ever experienced. Her life had been so sheltered up to the present, and now she had been brought face to face with the grim fact that in these days something more is necessary than willingness to work. She had seen women whose faces were seared with the bitterness of hope deferred—marred by constant disappointments—pinched with actual want, in desperate need, and yet all willing and anxious to take anything that was offered them, anything that would enable them to keep body and soul together, in some semblance of gentility. Battered stragglers, limping in the van, yet fighting despairingly for a footing in the ranks of one of the most pitifully overcrowded professions. It is a sight to make the heart bleed. Small wonder if the courage of the country-reared girl failed for a while, brought face to face with the struggle—in the din, and, as she described it, the isolation of the great city. Finally, the longing for fresh air, for green fields and the kindly greeting of some one who knew her at least by name if not personally, had been too strong to be resisted. In addition there was always at the back of her mind the dread of reaching the end of her resources, and of being forced to return—a failure—to be a burden to *Petite Mère*. She had thrust the thought from her: failure she would not acknowledge till she had seen Molly Arkwright.

Now, however, all her confidence returned, and she was more than ready to believe in the truth of Dick's cheerful prophecy. Something would turn up soon.

After Philip had taken his father upstairs—it was always his privilege to help him in the evenings—Barbara and Molly sat for a long while talking, and when they went to bed, the girl found it hard to realize that she had only known her kind hostess for a few hours, so far had they advanced on the road to intimacy.

Her first act when she found herself alone was to open *Petite Mère's* letter; it was a long one, and the fine writing in the faded purple ink was not easy to read by

the light of a candle, but she pored over it, drinking in every detail of the day's doings, every trifling circumstance of the familiar life.

Of her own feelings Petite Mère said little, but it was easy to read the loving anxiety which was betrayed in every line. She longed to know that her child was safe with Molly, to whose care she was sending this letter to await arrival, although she had no idea whether business might not take her to any other part of England. It would doubtless surprise la Petite to know that Cléopâtre had evinced the most profound depression since her departure. Her mood had been all that there was of the most serious. Her appetite even had seemed to fail, and Alcibiade and his wives had grown fat and insolent. It had been a most touching state of affairs, but Petite Mère was pleased to be able to say that since yesterday her spirits had recovered somewhat, and her voice had been less often raised in piteous appeal!

Also, there had been a visitor at the Pavilion—a most unusual event!—seldom did Petite Mère receive a visit from a gentleman! It had been none other than Monsieur Jean Paul Laurent, who, departing from all the long established customs of his nation and class, had come himself to plead his cause. He had been bitterly disappointed to find that Mademoiselle Vincent had already taken her departure. He had begged Petite Mère to write and assure her of his undying devotion. He had been intensely chagrined at the rumour which he had understood was abroad, namely, that he had betrothed himself to another lady. It was quite untrue. How, indeed, could it be possible when all his heart belonged to Babette and to her alone! It was unfortunate that his feelings compelled him to run counter to the wishes of his respected mother, who, alas! could not be brought to see reason! So strained indeed had their relations become, that he had decided to leave home and take up business in Rouen. He had already found an opening which promised well for the future. If Mademoiselle Vincent would but honour him with her regard, and give him her hand, he could undertake to support

her most suitably, although modestly at first! Would Madame be so kind as to convey the matter of their conversation to Mademoiselle. For his part he would await her pleasure—a year, two years hence—when she pleased, he would still be waiting.

And much more in the same strain, all faithfully recorded by Petite Mère. "Thou seest, Mignonne," she ended, "thou canst no longer call him a downtrodden worm! His form may not be elegant, but his actions are decidedly those of a man. I tell thee I was thankful that I could with truth say that I had not thy present address, for I assure thee, that he was prepared to follow thee, even to England. I have told him plainly that his cause is hopeless, but what wilt thou? 'No,' seems to be a word he cannot understand. Also thou wilt be glad to know that the little grey hen has no less than ten chickens. The beautiful pictures have given us infinite joy. . . ."

Poor Barbara! the splendid presents for Petite Mère and Melanie had dwindled down to a packet of highly coloured postcards, bought from a starving man on the Thames Embankment, for the sum of eightpence-halfpenny. But who can gauge the value of a gift, or the pleasure it brings to the recipient!

Barbara slept that night with the precious letter tightly clasped in her hand, a bit of home in a strange land; and was happy, for she dreamed that she was floating amid rosy clouds, borne aloft on soft wings, "the little wings of angels," to where Petite Mère stood awaiting her with outstretched hands, in a bower of blue roses.

CHAPTER XI

ST. ETHEL'S

"The Past and Present here unite,
Beneath Time's flowing tide,
Like footsteps hidden by a brook
But seen on either side."

LONGFELLOW.

IN the heart of England, amid gently undulating fields and pleasant woodlands, lies the old country town of St. Etheldreda's, so named after the patron saintess of its ancient Abbey Church, and usually called, for brevity's sake, St. Ethel's. The country people go even further, and irreverently decanonizing the pious lady, talk familiarly of "Ethel's."

In days gone by, when trains were unknown and coaches plied along the great highway to the north, St. Ethel's was a place of some importance, but now-a-days the tide of commercial progress has receded, and left it stranded, as it were, in a quiet backwater. Its prosperity has declined; there may even be seen a few blades of grass between the old stones of the Market Square, a point which I record with some trepidation, being sorely afraid of wounding the tender susceptibilities of the old residents, who still consider St. Ethel's the hub of the universe.

There is about the place a leisurely old-world air, and it has a charm all its own. The broad street, with its old timbered houses and curious octagonal Court House, has remained entirely unaltered. Over the bootmaker's shop is still suspended the figure of an angel, blowing a trumpet, with ridiculously puffed-out cheeks. It has hung there longer than any one living can remember, unchanged, save for a fresh coat of gilding from time to time.

For the preservation of the ancient peace of St. Ethel's we have to thank a certain irascible old gentleman, by name Sir Jeremy Knox, who earned the gratitude of quiet folk by opposing with all his vigour the proposal to bring the railway through his property, in the middle of the last century. His motives were, it must be confessed, entirely selfish, but his memory is blessed. As he owned the greater part of the land surrounding the town, the result was that the railway station was placed at a distance of two miles from the Market Square. Let those who deplore the inconvenience of the arrangement hold their tongues and be still. To Sir Jeremy Knox we owe more than we can repay.

Round the station there has sprung up a mushroom growth of buildings—villas, artisans' houses, and, worst of all, several factories. The inhabitants of St. Ethel's proper, view this with great disfavour, and speak of the neighbourhood as "Downhill." It is on a lower level than the old town, both socially and topographically. Those who live "Downhill" are given no chance of rising in the social scale.

The ancient abbey of St. Etheldreda's, or what remains of it, I will not attempt to describe. It is well known to students of architecture of the period, and strangers may obtain a guide-book containing all particulars, for the sum of sixpence, at the little shop in Hen's Walk, where Mrs. Mumble dispenses sweets and good advice with strict impartiality. To prevent disappointment, I will say at once that it gives no information about the hen, who she was, or why she walked. The name has been the topic of many an argument, but still remains wrapped in mystery. I have heard it suggested that Henn, the well-known poet, was in the habit of pacing these uneven stones when the fire of his genius burned, but, again, it has never been conclusively proved that Henn was even aware of the existence of St. Ethel's.

To return to the Abbey Church. I will merely say that service is conducted in the chancel, the nave being in ruins, and that from its Norman tower the familiar

notes of "Home, Sweet Home," ring out, somewhat unevenly, at noon and midnight.

Saturday is market day, and for some twelve hours the old town wakes, and the air is filled with the bleating of sheep, the lowing of cattle, and the harsher voices of reluctant pigs, driven this way and that, harassed by the consciousness of impending doom. Carriers' carts, cumbersome, unwieldy vehicles on four wheels, with green or blue tilts, drawn by one or sometimes two sturdy horses, set down parties of country-women and their farm produce. Well-to-do farmers and their wives drive up in tax-carts with high-stepping cobs in the shafts, greeting their friends in cheery words spoken in the slow, rather drawling accent common to that part of the country.

I remember once during my first visit to St. Ethel's seeing an old farmer arrive on the scene, driving a white mare with, to my astonishment, her very young foal running beside her. I remarked to a by-stander that it seemed rather a shame to be working the mare. "Well," was the reply, "Matt Clarke wouldn't get home to-night, without the old mare took him!"

A cheerful shrewdness is the order of the day, but towards night it develops into rustic hilarity and jesting. Cheap-jacks ply their trade under flaring naphtha lights, evoking roars of laughter by their nimble and often caustic wit, pressing toys, lace curtains, patent medicines and what-not upon the gaping crowd. Sometimes there will be a wagon drawn up close to the water trough, flaunting a sign, "Painless Dentistry." It is fairly well patronized, but personally I have always doubted the truth of the adjective! Why have a man alongside who bangs furiously on an enormous drum at the moment of extraction, if not to drown the screams of the victim?

About half-a-mile from the Court House, on the road to Barnham, stands a small white house. If the devil had walked on his travels he would assuredly have grinned, for it boasts a double coach-house on one side, on the other is a garden, delightfully shaded in

summer, and screened from the passer-by by a tall yew hedge.

Its next door neighbour, at a distance of about a hundred yards, is a public house, bearing the curious sign, "The Case is Altered." The origin is easily explained: the license was granted about eighty years ago—before that travellers had been unable to obtain liquid refreshment until they reached the "Red Lion" at St. Ethel's.

Dick Arkwright had inherited the "White House" from an old cousin, and when illness, with its resulting misfortunes, fell on him, Molly had been thankful enough to bring him down to the quiet spot, which was all they could call their own. Previous to that, he had been making a fine income, and they had lived in comfort, taking no particular heed for the morrow, but the accident which had robbed him of health had robbed him also of the means of livelihood, and their income was sorely reduced. There was nothing for it but to face the position. The comfortable home was given up, servants were dismissed, horses were sold, and, what was harder than everything for the parents to bear, the boys could no longer remain at their expensive schools. The course of their whole life had to be changed.

Phil had refused to avail himself of an uncle's offer to enable him to continue at Harrow. He had fortunately obtained a clerkship in a solicitor's office in St. Ethel's, and was working uncomplainingly. The pay was small, but it was a help to the little household, and the lad was able to do much for his father, small services which would otherwise have fallen on his mother's overburdened shoulders. The sudden fall from comfort to poverty, the constant galling fret of the struggle to make both ends meet, must of necessity be a hard trial to a delicately nurtured woman.

It was during the first few days of Molly's life at the "White House" that, worn with nursing and harassed almost beyond endurance, she had heard a ring at the back-door. The charwoman, who was at the moment the only domestic (Molly had feared to bring old

servants to the new régime, and was seeking new ones), was busy upstairs.

"Who is there?" she called.

"Please'm, it's me," was the answer. She went to the door. A young woman, with flaming red hair and a cheerful, honest face, stood outside. A small tin-box, securely corded, was beside her on the step.

"Amelia Marsh, please'm, the house-parlourmaid. Mr. Poole sent me."

An angel from heaven could hardly have been more welcome at the moment, and Molly gladly accepted Amelia Marsh as such. She proved herself a capable, willing servant.

Then followed a period of constant trouble with cooks, until one day Amelia made the following statement—

"Please'm, you won't be troubled no more with them cooks!"

"What do you mean?" asked Molly wearily.

"Please'm, me an' Allus will manage very well. I've sent for her. Tom is a bringing of her over this very afternoon. She's my sister, and was thinkin' of changing her place. She's been livin' with Mr. Grey, the clergyman at Denbridge, and mother did feel it was time she took service with gentry."

"Can she cook?"

"Please'm, there won't be no need for you to worry. Me an' Allus can see as you're comfortable."

Alice proved to be a small edition of her sister, painfully shy and practically silent. She never faced her master or mistress, or took an order, if she could help it.

And the rule of Me an' Allus began—a rule firm and beneficent.

Amelia never spoke of herself or her sister separately. The two became one identity—"Me an' Allus,"—and all was peace. Little Patsy was their idol. However busy they were, Patsy's frocks were always neatly washed and ironed; there was always time to take Patsy for a walk; it is even believed that Patsy had a charm which loosened the tongue of the silent Allus!

There was some excitement in the family when it was

discovered that Me an' Allus had a young man. As he appeared regularly every Sunday afternoon, and walked with which ever of them happened to be "off" that day, it was impossible to gather upon which charmer he bestowed the larger part of his attention. He seemed equally pleased to see either Me or Allus.

"We walks with him," explained the speaking partner, "as it's useful to have a young man for Sundays. It gives a sort of standin' to have a young man for Sundays. But we don't 'old with 'avin' of 'im hangin' round week-days, and he knows it. Not but what he's a most respectable young man, one of them savin' sort as makes the best husbands. Not one to spend money—he ain't never given me an' Allus more than a bookay of flowers in his life—not even some trifle in the drapery line, which might have come cheap to him, seein' it's in his way of business."

A most respectable young man he certainly seemed. Punctual both at his daily work and at his weekly assignation.

All the party had seen him at different times, either when waiting for his young woman or when bringing her home again. It sometimes appeared to them that he stood a little in awe of Me an' Allus, but that might have been only fancy. He was a thin young man of medium height, with a pointed nose, and a chin that receded to almost vanishing-point, thereby causing his profile to resemble that of a teapot. He invariably wore a dark suit and a very high collar over a blue and white spotted tie. His hair was longer than the fashion which prevailed among the youth of St. Ethel's demanded; it is suspected that Me an' Allus thought it lent him a poetic air. His name was Spriggins, and he was a constant joy to Patsy, who watched eagerly for his arrival on Sundays.

Barbara had been welcomed most warmly by Me an' Allus, or, rather, by the speaking partner. "Me an' Allus are very glad to see you, miss," she said. "It'll do the mistress good to have some one to speak to. It'll take her out of herself, like. The way she keeps on

beats me! Tap, tapping on that machine half the night, after bein' on the run all day, and comin' down looking that 'oller-eyed in the morning—and master, too, it'll be more cheerful like for him havin' a visitor. Just you ask for anything you want: Me an' Allus will be pleased to oblige."

An incident happened about a week after Barbara's arrival, which established her firmly and for ever in the good graces of Me an' Allus. About six o'clock one evening, she chanced to enter the kitchen in search of something, only to discover an all-prevailing air of tragedy. Allus was crouching in a chair with an apron over her head, sobbing loudly, while her sister, standing in the centre of the small apartment, was expressing her views on the situation in heated terms.

"What is the matter?" Barbara asked.

"It's a shame! a right down shame, I call it, that I do! It's all that cat! I'd like to roast it!" she said venomously. "Me an' Allus was upstairs layin' that bit of carpet, and the fish for master's supper was 'ere on the table, egged and bread-crumbed and all, as pretty a little sole as ever I saw, and she must needs leave the door open, invitin' of that cat to come in, I call it!"

For once Allus spoke. "I thought the door was shut," she sobbed.

"And who paid you to think?" demanded her sister, with withering scorn. "An' now whatever we'll do for master's supper, I don't know. A sole, too, a thing he can't have more'n once in a blue moon, bein' that expensive."

"Have you any eggs?" suggested Barbara.

"Heggs!" repeated the girl in a tone of despair. "What is heggs? 'E's had 'em boiled, 'e's had 'em poached, 'e's had 'em scrambled, and 'e's 'ad 'em beat, over and over again, till it makes wonder he can bear to 'ear a cock crow! And what more to do with an egg except wait till it's a chicken, I don't know."

"But I do," said Barbara gaily. "Come along, and I'll show you. I want a pan and butter, and a tiny piece of onion and two eggs."

"Two?" asked Me an' Allus doubtfully.

"Yes, two; we'll be extravagant for once. Now put them all ready on the table. I'll dress early and come down five minutes before supper, and you'll see."

And see they did. An omelette of which even Melanie might have been proud! And on many subsequent occasions were Me an' Allus instructed in the art of French cookery, to their own satisfaction, and to that of the rest of the party.

CHAPTER XII

CONFIDENCES

"The rose and the thorn, sorrow and gladness, are linked together."
SAADI.

"ROME was not built in a day." Patsy, her elbows well squared, and her fingers very inky, traced the words slowly in a large and wobbling writing. Her little face was flushed, her golden hair tousled, and her brows wrinkled with anxiety.

"That's twice," she announced wearily at the end of a line.

"Only three times more," said Barbara encouragingly, "and then you will have finished."

"More haste less speed,' was much more easier," said the child; "I wonder what the next page will be. T.O.——"

"To-morrow never comes,'" read Barbara; "but never mind that, you get on with to-day's task."

"That's rediklus," declared Patsy decidedly. "'Cause to-morrow is to-day when it comes. Now there's a nasty great blot. Oh, dear!"

The mischief repaired she resumed her writing for a minute, and then asked thoughtfully, "Does some one have to-morrow before we do? and do they use to-day after we have done with it? I should like to know, but then to-day is yesterday after we have done with it; it is all very puzzling, I must ask Daddy."

"Yes," agreed Barbara, "you ask Daddy. Now go on, Patsy dear."

The house was very quiet. The faint click of a typewriter came through the closed door of the next room, where Molly was working at Dick's dictation. Through the open window came the droning voice of Me an'

Allus, singing to an obbiigato of splashing and the clattering of dishes—

“Love, Hi am lonely, years are so long,
Hi want you only, you and yer song.”

“Rome was not built in a day.” Barbara peeped over Patsy’s shoulder and sighed. For the words had an inward significance also to her, her Rome seemed to take so long in building! She had now been a month at the White House, and seemed no nearer obtaining a post than she had been on her arrival. For the first fortnight she had acted on Dick’s advice, and confident in the hope that something would turn up, had enjoyed every day as it came, serenely cheerful and gay of heart. But, alas! although, as Molly expressed it, there had been “nibbles,” no success had up to the present moment crowned their united efforts to obtain a situation.

One lady had required a knowledge of drawing, another of Latin and so on, all seemed to demand more than she could offer, and the thought of the numbers of applicants she had seen in London began to haunt Barbara. If so many well-equipped runners in the race failed, what chance had she?

Dick said it was because it was the wrong time of year—they must wait until the Easter holidays, then people would no doubt be making their arrangements for the ensuing term.

But this was exactly what she felt she could not do. It was true that her kind friends urged her to stay, but that did not alter the position. She had accepted their hospitality long enough, it was time something was settled. Perhaps she was demanding too much—she would seek for employment in a humbler sphere, anything, so long as it was honest, and she could support herself.

During the month of her stay a real friendship had ripened between Barbara and Molly, coupled on the girl’s side with a great admiration. The unfailing cheerfulness, almost light heartedness with which the older woman faced her life, her great love for her husband, her

devoted attendance on him and her patience with all the demands and moods of her young family, were quite wonderful. Little troubles were passed over as if unworthy of notice—Molly appeared to have a perfect genius for looking on the bright side. Love—of the parents for each other and their children, and of the children for their parents—was the corner-stone on which their life was built; but Barbara could not but feel that it was on Molly's shoulders that most of the burden rested. Was anything wrong?—"why, mother would do it: ask mother."

Dick was of necessity spared as much as possible, his health demanded it; Phil alone of the others was old enough to take his share, and this the lad did, nobly and loyally, turning every worry to jest, and it was only when you got to know him well that you appreciated the sterling good sense under the surface lightness.

Barbara had tried, during her visit, to render any little services she could, such as sewing and mending and helping with Patsy's lessons; she felt it impossible to make any adequate return for all the kindness and even affection which were showered upon her.

And during the time occupied by Patsy in finishing her copy, the girl made up her mind. She would wait no longer, and she would act at once. Also, she would say nothing of her intentions, for fear they should be over-ruled.

"That's done!" said Patsy at last. "Now, may I take Plain Jane out into the garden?"

"Is it her turn to-day?" asked Barbara, smiling.

"No; it's Abracadabra's really, but I am so fond of Jane, 'cause she's so plain that nobody loves her but me!"

"Oh, my sweet, have you finished?" said Molly, coming into the room, "have you done your copy quite neatly?"

"Well, it might be better; but then, again, it might be worse," answered Patsy, after the manner of *Me an' Alius*; "but it'll have to do," and with that she made her escape.

"Dick is going to rest a little," said Molly, with a sigh as she drew a basket of mending towards her and sat down to work. "He does get so dreadfully tired. It is the dictation that tries him so. If only he could write even a scribble in pencil that I could copy it would mean so much to him. He says it destroys all sequence of thought to speak it out loud. He simply cannot get used to it. He has been working much harder than he ought for the last six months, and he has only earned twenty pounds! And with his brain he could do anything!"

She let her work fall, and, throwing her arms across the table, laid her head down and burst into tears.

In a moment Barbara was beside her. "Don't cry. Please don't cry; whatever is the matter?"

But it seemed that for once Molly's fortitude had failed her, and at last the girl realized that it was better to let the tears have their course.

"I'm sorry," Molly murmured presently, drying her eyes. "I don't very often give way, do I? but for once I feel as if I must talk about it, you see; I have no one to talk to, and after a while one feels as if one must speak or die. It is all so pitiful. Dr. Watson told me yesterday that Dick ought to go to some German baths, I forget the name of the place; that the treatment did wonders for cases like his. I think he thought that I was heartless and that I wasn't paying any attention to what he said, but how could I when I knew that it was absolutely impossible? Heaven knows how much it would cost, and we can only just get along as it is! Oh, Barbara, you don't know what it is to have the being you love best in the world suffering horribly, and not to be able to give him what he ought to have."

"Is there no one who could help?" asked Barbara gently.

"I think his brother might do something, he is quite well off. He did help us at the time of Dick's accident, but he is one of those men who do kind things in a horrid sort of aggressive way, and Dick was so distressed about it. I simply could not suggest it to him again.

And then there are the children! Sweet little Patsy is all right, a child of that age is happy anywhere, and thank God we have enough to feed them; but the boys—Phil is so good, so cheerful and so uncomplaining, but what prospects has he in that office? Absolutely none! He has given up his riding and his golf and all his pleasures, he never even mentions them, and yet I know well enough how keenly he feels it. It isn't quite so bad for Lance, he has a strong nature and doesn't mind knocks, but that school is the worst thing for Tony. He is over-sensitive and rather inclined to be touchy, and he is losing all his nice disposition. But there, we won't go on with the list of bothers," she added, with determined cheerfulness. "What must you think of me, grumbling like this?"

"I think you are wonderful," said Barbara truthfully. "You always seem as happy as if you hadn't a care in the world."

"Women have to do a good deal of pretending," said Molly simply, "especially wives and mothers. Barbara," she added suddenly, with a complete change of voice, "do you think it very wrong to wish—almost to pray that some one may die?"

"What do you mean?" asked Barbara in astonishment.

"I must tell you. Dick would be angry if he knew; he never will speak of it, but—I don't think I could bear it if there wasn't a hope that some day things would be different."

"Money do you mean?"

Molly nodded. "You see, Dick has an old relation, quite a distant cousin who is well off; he has a large property in the next county, and when he dies Dick will be the next heir—at least he is by law. The old man is fearfully eccentric, almost mad, I believe; he wanders about all over the world, and no one ever knows where he is. The property, Brook Stretton is the name of it, is in fearfully bad repair, and the house almost falling down, I believe.

"He used to come home once a year on purpose to wind

a certain clock, but, I believe, he doesn't even do that now. I have never seen him, and I don't think Dick has either. His sister told me about it years ago. Of course he says it is all nonsense—that the old wretch may have been married for years, and have a large family for all any one knows, but I cannot give up hope. Barbara, do you wonder at my wishing he might die? An old man who cares so little for life that he lets the old home fall about his ears! Once when he was at home one of the cottagers came to him and asked if his roof might be repaired, as he said the rain came right in on to the bed where the children slept, and all old Brook answered was that ventilation was healthy! I believe at Brook Stretton itself there are baths in the bedrooms placed all ready to catch the water that runs through the roof!

"Honestly, believe me, I don't want it for myself! I should be as happy as the day is long in this little house if only Dicky were strong and we had enough money to give the boys a good start and for a few pleasures. Every day I look in the paper, and I say to myself, 'Old Brook may be dead!' and every day I think, 'Oh God, how long?' It is Dick's health and the means to obtain it I ask for. But—it will come some day, I know it; there is no harm in hoping. Here I sit, putting a patch in Tony's trousers or something of the kind, and hoping—hoping. Do you know, Barbara, it's very silly, but one thing above all others is to me the hardest to bear."

"What is that?" asked Barbara.

Molly laughed with an attempt at her usual gaiety. "Now you are not to laugh, I won't have you laugh! I know it is most absurd, but I really must tell you. They always say that it is the last straw that breaks the camel's back, and my last straw is—Dick's beard!"

"What do you mean?" Barbara smiled in spite of all her efforts to be grave.

"Well, you know that my Dick used to be the handsomest man I ever saw—his profile was quite perfect. I don't mean to say that I loved him for his looks! I

isn't that, but I did love to look at him. He has such a beautiful mouth and chin, and now that he has to wear that dreadful beard he is quite changed. You see, he can't shave himself, he won't let me try, and honestly I think I should be terrified, and of course we can't pay a barber to come here every day to save my feelings. But, somehow, that beard seems the culminating point of everything. It seems to be the materialization of all our troubles. Isn't it perfectly ridiculous? But, do you know, whenever I dream I always dream that everything has come right, and Dicky is running or dancing (he used to dance so perfectly), or standing tall and upright as he used to be, with a beautiful clean-shaven face! You may laugh now, as much as you like, I laugh myself, because it is such an absurd trifle, but my whole life seems overshadowed by that beard."

"It really is a very nice one," said Barbara, joining in Molly's laughter.

"I don't care," she said stubbornly. "It is all I can do not to go for it with a pair of scissors."

"That wouldn't improve it, would it?"

"No, I suppose not. Some day, when all the clouds have rolled away, I shall write a book called *The Tragedy of a Beard*. There are some people, chiefly in America, I believe, who say that if you only want a thing badly enough, and concentrate all your thoughts upon it sufficiently, that you are sure to get it. I know a woman who thought solidly for two hours a day about a motor-car. She got one in the end, but I believe it was only that her husband gave her one because he was so sick of seeing her sitting like an Egyptian mummy, gazing inwardly at a motor-car."

"She got it, that was the main point," said Barbara.

Molly nodded. "That was the main point. I shall concentrate upon Dick's beard. I wonder if it would come off! But no, on second thoughts I don't think I will—his hair might come off too, and he would be worse bald! What absolute nonsense I am talking! My dear, thank you for listening. You have acted as a sort of safety valve. I have blown off plenty of steam."

Barbara kissed her affectionately. "Thank you for telling me," she said. "I, too, will concentrate, as you call it, but only on brighter days for you."

"Perhaps on the whole that would be safer," said Molly gaily.

CHAPTER XIII

MRS. SEPTIMUS WAGHORN

"Queer cattle is women to deal with?
Lord bless ye! yer honour! They are!
I'd sooner be faced by ten navvies,
Than tackle a woman, by far!"

G. R. SIMS.

THREE days later Barbara Claudia Vincent stepped out of the gate of the "White House," and walked quickly down the road in the company of a shock-headed boy, who wheeled her trunk in a wheelbarrow.

In her heart were mingled feelings of regret and triumph, regret for the kind friends she was leaving, and triumph because at last she had obtained the first and most immediately important of her desires. For she was on her way to a situation! Not that it was anything very wonderful in the way of a start, but she would be earning something, that was the great consideration! It had come about in this way: having decided that it was impossible to wait any longer for the suitable post which failed to present itself, and that it was her duty to take anything that she could find at the earliest opportunity, she had lost no time in carrying out a certain plan, which had for some little time been simmering in her mind, and that very afternoon had sought the aid of the local registry office. Here she had been fortunate enough to interview a lady who had engaged her services! In exactly what capacity it was difficult to say—hardly that of governess, for the lady, by name Mrs. Septimus Waghorn, had been careful to state that her son, aged nine years, received his education at a superior day school in the vicinity (she had seemed anxious to impress upon Barbara the superiority of the scholastic establishment), and merely required a little

assistance with the tasks which he brought home for preparation. Light occupations, such as needlework and dusting the drawing-room, had been specified, but principally it appeared that Mrs. Septimus Waghorn desired companionship. Her husband was absent nearly all day, she wished to have some one agreeable to talk to, who would render her assistance generally in the house. This seemed to Barbara to be just the kind of post for which she was suited, and she had returned to the "White House" in excellent spirits to acquaint Molly with the arrangement.

But, rather to her disappointment, neither Molly nor Dick welcomed the tidings with the warmth she had expected. It seemed that there were social distinctions in England at which she had never even guessed.

"Who was Mrs. Septimus Waghorn? They had never heard of her! What sort of person was she? Had she engaged Barbara without any sort of references or inquiries? It seems a very strange thing to do!" To which Barbara had replied that she was at present staying with Mrs. Richard Arkwright, and that had seemed to be sufficient reference. Mrs. Waghorn had asked no further question.

Phil was able to inform them that though personally he had never met the lady, he had on several occasions spoken to her husband, who was the manager of a tannery, Downhill.

"Downhill!" cried Molly. "You can't go and live Downhill!"

"Why not?" asked Barbara innocently. It seemed to her that the exact whereabouts of her prospective employment was a matter of small importance.

Molly had not waited to reply, but had hastened to write a note to a friend, Mr. Poole, the Vicar of St. Ethel's, begging for any particulars he could give her of Mrs. Septimus Waghorn, her social position and respectability.

One of the boys had been dispatched with it on a bicycle, and had speedily returned with the answer. Mr. Poole was able to say that Mrs. Septimus Waghorn

("such a name," ejaculated Molly) was a person of undoubted respectability and of fair position, commercially, if not socially. He only knew them slightly, as they attended chapel and not church. He had never heard anything to the detriment of either Mr. or Mrs. Waghorn, and he believed them to be worthy people.

"I don't like the idea of your going to people who are not gentlefolk," said Dick. "You cannot tell what you are letting yourself in for."

"They will give me twenty pounds a year," replied Barbara contentedly; "that is quite a lot of money. I can save out of that."

"You'll be very clever, if you do!"

"I am sure I can, and I don't think I shall mind Mrs. Waghorn not being quite what you would call a lady. Some women who are bourgeoisie are very kind. Please do not try to dissuade me! It is very sweet of you, but, you see, I must do something, and it is a start."

So, finding that she was quite determined, they made no attempt to argue with her any further, but insisted that she should promise to return to them without hesitation at any time, should the place prove unsuitable.

Barbara reflected on the gist of their remarks, but would not allow herself to be daunted by them. After all, she could put up with small inconveniences, and, kind as they were, neither of them realized that her capital, which it will be remembered had never been excessive, had by this time dwindled to a microscopic trifle. In fact, she calculated, as she walked along, that by the time she paid the boy the shilling pre-arranged by Me an' Allus for the transport of her luggage, her remaining wealth would amount to exactly four shillings and fivepence-halfpenny—the five-pound note, which she held in trust, excluded, be it understood.

Even if everything was not exactly what she wished, she must endeavour at all costs to keep this employment. She was prepared to do her very best.

It was a lovely day, glowing with bright sunshine, the sort of day when hopes are high and confidence

wins an easy victory over doubts and fears, routing them completely, wiping them from the field.

The boy set down his barrow two or three times, and passed a gaudy cotton handkerchief over his brow, before resuming his progress. He was not conversationally inclined, making no reply to Barbara's suggestion that she feared the box was too heavy, so they walked on in silence.

It was a Monday, so the Market Square was deserted as they crossed it and turned to the right down the long road which leads Downhill. It was a broad road and easy of descent, as all roads proverbially are which lead in that direction. In the days of Sir Jeremy Knox, and his wordy warfare with the railway company, the valley, which is now called Downhill, must have been a pleasant spot. A stream wanders through it, or rather did wander, a shallow, serpentine stream, famous in old days for its brown-speckled trout, but now it doesn't wander any more, for it is dammed and controlled, and harnessed to utility, and supplies the motive power for various "works."

But some of the old willows which fringed its banks are still standing, one especially, hoary and bent with age, droops its head over the garden of what is called the "Mill House," droops its head as though in regret for the vanished past, for nature disturbed, for wild fowl and river folk ruthlessly expelled, and, above all, for departed peace. For all day long, and for five and a half days in the week, the air rings with the steady hum of engines and the whirr of machinery.

Also, on some days, neither so few nor so far between as might be desired, a nauseous and penetrating odour pervades the atmosphere, and reeking smoke belches out of the great chimney, obscuring all the landscape.

The "Mill House" itself is a small, square, stuccoed residence, of unredeemed ugliness, built in the days when architects seemed to have relied entirely upon a chest of drawers as their model, square and uncompromising, with the windows where the handles ought to have been. It stands a few yards back from the road,

and is divided from it by a strip of rough grass and some iron railings. Just as this time of year the laburnum, which hangs rather feebly over the gate, was in blossom, giving the house a more cheerful appearance than it possessed at other seasons.

Barbara bade the boy wait for a few minutes, and rang the bell. She heard it tinkling in the distance, but no one came in answer to the summons, so presently she rang again, with more vigour this time.

She had been told that Mrs. Waghorn kept only one servant, and she had imagined her something after the style of 'Toinette—good old 'Toinette, in her spotless apron and stiff goffered cap, but the reality in no way resembled her fancy, for after another perceptible pause the door was opened by a slatternly girl in a dirty print dress. The front of her head was adorned with a bristling row of easy curlers, and crowned by a tumbled wisp of dingy embroidery, which only extreme courtesy could have described as a cap.

"Is Mrs. Waghorn at home?"

"She's hout," was the laconic reply. "Are you the 'elp?"

"I beg your pardon?" said Barbara, who missed the point of the question.

"Are you the 'elp she's expecting?"

"I am Miss Vincent."

"Oh! you har, har you? You can come in. Left attic on top's yours." She waved a grimy hand in the direction of the staircase, and disappeared into the back region.

After some hesitation Barbara decided that the first thing to do was to collect her trunk. It had better be taken to the left attic on top! There seemed to be no one about, and the maid showed no signs of returning, so she ran upstairs, and discovered what she supposed was her room. It was small and rather dark, but was evidently prepared for her reception, clean sheets on the bed, and a clean towel on the wash-stand told her as much. She ran down again, and directed the boy to carry up her trunk. He seemed to find some difficulty

in doing so, and it ended in their carrying it up the stairs between them. This safely accomplished, she paid and dismissed him. Then she took off her coat and hat, and laid them in a cupboard, which smelt deplorably of mice, and finally stood waiting, nervously uncertain of what her next move ought to be. She was painfully anxious to make no mistakes in her new sphere, but at the moment she could do nothing, she hadn't the slightest idea what her duties were.

It was, however, not more than a few minutes before she heard a voice outside her door calling her name. She opened at once, to find Mrs. Waghorn standing on the threshold, accompanied by a small boy.

"I am sorry I wasn't in to meet you," she said fretfully. "I've been as rushed as never was, this morning. This is Clarence. Say 'Good-morning' to the lady, ducky."

Clarence was a slim boy, with very red cheeks, and large, rather protruding, light-blue eyes. His head was covered with brown curls, which hung in corkscrews far below his shoulders. Rather a nice-looking little boy, Barbara thought. He was dressed in a dark-blue tunic and knickers, with a wide and torn lace collar, and brown shoes and socks.

"Come, say 'Good-morning' to the lady," repeated his mother coaxingly, as the child hung back. "He is so shy."

Thus urged, the bashful Clarence peeped round his mother, and opening his mouth, put out his tongue to its utmost limit.

"He's so high-spirited," said his fond parent apologetically. "He'll get to know you soon. But come along down, and I'll show you round before Mr. Waghorn comes in to dinner."

Mrs. Waghorn was a woman of about forty, getting, as she herself described it, rather full in the figure. She was elaborately attired in a red silk blouse, with short sleeves and a very low neck.

She preceded Barbara down the stairs, pouring out a stream of words in a high-pitched, complaining tone.

"Wherever is that girl Violet? She's never put up those clean window curtains, as I told her! The trouble I have with servants is awful. They are so independent, they won't be spoken to. Here's the drawing-room, Miss Vincent. It hasn't been dusted yet. I haven't had a moment to call my own, and you won't catch Violet doing anything that isn't rightly her own work. There, Clarence, you run along, ducky, and don't you be late for dinner. Look at the dust! Did you ever see anything like it?"

"Would you like me to do it at once?" asked Barbara. "Will you tell me where to find a dustpan and dusters?"

The drawing-room was, in Barbara's opinion, the most hideous room she had ever seen. On the floor was a bright-green carpet with a pattern of crimson roses upon it. The wall-paper was yellow, festooned in pink poppies, while above it was a frieze, where life-sized swallows disported themselves in airy flight. A suite of furniture was upholstered in a shade of green velvet, which clashed horribly with the carpet, but the chief feature of the room was the varied assortment of knick-knacks, with which every available place was crowded. On a table in front of the window stood an erection of bamboo, supporting half-a-dozen or more small brown jars, of the kind in which cream is generally sold, in varying positions, the whole was draped with faded yellow ribbon, bows of which ornamented the neck of each jar. On either side of the table stood a drain-pipe gaily painted a brilliant blue, holding a large bunch of pampas grass, which positively showered dust as Barbara touched it.

On the mantelpiece were two yellow china cats, with very long necks, one sporting a bandage over one eye, giving it a most rakish expression. Glass vases filled with dried grasses, and a heterogeneous collection of Christmas cards, Japanese fans, and odd little insects, spiders and crabs, made out of painted cotton wool and wire. Another feature of this notable apartment was a photograph of Mr. and Mrs. Waghorn, which occupied

a prominent position on the top of the piano. It had evidently been taken some years before, and was framed in peacock-blue plush, with silver corners. The couple were represented in a country lane, Mrs. perched precariously on the top of a stile, gazing coyly at Mr., who stood beside her, leaning against a post in a nonchalant attitude, with a foolish simper on his whiskered face.

Barbara, armed with the necessary utensils, which had been found after some delay, started to work with a vigour, glad of definite occupation which promised relief from the outpourings of Mrs. Waghorn's burdened mind, but she very soon discovered that this was not to be. Two things the good lady detested, one was solitude, the other silence. Regardless of the dust, which was rising in clouds under Barbara's onslaught, she stood in the centre of the room, moving her position from time to time as it was necessary, but never ceasing to talk.

"Of course, you know we haven't always lived here. I'm used to London myself. This is a dead-alive hole, no society whatever. Of course, when my husband joined this business we had to come and live here, but my feet ache for the pavements—they really do! You know London, I suppose? What part have you lived in?"

"I have always lived in France."

"Well, I never! Not really? I've never been there myself, except for a day's trip on the *Foam* from Folkestone, but I've always admired French fashions. Perhaps you've got a blouse or two I could copy, although I must say there doesn't seem much style about you. I suppose you can cut out? Why! here it is ten minutes to one, and the table not even laid! Where is that girl Violet?"

A moment later she was calling in the hall, and Barbara heard a violent altercation between mistress and maid, which was interrupted by the advent of the master of the house, who opened the front door with his latchkey.

"Well, mother," he said, with a nervous giggle, "'ow are you?"

"I'm busy, can't you see that for yourself?" was the tart reply. "Dinner isn't ready, and there's no saying when it will be."

"What's 'appened to the girl?"

"What's happened to the girl?" repeated his wife in tones of scathing correction. "Nothing, that I know of. She merely doesn't choose to do her work. I can't do everything—how can I?"

"You'd better stop that now, Miss Vincent," she added, putting her head into the drawing-room. "You can finish it later. Where's Clarence?"

"I have not seen him," said Barbara, and Mrs. Waghorn stifled an exclamation of annoyance.

Dinner, when it arrived, proved better than Barbara had expected, from the prevailing muddle. A joint of boiled mutton and caper sauce, and a suet pudding. Clarence, who had refused to accept his mother's invitation to "let Miss Vincent wash your face and hands," sat staring at her with all his eyes, his interest being so keen that a good deal of his meal found its way on to the napkin which was tied round his neck.

"Know this part of the world?" asked Mr. Waghorn politely; he paused in his efforts to balance a straying caper on his knife blade as he spoke. He was exactly like his portrait, simper and whiskers and all.

"Not very well. I have only been here a short time."

"Miss Vincent has lived in France, and it is her first visit to England," explained his wife. "Don't slop your food, Clarence, ducky. It's a wonder to me that any one comes to this country. England isn't what it used to be."

"Ah!" said Mr. Waghorn, with a mildly facetious wink, "I know what you're up to, 'usband 'unting, that's what it is!"

"Don't be a fool!" said his wife sharply; and he subsided into silence, after a low giggle at his own wit.

Presently "Clarence, ducky" got down, in obedience to his mother's command, to ring the bell. In order to do

so, he passed behind Barbara's chair, and deftly inserted two sticky fingers down the back of her neck.

His parents made no comment, but she made up her mind to have a few words with the young gentleman later.

"Going out this afternoon?" inquired Mr. Waghorn mildly.

"How can I go out? It's Violet's day, and with all there is to be done, and all! I am toiling all the time, and no thanks at the end of it."

After dinner Barbara finished her work in the drawing-room, and then Mrs. Waghorn decreed that she should start some sewing. She fetched her work-basket, and on being given a roll of flannelette and a pattern, felt happy in the anticipation of a quiet afternoon.

But it was not to be! No sooner had she sat down than Mrs. Waghorn remembered she must have a crochet pattern. "It was in the drawing-room cupboard." After a prolonged and unsuccessful search, the girl resumed her work. Five minutes after it was, "I think you had better go and see what Clarence is doing." She found him at last, happily engaged in burying the kitten alive in the back garden. Having rescued the unfortunate animal, almost at its last gasp, she returned to Mrs. Waghorn, and ventured to point out the cruelty of the pastime.

"Well, never mind," said the lady pettishly, "he's only a child, he must have his fun! I think you had better put that work away, and see about watering the plants in the greenhouse." The greenhouse was a small lean-to next to the dining-room, and contained a few sickly ferns and aspidistras. After that it was time to get the tea.

All the rest of the day passed in the same way, and when Barbara finally reached the solitude of her own room, which was not until very late that night, she realized that she had not sat down for ten minutes all day, and yet had completed absolutely nothing. She was very tired, but still undismayed. No doubt things would go better when she was used to the life.

CHAPTER XIV

CLARENCE

"He was what nurses call a limb,
One of those small misguided creatures,
Who though their intellects are dim,
Are one too many for their teachers."

CALVERLEY.

BARBARA came down early the next morning, and at the foot of the stairs met Violet, who surveyed her from head to foot in lazy, contemplative fashion.

"Good-morning," remarked Barbara cheerfully.

Violet made no attempt to let her pass, but said thoughtfully, "I wonder 'ow long you'll stay!"

"Why?"

"Not long, I'll be bound. I've been 'ere three months, and there've been four 'elps. I wouldn't stand it myself, only it suits me plans. My young man, 'e's in the works, and, this being adjacent, it's convenient like. Now I'll just give you a friendly word." Violet dropped her voice to a confidential tone. "You stand up to 'er. If you don't, she will lead you a dog's life! The first few days I was 'ere, it was Voylet this, and Voylet that, same as it was with you yesterday, till I ups and gives 'er a piece of my mind. Put it plain, I did. 'I'm 'ere to do a bit o' cleaning and a bit o' cooking, but not to stand your tantrums,' says I. 'And since I'm speaking, I may as well 'ave you know that I won't 'ave no one poking round my kitchen—so that's flat! If you don't like it, you can take my notice; it's all the same to me!' Of course she didn't," added Violet, with a wink. "I'm a bit of a cook, I am, and she'd just about got sense enough to know when she was well off. Just you stand up to 'er! And it's the same with that boy! You 'ide 'im. You'll 'ave no peace till you do! 'E tried 'is

games on me, till me patience was fair wore out, and I very soon stopped 'em. I waited till the first time 'is ma was out, I did, and then I put the fear of me into 'im with a stick. 'E didn't 'alf catch it! I 'avn't 'ad young brothers without learning 'ow to thrash 'em, no fear! 'E don't show me no more'n the tip of 'is snub nose now! Not much!"

Barbara could not help smiling, and Violet, being now wound up, continued her oration.

"As for Wag'orn, 'e's a detile!" she said scornfully, describing the master of the house with a word with the felicitous wit of her class. "That's what 'e is! 'E's a detile! 'E don't count, no more'n if he was dead!"

This time Barbara laughed outright; she couldn't help it. She had no desire to stand gossiping, but Violet blocked her way, intent on having her say out.

"Tell me if you want anything, and I'll do my best for you," she said patronizingly; "but mind you're firm. She was sweet enough yesterday, but that won't last no more than two shakes of a cat's tail. If once she thinks she's got you, she'll give you 'ell's delight."

At this moment a door slammed violently upstairs, and Violet returned hastily to her interrupted task of whitening the front doorstep.

An hour or two later, Barbara, happening to enter her bedroom, found her dressing-table stripped of all her possessions: the little photograph of Petite Mère, the French Testament, which was a valued relic of Père Joseph, her brush, comb, hairpins, all were gone. She hunted everywhere, and finally sought Violet, who grinned in reply to her inquiry.

"You may take your oath it's that limb," she said cheerfully. "I should look in the garden if I was you."

"In the garden?" ejaculated Barbara in horrified accents.

"'E's thrown 'em out of the window, that's what 'e's done!"

And, sure enough, there lay her scattered possessions, everything breakable in fragments, and the precious book ruined by contact with the damp gravel path.

Barbara ruefully carried the remains into the house, meeting Mrs. Waghorn on the threshold.

"Whatever have you been doing? I wish you would come when you're called!" was that lady's greeting. "I don't pay you to waste your time, and you may as well know it first as last."

Barbara tried to explain, but was promptly cut short. "Now it's no use complaining to me of Clarence! I won't have it; I've enough to do without listening to your grumbling. The child's high-spirited, and the sooner you understand it the better. There's a pile of dirty blouses up on my bed; you'd better go and wash them."

When Clarence returned from school at mid-day, Barbara ventured to request him not to meddle with her property again. She spoke kindly, hoping to conciliate the child, but the only answer he vouchsafed was a mute one, in the form of his thumb pressed firmly to his nose, with all his fingers wagging derisively in the air.

The next day she discovered her umbrella cut to ribbons, and the day after that her best pair of shoes floating in a slimy pool at the bottom of the garden, irretrievably ruined. Lessons were out of the question, even had Mrs. Waghorn suggested them, which she did not, for "Clarence, ducky" never replied to any remark of hers; in fact, never spoke to her, except to peer round corners at unexpected moments, and jeer at her as "Froggy"!

No arguments could move him; to persuasions he was deaf. In the morning she felt comparatively safe from his persecutions, but when his short school hours were over Barbara lived each day in ever-increasing apprehension as to what his next effort might be. The slightest word on her part sent the child screaming to his mother, and caused a scene. Barbara tried the plan of taking no notice whatever, thinking he might tire of the campaign; but no! his resourcefulness in mischief merely increased day by day; his ingenuity in finding fresh means of torment was positively devilish—there

was no safety anywhere. Her bedroom door had no key, so that any precautions she tried to take in that direction were futile.

One night, after a day of more than usual ill-temper on the part of Mrs. Waghorn, Barbara, dispirited and desperately fatigued, climbed the stairs wearily, and sat down on the edge of her bed, to rest for a few minutes before undressing. She felt something lumpy, and on turning back the clothes found four snails and the dead body of a bird. She thought of fetching Mrs. Waghorn, but dreaded the scolding that would ensue, for she had learned that the blame for Clarence's ill-doings invariably shifted by some sleight of hand on to her shoulders. Violet seemed to think that the trouble was entirely due to Barbara's weakness. She merely repeated her former advice. "'Ide 'im. You'll get no peace till you do!"

On her first Saturday at the "Mill House," Mrs. Waghorn went out to pay a visit, accompanied, to Barbara's infinite relief, by her redoubtable offspring. She had left endless instructions as to the duties to be performed in her absence, and the girl worked hard for a couple of hours, and then put on her hat and went to the post office to despatch a parcel, as Mrs. Waghorn had directed.

This done, she strolled back along the river, rejoicing in the quiet and fresh air, thankful to be free from the buzz of the engines, which had sounded ceaselessly in her ears for nearly a week. Her head was aching, partly from sheer fatigue and partly from the effect of the smell of the tanning, which had been particularly nauseous the previous day, and to which she could not get accustomed. There were seats along the public footpath, and presently Barbara sank down on one, overwhelmed by a sudden rush of home-sickness. For the past five days she had worked incessantly, rising early and going to bed late, striving her utmost to fulfil the never-ending exactions of Mrs. Waghorn, who never gave her time to complete anything she began, and promptly scolded her for leaving things unfinished. It was impossible to satisfy her. On one or two occasions,

after some outburst of temper more violent than usual, the meek Mr. Waghorn had endeavoured to stem the torrent of his wife's fretful but vehement abuse, but his efforts only made matters worse. He was, as Violet had said, "a detail" of no account whatever.

Oh! for the sound of Petite Mère's loving voice, for the touch of her hand, for the peace and simple freedom from care of her life at Le Pavillon. Tears of loneliness and unhappiness rose in the girl's eyes at the thought of home, but she forced them back. She had no intention of giving in. Her courage still remained, shaken a little, perhaps, but not destroyed.

"Hullo, Barbara!" said a cheery voice. "I was just coming to see you, when I spied you from the bridge. Mother sent me to know how you were getting on."

"Oh, Phil," she cried, "I am so glad to see you! How is your father?"

"He wasn't so well when you left, was he? But he has picked up again now. What's the matter with you? You look pretty washed out! Why haven't you been to see us?"

"This is the first time I've been out; I've been very busy."

"Well, I suppose you'll be coming up to-morrow—Sunday afternoon?"

"I am afraid not," said Barbara sorrowfully. "I think Mrs. Waghorn is expecting friends; she told me she should want me."

"But I say, that's all rot, you know. You ought to be free on Sunday afternoons, anyway," said the boy. "Tell me, Barbara, it isn't all beer and skittles, is it?"

"Well," she answered, smiling, "it's not all quite easy, if that is what you mean."

"Why don't you chuck it?"

"Phil," she said earnestly, "I can't. I can't and won't. At least, not without having a very good try at it; and I want you to promise me not to say anything to your father and mother. Just say you have seen me, and that I send my love."

"I know perfectly well, if I told them what you look like, mother would have you out of it before you could say knife," returned Phil bluntly.

"But you will not say anything, will you?" she begged. "I really cannot afford to lose this place, and very likely it will be better when I am used to it."

"What's the trouble?"

"Oh, a lot of stupid little trifles," she said lightly. "I really don't know which is the worst," she added, smiling, "Mrs. Waghorn or the boy. But never mind; I'm going to stay."

Philip nodded. "You're plucky," he said admiringly. "All right, I won't give you away; at least, not at present. I'll come and see how things are going in a few days."

"Oh, please don't do that," she said quickly. "Indeed, you had better stay away. Mrs. Waghorn mightn't like it."

"Well, I'll see. I won't promise anything," was his only comment. They walked together to the gate of the "Mill House," and here Phil bade her good-bye, and, mounting his bicycle, rode away up the road.

How Barbara longed to go with him, for a taste of Molly's refreshing gaiety, if only for an hour.

In the hall Mrs. Waghorn was standing. "Where have you been?" she demanded.

"I went to the post office to despatch your parcel," Barbara answered quietly.

"Don't tell me. I saw you philandering down by the river. First you tell me you don't know any one in the town, and then the first time you go out you waste your time meeting a young man! Don't tell me you didn't expect to meet him! It isn't likely I should believe that!"

"You knew that Mr. and Mrs. Arkwright were my friends; it was their son to whom I spoke."

"So you say. I've only your word for it! Don't let it happen again, that's all—and don't stand wasting time now you have come in."

And so the days went on, dragging wearily one after

the other, until the end of the following week; and then the climax came.

Mrs. Waghorn announced that she was giving a luncheon party.

An old friend and her daughter were coming by train to spend the day, and Mrs. Winch, a neighbour, had been asked to meet them.

Mr. Waghorn's presence at home was commanded, and great preparations were made. A new suit had been designed for Clarence—black velvet, with a crochet collar. Barbara had toiled early and late to finish it, and had, in obedience to Mrs. Waghorn's instructions, embroidered a large C. in gold silk upon the breast. For once the lady vouchsafed a word of commendation.

"That looks all right," she said condescendingly; "you haven't done it so badly. I got the idea from *Social Snippings*. Lady Somebody's children always have them like that. It looks most genteel! You'll take care of it, won't you, Clarence, ducky?"

Saturday morning came. Mr. Waghorn left the house early, banished by his wife's incessant orders and counter orders, but promising to return punctually at one o'clock.

And then the first blow fell! A small girl, breathless with speed, and bursting with the importance of her news, announced to Violet that her young man had met with an accident. It was impossible to gather from the incoherent messenger the extent of his injuries, or, indeed, anything beyond the fact that he had been carried to the "hospital, lookin' like death!" Violet never hesitated; she dashed upstairs, and, flinging on a coat and hat, announced her immediate intention of following her swain to learn the worst for herself. In vain Mrs. Waghorn barred her exit and stormed at the girl, reminding her of the expected guests, and asking her who was to do the cooking. Violet swept her to one side. "What's that to me?"—her voice rising almost to a shriek. "'E may be lyin' dead at this moment!" And with that she flew off down the path, closely followed by the messenger.

Mrs. Waghorn sank into a chair and sobbed aloud. This really was too much! And Barbara, only too wishful to gratify her, offered her services. The offer was not very well received at first, but still, whatever her doubts as to the girl's capabilities, there was no other way out of the difficulty. It was the best she could do.

Barbara did not say that she infinitely preferred preparing the luncheon to sitting through the festivity; she had already met several of Mrs. Waghorn's friends!

For a while peace reigned. The table was laid—a strip of green crinkled paper with frilled edges adorned the centre of it, and at the corners were four little pots of ferns enveloped in the same material. The effect was so pleasing to the eye that Mrs. Waghorn became quite affable, and all went well. Barbara completed her arrangements quietly and methodically; the menu—cutlets, joint, apple tart, and savoury—presented no difficulty to her. She rather enjoyed the cooking of them, and was most anxious that all should go smoothly.

The only thing that the girl afterwards knew ought to have aroused her suspicions was the exemplary behaviour of Clarence! He played in the garden all the morning, and came at once when called, to have his hair curled, and to be arrayed in the new suit by his doting mother. At the time the danger of this state of affairs did not strike her.

The guests arrived. Mrs. Jobbings, a stout lady, and her daughter—the latter was a stylishly dressed young woman, wearing a profusion of cheap jewellery, which rattled as she moved—and Mrs. Winch, a middle-aged woman with a kindly face. Mrs. Waghorn, attired in a very tight gown of red velveteen, the neck cut lower than usual, and adorned with a row of very large pearls, received them with effusion.

She confided to them that there had been what she termed a "fracass" in the household, but that Clarence's governess had volunteered to assist. Mr. Waghorn presented himself at the right moment, and Mrs., beaming with satisfaction and unwonted good-humour, led the party into the dining-room, and they took their seats.

Clarence, his napkin tucked under his chin, his eyes cast shyly down, looked the pattern of what a well-brought-up boy should be, the joy of his mother's heart.

Mrs. Waghorn had graciously decreed that there need be no waiting; if Barbara just brought in the dishes, they would help themselves. This satisfactory arrangement prevented the necessity of her being in the dining-room for more than a few minutes at a time. She was introduced to the guests, but that was all. It is true that Mr. Waghorn mildly ventured to inquire whether Miss Vincent wasn't going to get any dinner, to which his wife replied, with cheerful mendacity, that Miss Vincent had preferred to lunch earlier!

Everything went without a hitch; the joint was roasted to a turn, the pie-crust of superlative lightness. Nothing could have been better.

Barbara had taken the precaution of placing a slice of beef and some vegetables in a hot plate on the stove; because, even if it must perforce be late, there was no reason why her meal should also be cold. For the moment she had no leisure to think of herself further.

Luncheon over, the party moved into the drawing-room, and—fatal fact—Clarence disappeared. His departure was not noticed in the hurry of the moment. Barbara made the coffee and carried it in. She was detained for a few moments in polite conversation with Mrs. Winch, who thanked her for all the trouble she had taken on their behalf; then, returning to the kitchen, she cleared a corner of the table, and prepared to satisfy her own hunger. Taking the hot plate from the stove, she laid it on the table and lifted the cover, and screamed aloud, while the cover fell clattering to the floor. There, on the hot plate, moving convulsively in expiring agony, lay—the horrid truth must be recorded—a large frog. Barbara's blood boiled—the disgusting cruelty of it made her gorge rise. At this moment she turned her head. Round the door peeped Clarence—the delight with which he viewed the success of his plot made him less cautious than usual.

"Froggy," he jeered, "here's a frog for your dinner!"

Barbara's self-control vanished. In two strides she crossed the floor, and, grabbing the astonished Clarence before he had time to escape, she caught him a resounding box on the ear with all the strength of her young arm.

Shriek after shriek rent the air. He stood, his hands clasped on both sides of his head, yelling with the full force of his lungs as if he were being killed. Mrs. Waghorn ran out of the drawing-room, followed by her alarmed husband and friends, for, indeed, it sounded as if nothing short of murder were being committed.

And after that the deluge!

CHAPTER XV

A SECOND ATTEMPT

"Who keeps one end in view makes all things serve.

ROBERT BROWNING.

It was some time before Barbara could make herself heard above the din, for Clarence, his face hidden against his mother's skirt, continued to scream with unabated vigour. Mr. Waghorn, having satisfied himself that the boy was uninjured, beat a cowardly retreat, and, seizing his hat, bolted through the front door.

At last Barbara managed to tell her story and showed the plate with its horrid remains. "He must have done it while I was in the salon with the coffee," she said indignantly; "I boxed his ears, and he well deserved it. He is making a great noise, but he isn't the least bit suffering."

"Little beast!" said Miss Jobbins, with a face of disgust; "he ought to be thrashed!"

Mrs. Waghorn had, up to the present, been occupied in trying to comfort the miscreant; but now, stuttering, almost foaming with fury, she turned upon Barbara. "You hussy!" she raged, "you impudent, good-for-nothing hussy! What do you mean by laying a hand on my child? I'll have the law of you, I will! I'll summons you for assault! I'll send for the police!"

"Come, come, Mrs. Waghorn," interrupted Mrs. Winch, endeavouring to interrupt the flow of vindictive words; "you are hardly fair to the young lady——"

But Mrs. Waghorn paid no heed. "Get you gone out of my house!" She fairly shouted the words. "This minute. With your sneaking foreign ways."

"What is the meaning of this?"

They all turned at the sound of a fresh voice, as Philip strode into their midst. For a moment even Mrs.

Waghorn was taken aback. Phil, who looked hugely tall in the low kitchen, spoke in an authoritative tone, his eyes flashing, his whole appearance masterful and determined.

Then she recommenced, but he quickly cut her short. "Thank you. I heard what you said; I should like to hear the truth from Miss Vincent."

Barbara felt like bursting into tears, and was speechless; but Mrs. Winch proved herself a friend and explained the tragedy.

Philip wasted no words. "Go upstairs and pack your things, Barbara," he said sharply. "Come home with me. You shan't stay a moment longer in this house."

And Barbara fled.

Then Mrs. Waghorn found her voice again. "And who may you be, I should like to know?" she demanded, standing with her arms akimbo and all her thin veneer of gentility departed. "And who may you be, coming into my house and ordering people about and interfering in what's not any business of yours? What have you got to do with the young lady, as you call her, although I should say the name was too good for her? What have you got to say to her? Or, perhaps," she added nastily, "I'd better not ask, eh?"

"My name is Philip Arkwright." The lad's temper was barely under control. "If you want to find me you can do so at Mr. Roach's office in the Market Place. Now I'll trouble you to give Miss Vincent the money you owe her, plus a month's payment and board in lieu of notice." He drew out a pencil and made a rapid calculation on his shirt cuff. "That's the total," he said shortly. "At once, please."

Mrs. Waghorn fumed. "I shall do no such thing, Impudence!"

"Oh yes, you will," he answered sharply. "Unless you prefer that the matter should be brought into court."

Finally, after much argument, he succeeded in obtaining payment from Mrs. Waghorn. Whether he would have, had it not been for the presence of her friends which shamed her into compliance, it is impossible to say. But when Barbara came downstairs she had only

to do as he told her, and sign the receipt, and be marched off without further parley. She was shaking from head to foot, and he placed his arm under hers to steady her. Outside the gates some men were lounging, the works being closed for the half day, and one of them returned at Phil's order to fetch the trunk, which he professed himself willing to deliver at the "White House" within an hour. As they walked along, Phil wheeling his bicycle with one hand while with the other he still guided her unsteady feet, Barbara's feelings beggared description. Disgust, anger, despair overwhelmed her! She had failed—whether by fault of her own or not, the fact remained that she had failed.

The boy showed his tact in saying no word, giving her time to recover herself as they paced slowly up the hill.

At last she spoke. "Oh, Phil," she said with a sob, "what should I have done if you had not come!"

"You'd have been all right," he said quietly. "That woman in black, whatever her name was, would have seen you through. She is a good soul, and she told me that if there was any trouble she would be glad to speak for you. She meant it kindly, I'm sure. That loathsome little brat! My aunt! what wouldn't I give for ten minutes alone with him and a hunting-crop! He's a masterpiece! What do they label him for? CAD is written all over him, without sticking it on his clothes!"

Phil was raging now, "letting off steam," his mother would have called it.

"Shall I get into trouble over it?" asked Barbara in a frightened voice.

"Not you, don't you believe it," was his reassuring answer. "Waghorn isn't such a fool, whatever his missus may be!"

"You go straight upstairs and have a rest," said Phil, as they reached the "White House." "I'll tell mother, and she'll see you are not disturbed till tea time. You'll be all the better for a good sleep."

Barbara did as he told her, and walked upstairs into

the little room she had previously occupied, and taking off her hat and coat lay down upon the bed and burst into tears.

The thought of her failure tortured her, and she felt there was nothing for her to do but to go back and make confession to Petite Mère. Petite Mère, who knew nothing of actual facts, for Barbara had not told her of the final extinction of her hopes by the lawyer's opinion. She had dreaded to cause the good little woman anxiety by telling her the facts, and had merely said that up to the present she had not been able to arrange matters with regard to her fortune; but now, almost penniless, and with no prospect of being able to earn money, what was the use of her staying in England? And yet, what was she to do at the Pavilion? Could she return to be a burden and an expense?

To such a depth of misery had she fallen that positively the thought of Monsieur Jean Paul and his protestations of undying devotion drew her like a magnet. If she married him she would at least have security and a home of her own, and after Mrs. Septimus Waghorn, Madame Laurent appeared positively engaging, especially at a distance! Jean Paul might not be prepossessing in appearance, but, as Petite Mère had said, he was a good son, and would probably be a good husband. And then, fortunately, in the middle of her anxiety as to the future, she fell asleep, and kindly nature soothed her into unconsciousness of all her perplexities.

When she awoke it was five o'clock, and jumping up she bathed her face, which was still flushed from her weeping, and, smoothing her disordered hair, she ran down to the drawing-room.

Molly kissed her affectionately, and Dick shook her warmly by the hand, and without saying a word about her trouble they both made her aware of their sympathy, which was none the less real for being unexpressed.

"Here is Mr. Poole," said Molly; "I think you have met him before."

Barbara turned to greet the Vicar of St. Ethel's, an old man with snow-white hair and a kindly face, who

had been sitting beside the sofa on which Dick was lying.

"Yes," he said, as he shook hands, "we have met before. Mrs. Arkwright has been telling me that you know Les Andelys. It is many years since I was there, but I always remember it as one of the most lovely places I have ever seen."

"It was the home of my childhood, so I know it very well," answered the girl, with a little break in her voice, and through the tears that rose to her eyes she could see once more the little house with the green jalousies, the sheltered garden, and even the familiar form of her beloved Père Joseph, seated in the Temple de la Réflexion beside the river. Oh, if only Père Joseph were here now, what would he counsel her to do?

"Château Gaillard on a summer's evening, standing white against the blue sky and with the broad river flowing beneath, is a sight which once seen can never be forgotten," continued the kind old man. "I have some very fine photographs of it which I should like to show you some day."

"How long is it since you were there?" asked Molly.

"Many, many years. It is as well not to be too precise in these matters, since accuracy only serves to remind one how fast the years have gone by," he answered smiling.

"You needn't worry about the years, Mr. Poole," said Dick cheerily. "They don't seem to affect you at all. I've known you for twenty of them and you haven't changed a bit, and I don't think St. Ethel's has changed much either since the days when I used to come here as a boy, when old Cousin John Arkwright lived in this house."

"Oh, St. Ethel's has changed," said Mr. Poole sadly; "not perhaps so much in the town, although even there I see changes, but in the people. Nearly all those I knew and loved have left us; but of that I have no right to complain, seeing it cannot be otherwise when one has reached one's allotted span of three score years. I might add the ten, but I won't. Actually in St. Ethel's itself

I can only count three or four of my old friends and contemporaries, although, of course, I can add to their number in the neighbourhood. By the way I am sorely distressed about a very particular friend of mine, whom I think you know: I am speaking of Miss Leigh, who lives in the village of Fiddler's Green."

"Is she ill?" asked Molly.

"No, I am thankful to say she is not ill, although her sister, Miss Margaret, who lives with her, is always delicate; but the two old ladies are in a grievous plight just now. It is a purely domestic matter, but a serious one, nevertheless. They live a very quiet and retired life, and in their case what might be a slight trouble to many assumes a great importance; but the fact is, that for many years they have had a most excellent French servant, who was greatly attached to them, and who devoted herself to their comfort; but recently she has been compelled to return to her native country. They have since been very unfortunate and have not been able to find any one to fill her place in the least, the truth being that their good Marie was friend, companion, adviser and servant all in one, and they are lost without her. I suppose you would not be inclined to let me steal your excellent Alice for them?"

"Oh, never!" cried Molly decidedly; "I know I have to thank you for her, but I couldn't possibly give her up. Poor old ladies, I am very sorry for them, but I must confess my sympathy does not go so far as making me willing to hand over my domestic angel. Cannot you find any one for them?"

There was a twinkle in the old man's eye, as he answered, "Well, to be quite honest, my attempt was a failure, a grievous failure, and it only resulted in Miss Leigh being frightened out of her wits. Now, if only my good old friend Miss Lætitia had been alive she could have helped in such a case as this."

"Who was she?" asked Molly; "I don't think I knew her."

"No, you never knew her. She was a very remarkable woman, Miss Lætitia Brown, and she lived in the

little red house in the Market Square, at the corner of Hen's Walk; her father had been Rector of St. Ethel's, one of my predecessors, and she spent all her life here. She occupied herself with good works and was extraordinarily charitable. Her means were small, so small indeed that it was a marvel how she managed to exist, but exist she did, and always managed to have something to spare for those worse off than herself. One of her occupations was to train girls for service—not infrequently she took them from the workhouse—and so great was her reputation for success in this particular line, that there was a great demand for Miss Tichy's maids. The people always knew her as Miss Tichy! Times have changed, and the Miss Tichys of the world are now few and far between. I remember her so well. She presented an unusual figure, for she paid no attention to the prevailing fashion, and always wore a brown stuff gown, year in, year out, with a mushroom hat tied under her chin. The only change she made in her outward apparel was that she donned a poke bonnet on Sundays. She used to step across to sup with me sometimes, and because she considered it unsuitable for a lady to venture abroad at night without an escort she always brought her maid with her. Her little maids were often extremely young, and were more of a care than a protection, but that made no difference. I can see her now, with her gown bunched up round her waist and wooden clogs on her feet, bidding me good-night, while a sleepy little Jane, or Mary, or Eliza, as the case might be, waited, lantern in hand, at a respectful distance."

"How sure I should have loved her," said Molly, who enjoyed the old gentleman's reminiscences.

"Yes, every one loved her, and her memory remains. Only last week I was walking in George Street and stopped to speak to a woman at her cottage door, remarking that I always noticed the spotless whiteness of her front step.

"Well, sir,' she replied, 'Miss Tichy, she larned me to whiten a stone, and I'd take shame to myself if I forgot what she larned me. Many is the time she has

stood beside me at six o'clock of a freezing winter's morning, making me do it rightly, for I wasn't an easy one to larn. But now I keep it white for her sake.' My good Martha, who has ruled sternly at the Vicarage for thirty years, was another of Miss Tichy's maids."

"It is rather a nice idea, isn't it?" said Molly. "The white step is her monument."

"It is certainly a monument of affection, and she deserved it, for they knew she knew all their sorrows and helped all who were sick and suffering."

"I don't suppose it is so easy to live on a little now as it was in her day?" remarked Dick.

"I don't know about that," answered the old man, shaking his head. "The fact is that this is a money-seeking age, and if any one has a small income they cannot be content to do on it, but must strive to increase it. It seems to me all right for men, but a pity for women. I am old-fashioned, I know, and have outlived my generation, but it saddens me to see the way girls won't stay at home now, and help their mothers, but must rush into some employment which brings them in a few shillings to spend, not on useful things, but on sham pearl necklaces and lace collars. It seems to me that in the cottages at any rate it is the mother's right to have a little care and attention when she is getting old, and has borne all the burden and heat of the day. I know a woman now who has four daughters. She is old and ill, but they all go off to the factory Downhill, and have no time for her."

"But we have district nurses," said Molly.

"That is true, and excellent women they are in cases of sickness; but they cannot give the care and affection that is the daughter's privilege. Some girls are obliged to work, of course; but I should like to see many more giving consideration to the home duties which are, I know, tedious at times. Miss Leigh, for instance, has two nieces, but each has her work and no thought or leisure for her. One is secretary to a golf club, and that of course prevents her leaving home." The old gentleman chuckled as he spoke. "And yet I can't imagine

any one more delightful to live with than Miss Leigh."

"I know her nephew, Stephen Grant, very well," said Dick. "A good fellow he is, and comes down pretty constantly to see the old ladies."

"Yes, Stephen is a good nephew to them and is most considerate; but what they want is a niece, or at any rate a woman who will look after them."

"I wish I knew them, but you know we have no carriage and I so seldom go out anywhere." It was Molly who spoke.

"It would be a pleasure both to you and to them, I am sure," said Mr. Poole courteously. "Well, since you will not let me have your Alice I must be going, for I really must find some one to go to them to-night." He rose as he spoke and made his farewells.

As he walked to the door Barbara stepped quickly forward and caught hold of Molly's arm.

"Molly," she cried, "ask him! Can I not go?"

"Go where, Barbara?" asked Mrs. Arkwright in surprise.

"To the old ladies. I would try to make them happy."

Molly looked doubtful, and Barbara ran out into the hall to see Mr. Poole's black-coated figure walking to the gate.

She flew out, and he turned at the sound of her footsteps.

"Oh, Monsieur," she said, her English failing her as it still did occasionally. "Pardon that I detain you, but might I not go to the ladies whom you mention?"

"You, Miss Vincent?" he looked kindly at her pretty flushed face and eager eyes. "I am afraid you have misunderstood me. Miss Leigh requires a servant."

"Why should it not be me?" she replied simply. "I have to-day left a situation as—what you would call mother's help. That seems to me to be little different. There was—unpleasantness and I came away. It was not perhaps altogether my fault—Philip will tell you about it. I can well look after a ménage, and you said,

Monsieur, that these ladies required also some one who would be careful of their comfort, and that I could well promise to do."

Mr. Poole looked perplexed.

"You see, Monsieur," she went on, speaking quickly, "it is necessary that I earn my living, and it appears that I have not sufficient knowledge to teach. But to attend to the house—that I well understand, and I could go now—my box is not yet unpacked."

"You would find your life dull at Fiddler's Green, I fear."

"I do not think so. I have always lived very quietly and very simply. I am indeed quite suitable, and I would try my very best to do all that the ladies required of me."

"Let us come and consult Mrs. Arkwright," said Mr. Poole, and they returned to the house.

"This kind young lady suggests that she shall step into the breach, and go to Miss Leigh's help," he began, as they entered the drawing-room.

"Molly," said Barbara earnestly, "will you not tell Monsieur that I have all the knowledge necessary? Oh, do you not see that it is a chance for me? I cannot find a post and I cannot return to Petite Mère."

Molly thought for a few moments. "I think you might go," she said at last. "You will, at any rate, be with ladies, and if the work is not too distasteful——"

"It will not be distasteful, I am certain. I am very fond of the ménage." After some moments of discussion it was settled that Barbara should have her will and go to Miss Leigh, at any rate until she was able to find some one else. Mr. Poole was obviously relieved, and grateful that she could proceed to Fiddler's Green that same evening, and finally departed to make arrangements for her conveyance.

"It may not prove to be a suitable occupation for you," said Dick, when the trio were left alone together; "but I am certain that you cannot come to any harm. And if you are in the least unhappy you must come back here at once."

"Yes," said his wife decidedly; "you must promise me that if you are as miserable as you were with that dreadful Mrs. Waghorn you will come back immediately. But from what I have heard of Miss Leigh from Stephen Grant, she seems to be rather a dear old lady. Her old sister is a little peculiar, rather simple and eccentric, so he says, but not in the least disagreeable."

"For one thing I am grateful, and that is that there is no child. I have always thought that I loved children, but oh, Molly, Clarence is impossible! Do you think that I behaved very badly?" asked Barbara sorrowfully.

"No, I don't. Phil has told me all about it, and I only wonder you stood it for so long. I blame myself very much for having allowed you to go. I never liked it, and I ought to have prevented it."

"Never mind. It is finished now, and I am fortunate in having another opportunity to do something for myself. You have been so very good to me, and Phil was so kind."

"The boy was perfectly right, and I think you are very well out of it," said Dick. "I think you are jolly plucky, and I hope with all my heart Miss Leigh will be nice to you."

"You won't have to scrub floors or clean steps, I sincerely hope," said Molly. "Oh dear, oh dear! I do wish you could stay here with us!"

"I do not mind if I do," said the girl stoutly; "they shall be as clean as Miss Tichy's if I do!" and in her heart Barbara was thinking of dear Père Joseph and one of his sayings, "What matter the hands if the heart is clean before the good God."

A few minutes later the door opened, and Lance walked in.

"There's a man here with a cart," he said; "Mr. Poole has sent him to fetch Barbara."

"Who is it?" asked Dick.

Molly rose and went to the door with Barbara, and there they found a cart waiting as Lance had said. A young man was standing at the horse's head. He raised his cap.

"I am John Strong," he said, "of Fancy's Farm. I met Mr. Poole in the town, and when he found I was driving home he asked me to take a young lady as far as Fiddler's Green, for I go right by that way. I'm pleased to do it if the young lady doesn't object to the pig."

"What pig?" asked Molly, smiling.

"I've a young pig under the net there, and he doesn't seem inclined to travel very quietly, but——"

"I don't mind that at all," interrupted Barbara, "if you have room for my box."

"If your son will just stand at the mare's head for a minute I will manage all right, but I can't leave her alone, for she doesn't fancy being stopped with her nose towards home."

Lance came forward, and in a few minutes cheerful John Strong had stowed Barbara's small box away under the seat, much to the discomfiture of Piggy, who proclaimed his resentment in loud and shrill screams. Patsy came running out from the kitchen and pleaded to be lifted up to see the interesting visitor, and was hugely excited when the young farmer told her he had many more at home.

"Have you any little weeny ones?"

"Plenty of them," he told her good-naturedly.

"Are they all pink?"

"Some are black," he answered, laughing.

"I suppose," said Patsy plaintively, putting her little curly head on one side, "you haven't got a spotted one?"

"Why, yes I have, to be sure. Three spotted ones and one white, I should say pink one," he corrected himself, "which is half black. He looks as if he had a pair of black Sunday trousers on!"

Patsy's eyes grew round with interest. "I should love to see a pink pig with black trousers," she said, clasping her hands ecstatically.

"Why, so you can, any day, if you come up to Fancy's Farm."

"Oh, mummy, may I go?"

"Why yes, darling, you may go, if Mr. Strong will let you."

"May I go now?" Patsy executed a little *pas seul* on the step in her excitement.

"No, not now; but Phil will take you one Saturday afternoon if you ask him."

Patsy looked a little depressed, but made no answer. Barbara climbed up into the tax-cart, and John Strong was just following, his foot was on the step, when the child ran forward and pulled him by the coat.

"Are you sure," she said solemnly, "that nobody hasn't painted him?"

The man looked mystified, and then as he grasped her meaning he broke into a hearty laugh.

"Why, no," he said, "he was born like that!"

Patsy held out her hand. "Good-bye, man," she said politely; "I am glad he isn't painted, because I have always wanted to see a real pig in trousers. But if it was painted it wouldn't be real, would it?"

Patsy was always irresistible when she put on her polite manner, and John Strong looked slightly embarrassed as he clasped her tiny hand in his huge paw.

"You come along any day," he said heartily, and in another moment the skittish mare was proceeding down the drive in a series of leaps and bounds.

CHAPTER XVI

FIDDLER'S GREEN

"The common problem, yours, mine, everyone's,
Is—not to fancy what were fair in life
Provided it could be—but, finding first
What may be, then find how to make it fair
Up to our means—a very different thing."

ROBERT BROWNING.

"You mustn't mind the mare," said John cheerfully, as they turned into the high road. "She's a bit frolicsome at times, and we call her Frolic. It's a good name for her. There's no cause to be alarmed."

"I am not at all alarmed, thank you. How far have we to drive?" asked Barbara.

"'Tis a matter of four miles, as near as can be, but a good road all the way. Frolic steps along and makes nothing of the hills. Do you know these parts?"

"No, I am quite a stranger. I do not know England well, I have always lived in France."

"Have you, indeed?" he replied with interest. "I don't know much about that country. Our ways will seem different to you, I suppose. I do hear they have good dairy farms over there, though. My uncle went over with some cattle to a show, and he brought back great stories of how they managed things over there. A bit old-fashioned, their ways, it seemed to me. Don't go in for machines so much as we do, I understand; he did tell me he saw the flail used when he was there, but I didn't like to believe it. It seemed a little too much behind the times."

"What is a flail?"

"For thrashing out the crops by hand, I mean."

"Oh yes, I understand. I have often seen it used. At home the men and women, too, stand in a circle

and thrash out the buckwheat with long, flat, wooden sticks on leather straps."

"You don't mean it! Then Uncle Joe was right after all. Why, here we just wait our time and then start the engine going, and the whole job is over in a few days. But my farm is mostly pasture land, so I don't grow much besides potatoes and roots for the cattle. We've a fine dairy, and my mother she's a rare hand at the butter making. She wins prizes most years at the county show, and deserves it well, too. She takes a lot of pains with her dairy, does mother. My father and his father before him always lived on the land and kept good cattle. Our herd has a good name in these parts."

Just then Frolic danced her way past a flock of sheep which were grazing by the side of the road. It was already growing dusk, and a heavy bank of clouds overhead obscured the remaining daylight. The mare was pulling hard and snuffing the air as though she scented the good corn which awaited her in her comfortable stable. For a minute Strong had his work cut out to keep her to the road.

"Steady then, my beauty!" he said soothingly, "did you never see sheep before?"

"You'll find Fiddler's Green a pretty spot," he continued presently. "It isn't more than a handful of cottages, a bit of a church and the "Fiddle Inn" all bunched together on the green. Miss Leigh's—that stands just beyond. 'Tis the last one up the lane except for old Major Vasey's. Now, hold tight," he added, "there's a motor coming, and Frolic likes a bit of a dance."

A large car, travelling very fast, was coming towards them, and the mare, as she saw it, threw up her head and pricked her ears. Then, without the slightest warning, she stopped, threw herself back on her haunches so abruptly, that had it not been for the young man's warning Barbara must have been precipitated into the road. Strong brought the whip down across the mare's back with the full strength of his arm, and she plunged

forward; but the motor was level with them now, he was unable to prevent the excited animal from swerving on to the grassy verge. There was a bump as the cart jolted over a little ditch, and Frolic nearly fell; but she recovered herself, and tore along the road as if pursued by all the furies.

"I hope you were not frightened," said Strong anxiously; "it is really only her play."

"Not in the least, but I think I should have fallen out if you had not told me to hold firm. The poor pig seems very unhappy."

"It shook him up a bit" he answered, laughing, and indeed Piggy was bewailing his discomfort in loud and piercing squeals which had the result of urging Frolic to a still swifter pace.

Strong leaned forward. "There's something wrong," he said, "she's going lame." Indeed it soon became evident that she was limping badly. "She's torn a shoe off over that grip," was Strong's verdict. "If that isn't tiresome, now! I'm afraid we'll have to stop at the forge and get one put on. I'm truly sorry for the delay, but if Job Way's at home it won't take more than a few minutes."

He pulled Frolic into a walk, not a difficult task, for the little animal seemed as dejected as she had been gay a few moments before; one might almost have supposed she knew her folly was to blame for the accident.

The forge stood at the cross-roads some few hundred yards further on, but it was closed. Strong shouted, and a woman came out of a cottage adjoining.

"Why, Mr. John, is that you?" she said heartily.

"That's me. Is Job about? I've a bit of work for him, and don't want to waste time."

"No, that he ain't. He went down to Ethel's come dinner time, and he ain't got back. Not but what I expect him very soon, it being close on his supper time. He won't be long, that's certain, for he ain't never one to miss his supper, ain't Job!"

"What had I better do, do you think?" asked

Barbara anxiously. "It's getting very late. Can I not walk the rest of the way?"

John strong took off his hat and rubbed his forehead with a gesture of vexation.

"I am sorry, mightily sorry. I come down this road times and times every week, and never have to stop for anything; and just to-night, here we are, hung up as you might say. It isn't more than a mile to Fiddler's Green from here, and you can't miss your way if you'd like to walk it. I will bring on your box when Job has finished with the mare."

"Then I will walk," decided Barbara; "Thank you very much."

"You go straight along and take the first turn to the left. Go right across the green and the house is the first in the lane beyond. I have here that Mr. Poole gave me for Miss [unclear] perhaps you would take it with you, if you see [unclear] late before I come." Strong produced it in the [unclear]. "It seems too bad that you should have to step the last bit of the way," he added regretfully.

Barbara assured [unclear] that she did not mind in the least, and would enjoy the walk.

She started off, but in a minute he overtook her. "Wonder," he said to her shyly, "if you could tell Mr. Ark right [unclear] sty?"

"I beg your pardon," said Barbara, at a loss to understand him.

"Whether he was a pigsty, I mean," explained the young man. "I would be so pleased for that little lady to have the little pig she fancied."

"I am sure she would be delighted," said Barbara, smiling, "and I think they have a place to keep it."

"Thank you," he said, raising his cap. "'Tis a funny little beast, and I'd like her to have it."

Barbara [unclear] along, wondering what Molly's feelings would be when the pink pig with black trousers was added to their establishment. There was no doubt that Patsy would be blissfully happy. What a day

of surprises it had been! How little she had thought when she went to bed last night that in the space of a few short hours she should have fallen into the depths of despair, and have been raised again to high hope by a second chance of employment.

She shuddered as she thought again of the horrible scene of the morning, and her heart was full of gratitude to Philip for his timely rescue. It was indeed a mercy that he had arrived so opportunely, and still more a mercy that Petite Mère did not know how miserable she had been at Mrs. Waghorn's. Surely, surely she could succeed in her new venture! Two old ladies did not sound alarming, and she would show them how well Petite Mère had instructed her in household matters. What was happening at the Pavilion? And with her mind back among the scenes she loved the way did not seem long. She crossed the Green, and thanks to John Strong's explicit directions had no difficulty in finding the house, although it was now so dark that she could only see it indistinctly, and had some trouble with the latch of the gate.

She could find no bell, so she knocked timidly on the door. For a while there was silence, then she heard some one moving within. Then silence. She knocked a second time a little louder than before. She heard the bolts being withdrawn, and at last the door was opened, but only to the extent of a few inches.

"Who is there?" asked a quavering voice.

"It is Mr. Poole who has sent me," replied the girl; "I have here a letter for Madame."

Another pause, and the chain which held the door dropped with a rattle, and it opened wider.

A little old lady stood on the threshold, holding a small lamp in her hand; the flickering gleams lit up her snow-white hair and gentle face. She looked very pale, and the hand which she extended for the letter was shaking.

Barbara handed her the note. "Mr. Poole told me that you required some one," she began haltingly.

"I do not understand," said the old lady in bewilder-

ment, and Barbara could see that she was casting anxious glances towards the gate as she spoke.

"Will you not read the letter, Madame?" she suggested.

Miss Leigh stood the lamp on a little shelf beside the door and tore open the envelope, while the girl waited in silence.

"I do not understand—there is some mistake, I am afraid," Miss Leigh said nervously. "I required a servant, not a——"

"Will you not let me try, Madame, I assure you that I can do all that will be required. Mr. Poole has fully explained your desires."

"But—" the old lady faltered, "it is not a position suited to. . . . I want some one who can cook and attend to the household matters——"

"This I can well do, Madame," urged Barbara desperately; what should she do if Miss Leigh would not even let her make the attempt? "I have all my life been accustomed to these things, and I assure you that I would do my very best——"

A sound in the lane beyond interrupted her. The sound of a man's voice, singing loudly, hilariously, and not over steadily—

"Of all the wives as e'er you know,—O—O—O—
Yeo, ho! lads, ho! Yeo, ho! lads, ho!"

To the girl's surprise a look of positive terror came across Miss Leigh's face; she turned ashen white and swayed where she stood; but the next minute she recovered herself, and making a quick step forward, she grasped Barbara's arm and pulled her inside the little hall.

"Come in, come in!" she said hoarsely.

Then, with trembling hands, she hastily shut the door, pushed home the bolts and attached the chain, then stood with her back against it, white but determined.

The sounds came nearer, perfectly audible in the

silence of the night. They seemed to pause at the gate, and Barbara could see the old lady's face grow more and more strained. Then came another voice, raised in tones of argument and persuasion, and finally the singing recommenced and died away as the singer proceeded slowly up the lane.

The two women stood without speaking until the last echo faded, Barbara wondering what could be the reason that the song of some passing reveller should have the power to cause so great an alarm, for the look in the old lady's eyes had been quite unmistakably terror, and even now her breath was coming quickly and unevenly. It was quite impossible that any one could enter with the door so closely bolted and barred—what could it be? But she forgot the occurrence the next minute in her anxiety as to what was going to befall her. It was impossible for her to return to the "White House" that night.

Miss Leigh reached for the lamp from the shelf.

"Come in," she said, speaking quietly and kindly although her voice still shook a little. "I am glad you are here, although I am afraid you have been misled, and your expectations will be disappointed. But Mr. Poole has sent you, and I am thankful that some one is here to-night at any rate. My sister has already retired; she is not very strong, and we are both inclined to be foolishly nervous, I fear."

It seemed to Barbara that she was trying to excuse her agitation of the previous moment.

"I have always lived in the country, and I am not in the least nervous of anything."

"You are fortunate," said the old lady, with a smile that struck the girl as very sad. "You did not walk from St. Ethel's?"

"No, Mr. Strong brought me in his cart, but his horse lost a shoe, and I walked the rest of the way. He will bring my box when he leaves the blacksmith's."

Miss Leigh led the way into a small parlour, but as she did so there was a knock at the door, and Strong

himself could be heard calling. Another minute and he stood within.

"I began to wonder whether you were all in bed," he said in his cheery way. "Will you show me the room, and I'll just run this upstairs for you. I'm very sorry the young lady had to walk. You've a great big chain on your door, ma'am; you are safe against burglars!"

"Women living alone are apt to be timid, Mr. Strong," replied the old lady, with gentle dignity. Then, as he returned down the stairs: "Your mother is well, I trust?"

"Thank you, she's finely. She would have sent her respects, I am sure, had she known I'd be seeing you."

"I am sorry you should have had the trouble——"

"Don't mention it, Miss Anne, don't mention it!" said John Strong heartily. "Good-night, ladies."

After his departure Miss Leigh secured the door with the same care as before, and then preceded Barbara into the kitchen.

"You will be glad of a cup of tea, I expect," she said, and busied herself with the preparations. "Mrs. Dodge has been helping me to-day, but she has gone home, so we are quite alone. She will come again in the morning."

Barbara felt a pang that was half sorrow, half joy, as she gazed around her. She could almost have imagined that she had been transported by some miraculous agency to the little home at Le Petit Andely. The kitchen was just the same size and shape, and the resemblance was still further increased by the familiar utensils of copper and brass which hung on the walls. She could almost see Toinette in her blue check apron stretching up her hand to take a saucepan from the shelf! Even the pattern of red and white on the tablecloth was the same. Barbara knew it well enough; had she not learnt her first numerals by the aid of those red and white squares?

Presently she became aware that Miss Leigh was speaking, and her thoughts came back with a start.

"Pardon, Madame!" she said, "but for a moment I thought I was again at home."

"Why was that?"

"Yours has all the air of a French kitchen. We have even a pair of brass candlesticks exactly like those, *chez nous*."

"You have lived in France?"

"But always I have lived in France, and if Madame wishes the household arranged as we have it there, I can satisfy her, I know."

Miss Leigh looked at her curiously, as she wondered what the circumstances could be that forced this girl of undoubtedly gentle birth to seek occupation which seemed so unsuited to her. But she found something very winning in the eagerness with which Barbara strove to reassure her as to her capabilities.

"I, too, have lived in France—in Normandy, for many years, and the things which you see came with us to England when we moved our home. My good Marie, who was my servant for so long, took a great pride in keeping everything beautifully neat and spotless, but alas! I fear that since her departure all has not been as it should be! The tea is ready now; will you sit down, if you please, and perhaps you will tell me how it is that you are willing to come to me."

Barbara repeated what she had told Mr. Poole—how it was necessary that she should support herself, that she did not possess the proper qualifications for teaching, and so on. "If Madame will but give me her instructions," she said in conclusion, "and forget that it is not Marie to whom she speaks, I am sure Madame will have every satisfaction."

Miss Leigh looked doubtful and troubled. The whole matter was so unusual, and she was rather afraid of anything unusual.

"You would find it a very dull life," she said after a minute of reflection, "and I am afraid you would soon tire of it. I should not like you to——" She paused in

some perplexity. But the girl before her looked at her with imploring eyes and refused to be daunted.

"I shall not tire of it, Madame, indeed I shall not tire of it. Nor shall I find it dull. The only thing that I would ask of you is that occasionally I should be allowed to visit my friends the Arkwrights; they have been very kind to me. I would see to it that my absence should not in any way inconvenience you."

"I should not think there could be any objection to that."

"In all ways I will be to you as Marie, if you will only let me try."

The old lady rose. It was difficult to raise further objections in the face of the girl's gentle persistence.

"Very well," she said. "Since Mr. Poole has sent you, I am willing that you should try."

CHAPTER XVII

THE SISTERS

"A wee bit hoose and garden neat,
Wi' bushes green and roses sweet."

SAMUEL DODGE, one time A.B. in Her Majesty's Navy, but now odd job man to Fiddler's Green, straightened himself as much as possible, for his back was permanently bowed, and passed the back of his hand across his heated brow. "Well, ma'am" (he pronounced it "well'um!" and it was his invariable way of opening a conversation), "well'um, 'twas this way! 'tis them dratted mice as has taken my whole fine row of peas; and seein' as they're gone, t'ain't no manner of use makin' trouble about 'em, but says I to myself, I'll just set another."

Barbara laughed, a fresh, ringing laugh. "They are always greedy, the mice, but the seeds will grow quickly in this lovely weather. The ground is just right for them."

"Well'um, that might be better, and then, again, that might be worse. "T'ain't in the nature of things that the sun and the rain should come just as we want it. Where the seeds is askin' for a bit o' wet, the blossom's askin' for a bit o' sun, so there ye are!" the old man chuckled softiy. "Well'um, an' how many eggs might you have the day?"

"Seven, Sammle," answered the girl—every one called him Sammle. "And the big grey hen is wanting to sit. Where can we get some eggs for her? Do you think it would be better not to set her on her own?"

Sammle Dodge removed his battered hat, and rubbed his round, bald head with a reflective thumb.

"Well'um, there's Mrs. Strong, she's a wonderful fine lot o' chicken, and there's Mrs. Green up the lane, maybe she'd be willin' to change a settin' o' her'n for a settin' o' oun. Likely she would, if you was to ask her, but if you go—well'um, you'll just have to be firm, for Mrs. Green, she's one o' them as you never know what they will do! First, she'll say she will, and then she'll say she won't; she's widdy-waddy, Mrs. Green, that's what she is! But you just march up to her, and shout, for she's as deaf as a haddock, and say, 'Mrs. Green, I've brought thirteen o' my eggs, and I'll thank you for thirteen o' yourn,' bold-like, and you'll get them all right."

"Where does she live? I'll go and see her this afternoon."

"Well'um, you go up the lane, and when you've gone a bit o' half-a-mile you'll see a spur way on your right side; you go alonger that, and you'll come to Mrs. Green's."

Barbara thanked him as he resumed his hoe and his occupation of making a neat little trench to receive the seeds, and turning towards the house, she walked up the little box-edged path, singing to herself as she went. At the end of the path she met Miss Margaret.

The younger Miss Leigh was in every way a contrast to her sister, for whereas "Miss Anne," as the elder lady was usually called by her neighbours on Fiddler's Green, was prim and precise and severely neat in her appearance, Miss Margaret's fancy ran to frills and ribbons, and a style of dress hardly suitable to her age.

Miss Anne wore her silver hair plainly banded on either side of her gentle white face, which was of that pale ivory tint which comes with advanced years, and on her head she wore a little lace cap, guiltless of ribbon or gay adornment. Her dress was always black, woollen for every day and silk for Sundays, relieved at the neck by a spotless embroidered collar, and fastened at the throat with a large round brooch of coloured mosaic mounted in fine gold. Her gowns were made

regardless of the present mode; she had probably not altered the style of them for forty years, but she looked what she was, a gentle, kind and rather timid old lady.

Miss Margaret, on the other hand, although only the junior of her sister by something under ten years, was extremely juvenile in demeanour. Her hair, which had been very fair, and which, although scanty now, showed little trace of silver, was curled and looped and twisted into wonderful curls on the top of her head. Her face was very free from wrinkles, and she had pale china-blue eyes and a pretty high colour in her round cheeks. She wore, whenever the season permitted, and frequently when it did not, white dresses, cut very full in the skirt, and edged at the feet with three frills. On her small feet she wore white stockings and low black shoes without heels, attached with a narrow elastic crossed over the instep. Under her chin she loved to place a bow of pale-blue silk ribbon, because she thought it matched her eyes. Her hands, which betrayed her age more than anything else about her, were adorned with many rings, all of small value and of considerable antiquity. She was a harmless soul, Miss Margaret; very simple, perhaps even a little childish, and spent most of her time arranging the little adornments of ribbon and frills which her heart delighted in. Time had stood still for her, and she was quite unable to realize that she was no longer a girl. As a rule, she was very happy, but at times she suffered from fits of depression and weeping, and during these attacks Miss Anne would nurse her and soothe her with unflinching patience and tenderness, as if she was indeed the child she sometimes thought herself.

She stepped up the path with a little mincing step, strangely reminiscent of the dancing class, with a small basket on her arm and a trowel in her hand.

"Barbara," she said gleefully, "it is such a lovely morning, I have come to sow some more of my flowers. My white daisies! They are my favourites, you know, because they are my name flowers."

"Yes, Miss Margaret. Where are you going to sow

them? I do not think you have much more room in your garden."

The little old lady looked distressed. "I am afraid it is rather full," she said sadly. "I suppose there is not some other place where I could sow them? Anne is vexed with me sometimes when she thinks I have too many of them."

If Miss Margaret had had her way, the whole garden would have been given up to the large white daisies that she loved, to the exclusion even of vegetables and herbs. Miss Anne had marked out a portion of ground for her, but that was already full, and there was no stratagem to which Miss Margaret would not resort to find other places unbeknown to her sister.

When they came to the appointed place, there was no doubt whatever that it was impossible to sow any more seed. The plot was entirely taken up with neat patches, laced over with black sewing cotton to protect it from the birds. Miss Margaret was on the point of tears.

"Where can I put them?" she said sadly. "I have three more packets."

"I have an idea! We can make a little row behind the parsley, along the top path," said Barbara brightly. "It will be pretty to have a line of white flowers there. Shall I make the row ready for you to sow the seed?"

Miss Margaret gave her the trowel and clasped her hands ecstatically. "Oh, thank you! thank you!" she murmured. "Daisies! they are so beautiful! But," she went on dreamily, "it is a long time since any one has called me Daisy! I do not think my sister approves of it. She always calls me Margaret. My nephew sometimes calls me Aunt Daisy. He knows it pleases me."

"It is a very pretty name," answered Barbara, looking up from her task of turning over the fragrant brown earth, to make a resting-place for the little lady's treasures.

"It is a very pretty name. I was always called Daisy at home. My mother called me Daisy—and some one else too." A rosy blush suffused her cheeks as she

spoke. "Some one else called me Daisy—it is such a tender, sweet name, I often repeat it to myself—his name was Henry! That is a beautiful name too, is it not?"

"Now," said Barbara kindly, "I have made the row, I will leave you to do the rest. Will you call me if you want me?"

"Oh, thank you, you are very kind!"

The girl walked away, wondering what Miss Margaret would do when the season for sowing was over. How would she have the patience to wait until they flowered? Barbara had yet to learn that the little lady examined the progress of each tender shoot that pushed its venture-some nose through the soft brown earth, with such zealous attention that not one plant in twenty survived her ministrations and arrived at its full stature. Which was, perhaps, all the better for the garden, since, as Miss Anne said, a garden should contain other things than white daisies.

The girl set her eggs down in the larder, and then passing into the kitchen, sat down in the high-backed chair by the open window, and took a letter from her pocket. She had already read it once, but it contained good news, and one cannot read good news too often.

Petite Mère wrote regularly, twice every week, letters full of loving concern and interest, telling every detail of the quiet life which could not fail to cheer and comfort the absent loved one. This time she had a great piece of news to relate. It appeared that her niece, who had but lately lost her husband, had written to suggest that she should come to spend the summer at the Pavilion with her little boy. She had been left with a comfortable income, but dreaded the idea of commencing her life alone amongst strangers, and, therefore, if Petite Mère could receive her, she was only too willing to pay a more than adequate sum weekly towards the additional expenses of the little household. This meant, as Petite Mère explained, that she and Melanie would be relieved from the necessity of such rigorous economy

as they had been recently obliged to exercise. But, before accepting the offer, she wished to have Babette's opinion upon it. Was La Petite well placed and happy? Had she heard anything further as to gaining possession of her fortune? and, above all, was there any likelihood of her returning home shortly? For in the latter event, the proposal of "Ma niece" would go for nothing. If, however, Babette did not contemplate returning for some months, there was no doubt that the arrangement would be a convenient one.

The girl laid the letter down on the table in front of her, and leaning her chin on her hands, looked out on the sunshine. The trees in the little orchard were just bursting into blossom, and underneath them tall daffodils and narcissus waved their yellow heads above the fresh green grass. The air was full of the twittering of the birds and fragrant with the scent of spring. Just so would the gnarled old trees in the orchard at home be breaking into flower, just so would the hum of the bees rise like a tender melody on the still, quiet air. The hortensier in the round bed before the door would be showing traces of pink blossom among its tender green foliage. Her heart yearned to it all, and a mist of homesickness floated for a moment before her eyes. She brushed it away hastily. Was she to feel regret now when she was getting on so well? Could she think of turning back now, of playing the coward without reason? Certainly not! It was only that for a moment the picture of home, which had risen before her, had drawn her as with a magnet. What happiness it would be to see the little home again! But, as Père Joseph had been wont to say, "All may not know happiness, but all may know content." And since she could not be where her heart flew with her thoughts, she would be content here. Since she might not go with Petite Mère to find the fairies, no life apart from her could be more congenial than her present one. She would not think of returning, decidedly not! Decidedly it would be well for Petite Mère to have "Ma niece," and be spared the galling fret of poverty. She was quite content here—

she blinked away a tear that had risen all undesired, with a quick, determined gesture—she would write now, at once, and have done with all regretting. And this afternoon she would go to Mrs. Green's in search of the setting of eggs.

There was plenty of space in the orchard for fowls, and she already had plans in her mind by which she would make a success of her poultry here, just as she had done at home, and assure to the old ladies a good supply of chicken and eggs.

In all such matters she had soon discovered that Miss Anne would give her free leave to do as she liked, and, in truth, never could any one have been more easy to serve or to satisfy. The wants of the sisters were simple and few, and Barbara's strong, willing hands made light of what had to be done. For the rougher work there was always Mrs. Dodge to help her. She had speedily arranged her household affairs according to the principles that 'Toinette had early inculcated. Certain tasks to be performed each day, certain rooms to receive particular attention through the week, and on Friday all the brasses and coppers to be burnished, so that as the good soul had always declared, "Their faces should shine bright for *Le Bon Dieu, le dimanche.*"

And on Saturday the market. Barbara always enjoyed the market.

She walked in with her basket upon her arm, made her purchases, and paid a visit to Molly, and then found some one to give her a lift back again towards evening. On the last two Saturdays it had been John Strong who had brought her back to the Green in his high dog-cart, with the mettlesome Frolic in the shafts.

The old ladies had few visitors: occasionally Major Vasey, who lived in the cottage up the lane, dropped in to see Miss Anne, but he did not, as a rule, stay long. Barbara gathered that he was an old friend, but up to the present Miss Margaret had not mentioned him, and Miss Anne was not inclined to be expansive in conversation.

He was a mild, quiet old man, with light grey eyes

and a white moustache, the ends of which hung down limply, giving to his face a curious, melancholy expression. Barbara had noticed that after his visits Miss Anne's usually pale face was wont to be flushed and her mouth a little tremulous, and once or twice she had wondered whether they had been lovers long ago in their youth, and if that had been the case, why they had not married. She had, girlishly, woven a little romance about the old couple, a romance for which she had to confess she had no foundation.

The only other visitor had been Mr. Poole, who had come some few days after her arrival to inquire whether all was well with her and with the ladies. He had been pressed for time, and had not stayed long.

She wrote her letter, and then with it in her hand ran out into the garden to ask old Sammler to drop it in the pillar-box at the corner of the Green as he went home to his dinner.

"Well'um," said this worthy, "I'll post it, that I will; not but what I could never see the use in writing letters."

"Don't you ever write a letter?" asked Barbara, smiling. Sammler's quaint ideas and his curious phraseology, which she sometimes found very hard to understand, always amused her.

"Well'um, I can't say as ever I did," he replied, removing his hat and rubbing the top of his bald head. "Never had no reason to, and nor'n that, couldn't have if I'd wanted ever so, me bein' what they call illegitimate, never havin' larned to read or write!"

"So you have never read the papers?"

"No, but missis, she reads finely, and she reads 'em to me of an evening. Great stories she reads out o' the papers. But there, half on 'em ain't true, as I often tells her. Missus, she thinks that all they print must be true. But I know better'n that! I ain't to be so easily took in, not by the pictures even, though I can see them, if I can't read or write. Reading don't help you to tend a garden! No! Nor yet to haul a rope, or serve a gun, though I do hear they have no sailors now that ain't got learning. T'were different in my

time, thanks be! We didn't have no schooling, or if we did, 'twere mighty little and soon forgot, and when I went to sea what they wanted you for to know, they larned you with a rope's end. Aye, and that at the proper end to larn a boy at. No boy, as ever I know, could larn with his head alone. If you wanted to fix a bit of knowledge, 'twould be safer to begin at t'other end!" The old man chuckled, as though delighted with his own wit.

"Well'um," he continued, shifting his position slightly, and leaning upon the handle of his hoe, "I says to myself, I says, these days whot we're livin' in now is mighty soft days. You ask those as is mothers and fathers now, and you'll hear 'em say, they won't have their Sammy nor their Billy walloped in school! They won't have no schoolmaster a-touchin' of their precious! But when all's said and done, those boys as hasn't caught it sharp won't be worth nothing when they do grow up. Lor, no, no. I mind me well when my grandson, my eldest son's boy, lived with me when his father was with his regiment in India, my grandson, Jimmy, he ran away and joined the Milisha as a band-boy. Mighty fond of music Jimmy was! Well'um, he went, and for a long time I didn't know what had come to him. And then one day there comes a letter from the Colonel, saying as Jimmy has been a bad boy, and might he give him a thrashin'? Seems in these days they can't give no thrashin' without the consent of the parent, and seein' as Jimmy's father was in India, they wrote to me. Missus read the letter, and lor, she was in a fine takin'. But I jest put it in my pocket and went down to Mr. Dodd, him what kept the 'Fiddler' at that time, and I says to him, says I, 'Just you get a pen and a bit o' paper, and write a bit o' summat for me.' Well'um, he sits him down and squares up his shoulders, as though his pen was a dirk and his paper the witals of his enemy, and him goin' for to stab him! 'Come on,' says he, 'I'm ready!'

"An' this was what he wrote, as I told him.

"' Since my Jimmy 'as joined the Milisha without my

consent, let him have it! Sammlle Dodge, his mark.' Ay, that was it, and I put my cross to it, plain for all to see, and into the box it went. Lor, you should have heard how I got it from the missus, when I told her what I done! She was partial to Jimmy, was the missus!"

"Where is he now?"

"A servin' of his king and country with the Royal Horse Artillery. He's turned out well, has Jimmy. Well'um, have you ever noticed that women as was sharp enough with their own, and could lay it into their own children with the best, is just as soft as butter when it comes to grandchilder?"

"I cannot say that I have."

"Well'um, that's so! That it is, soft as butter! If I can't read nor write, I can understand 'uman natur. That's my book, that is, and I larns quite a lot from it at times, that I do."

He moistened his horny palm preparatory to continuing his labours, and chuckled again. "Well'um, I'll post your letter, since you've wrote it, but if you would be larned by me, you'd find that there was more trouble in this world caused by the writin' o' letters than by any spoken word. I don't hold with letter writin', and I'm old enough to know that what I says is true."

As Barbara re-entered the house, Miss Anne met her.

"What were you thinking of doing this afternoon? Are you busy?"

"No, I am not busy, Miss Anne, and I was thinking of going up to Mrs. Green's to see if I could get a setting of eggs from her; the big grey hen is ready to set."

"Oh, is she?" asked Miss Anne, in a tone of voice which suggested that the fact was one which it was rather unsuitable to mention. "I thought, perhaps, that if you were not busy you would like to go and see your friends this afternoon, for I am afraid I shall not be able to spare you on Saturday, as I have just heard from my nephew that he proposes to pay us a visit on Monday, and there will be many preparations to be made for his arrival."

"Thank you; I shall be very glad to go this afternoon, and I will go early to market on Saturday, so that I shall be home in time to do what is necessary."

Miss Anne looked troubled. "It is not easy to provide all that a gentleman requires, Barbara, and my nephew, having lived so long in London, is, of course, accustomed to everything of the best. I do not know what to suggest for his evening meal."

"I will go to the market," said the girl cheerfully, "and I will see what is especially good on Saturday. We cannot have fish, since Monsieur does not come until Monday, but we can have an excellent salad, for Sammler has some young lettuces in the frame, which will be ready by then."

Miss Anne looked relieved.

"I think, Barbara, in that case I will leave it to you."

The girl smiled. This was the invariable end to Miss Anne's attempts at ordering a repast: the truth being that Miss Anne would no more have dared to offer a suggestion when Marie ruled over her household, than she would have dared to venture out after dark. The one thing that the excellent Marie had resented was anything in the nature of interference in the catering department, which was especially her kingdom.

"My nephew has not been to see me for a long time," continued the old lady presently, speaking in her gentle, deprecating voice. "He spends much of his time abroad, and, indeed, it is not many weeks since he returned to England. You will be careful about the coffee, Barbara. He used to say that our coffee was better than he ever tasted elsewhere. I should be sorry if he were disappointed. And I think we will use the best Worcester cups: the ones with the blue border, which are in the corner cupboard in the parlour. You will be very careful of them?"

"Certainly, Miss Anne; I will take every care of them."

"Perhaps I had better wash them myself, if you will just put them carefully aside, after they have been used."

It would grieve me if they were chipped or broken : they are so very old."

"You can safely trust them to me; I will see that no harm comes to them."

"I am sure you will be careful," said the old lady kindly, "and that you will remember that I value the cups. There are several other things which I keep for the occasions on which I have company, but these I will give out on Monday. My nephew will not arrive till late in the afternoon."

"Who is the nephew, and what will he be like?" thought Barbara, when the old lady had departed. "Will he be young or old? Old, I should imagine, very old, with grey hair, and not very interesting!"

CHAPTER XVIII

AN AFTERNOON OUT

"Of little threads our life is spun,
And he spins ill who misses one."

It was nearly four o'clock that afternoon when Barbara reached the "White House," where she received a hearty welcome from Molly's domestic angel.

"Well, now, we're right glad to see you, miss. Me an' Allus was just saying we didn't think you'd be coming again before Saturday. Missus'll be very pleased. Master, he hasn't been grandly the last few days, and missus, she's fair wore out with him. She don't say nothing, but Me an' Allus, we see her coming down in the morning as if she hadn't slept a blessed wink all night. There'll be just time for us to make one of them tea-cakes as you like. You walk right into the drawing-room, miss, and Me an' Allus, we'll hurry with it."

"Oh, Barbara, how delightful!" exclaimed Molly, as the girl entered. "I didn't think there was a chance of your coming to-day. How did you manage to get here?"

"I walked. Miss Anne told me I might come, as I had nothing particular to do. How are you?" Barbara turned to the sofa, where Dick Arkwright was lying.

"Much the same as I was yesterday, and much the same as I shall be to-morrow, thank you," he answered, with a whimsical smile which robbed the words of their dreariness.

"He is a little better to-day," said Molly brightly, "but he has had a horrid week. How have you been getting on, dear?"

"Very well indeed."

"Any excitements at Fiddler's Green?" asked Dick.

"Thrilling excitements," replied the girl, with a smile. "A new batch of chickens, and a new family of cats! Would Patsy like a kitten by and by?"

"Oh," cried Molly, "no more animals, I beseech you! Patsy's whole heart and soul are taken up with the trousered pig John Strong sent her. She lives in the pig-sty, to the ruin of her clothes and the despair of Me an' Allus. Barbara, I am sure it must have been the impression you made on that young man which prompted the gift; and next time do, please, take charge yourself of any token of affection your admirers may bestow, and don't hand them on to us! That little pig is taking years off my life!"

Barbara laughed. "Not in the least. It was entirely the charms of your beautiful daughter that conquered Mr. Strong. I had nothing to do with it at all."

"How are the old ladies?" asked Dick. "Is Miss Margaret still sowing daisies, poor dear?"

"Yes, she sowed another row this morning. But really I do not think we should pity her; she seems so happy over it."

"It is rather pathetic, all the same. Fancy spending your life in the culture of white daisies! Now if it were cabbages, it might be less poetic, but a great deal more useful."

"It does not seem to me that she spends her life over it, but rather that her life is already spent, and that this is just a—what would you call it?—an occupation."

"A relaxation for her declining years," suggested Dick. "That's quite a nice idea, but I am afraid poor Miss Margaret hasn't ever lived her life."

"But her life may be her past!"

"From all I have heard, poor Miss Margaret doesn't sound to me as if she ever had a past. I have never met the old lady, but I don't think it is quite kind of you to suggest that she has had a past!"

"Don't be ridiculous, Dick!" said Molly. "Barbara doesn't in the least understand what you are driving at. You are only teasing her."

"Miss Anne is much troubled to-day," said Barbara after a while, "because on Monday her nephew is coming."

"Which nephew? Is it Stephen Grant?" exclaimed Molly. "Oh, I hope it is. I haven't seen him for such a long time."

"Good old Stephen! I shall be glad to see his glum old face again," said Dick. "He is sure to look us up if he comes."

"You will like Stephen Grant, Barbara," said Molly. "He is very quiet, but he really is a dear when you know him."

"I do not think I am very likely to speak to him," replied the girl, smiling. "But Miss Anne seems very much afraid that he will be disappointed in my coffee! It seems he is very particular about his food."

"Stephen! Stuff and nonsense! I don't believe he would know if he were eating stewed ape or sweetbread. He has travelled all over the world, and I have been abroad with him more than once in the old days, and he's a first-rate hand at roughing it! I have never heard him complain of anything in my life."

"You make him one of your omelettes, Barbara, and he will be your devoted slave for life," said Molly. "It is all very well for Dick to talk, but I never met a man yet who didn't care what he eats. Come along; we'll go and have a stroll in the garden, while Dick has a rest, until tea-time; he has been writing all the afternoon. How are you getting on really, dear?" Molly asked again when the two were alone.

"Really very well. In fact, I do not think it could be better."

"But are you happy? Don't you hate the life, all by yourself there?"

"No, most assuredly I do not hate it. You see, it is very much what I have been used to, and there is always the thought that I am saving something for Petite Mère, and I really love the old ladies already; they are very kind, and very well satisfied with all I do for them. It is a charming little house; and as for the work, it is

really nothing. I could not possibly have a more easy life."

"You haven't answered my question," said Molly, smiling kindly. "You are a brave little thing, but—are you happy?"

"I am, at least, quite content," said Barbara, "and very soon I am sure I shall be quite happy. Just sometimes it seems a long way from—home, you know, but that cannot be helped. It is at any rate a beginning, and although I am afraid it must be a long time before I can go back and see Petite Mère, still I am very thankful for all the kindness I receive, and particularly for the fact that I have not to teach tiresome children! I could never do it properly, and the work that I have to do now I know I can do perfectly well, and that makes all the difference."

"I wish I could come over and see your old ladies."

"Oh, it would be delightful! Could you not drive over one day?"

"It does not seem possible now," replied Molly, with a sigh. "Poor old Dick has been in dreadful pain again lately. Of course he ought to go away, but that is out of the question, and things seem to be very tiresome all round. If only he were better I should not care. But he must—he must get stronger soon. I will not lose hope."

"How are the boys?"

"Very well. Philip is the greatest help and comfort to me. How the boy manages to keep so bright and happy I can't think. He absolutely refuses to look on the dark side of anything, and his gaiety is positively infectious. He can make Dick laugh even when he is feeling really desperately ill."

At this moment piercing shrieks came from the direction of the yard behind the house, and Molly and Barbara ran hastily towards it. "It's Patsy," gasped Molly in terror. "What can have happened to her?"

They ran round the corner, to find Patsy, scarlet and struggling, but silent, while the air was rent with appalling screams from a small and very agonized pig, which

wriggled vainly to escape from the grasp of Patsy's sturdy arms.

The hind quarters of the little animal were encased in a bass fish-basket, which only added to its discomfiture.

"Put it down, Patsy!" commanded her mother sternly. "Put it down!"

Patsy obeyed with manifest reluctance, and the pig freed itself and scuttled off on to the lawn without a moment's delay.

The child sat down suddenly, without the slightest regard for the mud or the stones on the ground, and, putting her two chubby, dirty fists into her eyes, began to sob bitterly. "You don't know what you've done, mummy, you don't know what you've done! I'll never catch him, never no more. He was just getting used to being carried; at least"—Patsy was naturally truthful—"he would have got used to it in a little while, and now I'll have to start all over again."

Molly stooped and picked her up.

"My darling," she said fondly, "I don't think the pig will ever like to be carried. It makes him perfectly miserable. Pigs like to live in a sty, and not in a fish-basket. Stop crying, my pet, and Barbara and I will help you to drive him into his home."

"I did want to carry him in my arms; he is so beautiful."

"Have you found a name for him yet?" asked Barbara, trying to turn the child's attention from her disappointment.

"Phil has found him a lovely name. It is Badajos!"

"Badajos?" cried her mother. "Why in the world?"

"Phil told me it was the name of some one who had breeches," explained the child gravely. "Didn't you never hear of him yourself?"

"Yes, I have heard of him," replied Molly, struggling with her mirth—the name was so typical of Phil's fertile imagination that she felt convulsed with laughter.

"Now come quickly; let us put Badajos safely away, and come in to tea."

The task, however, proved less easy than it sounded, and for over half-an-hour Barbara and Molly and Patsy

chased a noisy and extremely agile pig round and round the lawn. Finally, however, Lance and Tony arrived to their assistance, and the reluctant Badajos was overwhelmed by superior numbers and borne panting to his proper sphere.

Patsy was captured by Me an' Allus, who were horrified at the plight in which their usually spotless little charge presented herself, and the others trooped into the drawing-room, breathless, but triumphant.

"What in the world have you been doing?" asked Dick. "Judging from the sounds, I should say that there was going to be pork for dinner! Me an' Allus are passionately fond of pork."

Barbara and Molly sank down exhausted after their stern chase, and explained what had happened.

"The only thing I'm thankful for," said Molly at last, "is that no one was there to see an elderly and staid mother of a family tearing round like an escaped lunatic. I haven't run so fast for years!"

"You used to be able to run all right," said her husband. "I could tell tales about you if I chose."

"Don't listen to him, Barbara, I beg; or, if you must, don't believe a word he says."

"Have you had any good fortune lately?" asked the girl after a while.

"With the great beasts, do you mean?" asked Dick, this being the name by which Phil designated those who presided over the destinies of his father's manuscripts.

"Well, one article in the *State*, but nothing else."

"But I'm hoping very hard about one particular story. I am certain that is going to be taken."

Dick looked fondly at his wife's animated face. "My dear, will you never learn that my humble efforts resemble a certain race of pigeons: wherever you send them they are certain to return home. Sooner or later they turn up, crumpled and dishevelled, with unfailing regularity."

"Then we just pack them off again," returned Molly, undaunted.

"You do," corrected her husband. "I should never have the courage. There is a story here, Barbara," he

continued, taking up a magazine which lay on a table close to his hand, "which, I think, would interest you. It is all about the Seine Valley, just in the part you know. Rather a clever sketch of the people, I think."

The girl took it and glanced at the page he indicated.

"When is Phil coming in?" asked Dick.

"He will be late to-night," answered his wife. "Poor old chap, he has got a lot of work to do. I am sorry, because he could have taken Barbara home on any other afternoon. She generally comes on Saturday, which is just the very day that the office is open late, as a rule."

"I think he ought to have a holiday soon; I must tell him to ask Mr. Roach when he can let him go. He has been working hard enough for some time."

"Yes, he does deserve it," said his mother proudly. "But I don't quite see where he can go, unless I wrote and asked——"

"I don't suppose he could be away for more than a fortnight."

"I must see what can be arranged," said Molly quietly. But in her heart she was wondering, not only where the money for his journey was to come from, but how to provide the new suit which would certainly be necessary before the lad could go and pay a visit to his relations.

Suddenly Barbara looked up. "The person who wrote this knew nothing whatever about the people of that country," she said decidedly.

"What makes you say that?" said Dick. "I thought it was rather a pretty story."

"Oh yes, it is a pretty story, but the details are all wrong. Any one who knew the people would see that at once. They do not wear the clothes that are described—the great goffered caps that are mentioned are no longer seen there; the peasants are more the peasants of Lisieux or Vire; also they are kind and very good-natured people, and they would on no account be harsh to a poor idiot boy in the way which is described in the

story. On the contrary, they would be especially kind, for they consider that one so afflicted by *Le Bon Dieu* is most to be cared for and looked after. Also they are good housewives, these people; and, pouf! who ever heard of a good housewife washing clothes on a Friday! That would all be finished and the linen out to bleach by Tuesday. I know them well. I knew *pauvre Madame Revalle* at *Le Petit Andely*; she had one son who was imbecile—quite *affreux*—and her life was one long sacrifice of love. She was a widow, and had to work hard to support herself and him, and was always cheerful and never complained. She used to do needlework, and I have often met her miles away from home, taking back some sewing or something of the kind, and always pushing her *Jacquot* in a sort of huge *perambulator*. He was the joy of her life! I know the people well. I could tell all about them."

Dick laughed at the girl's scornful tone. "Well, why don't you write about them," he asked good-naturedly, "and show this fellow his stupid mistakes?"

"I do not think I could do that," she answered lightly, "but it is not because I do not know plenty of stories about them."

"Oh, Barbara, do try," said Molly. "I am sure it would be interesting."

"No, no; my task in life is the making of omelettes, and not of books," answered Barbara. "I must be going home now. I am afraid I shall not be able to come on Saturday, owing to the advent of *Monsieur le nepheu*, but if I can look in very early in the morning after market I will do so."

"I will walk a little way up the road with you, if you will wait a minute while I get my hat," said Molly.

"She isn't looking a bit well, is she?" said Dick sadly, as his wife left the room.

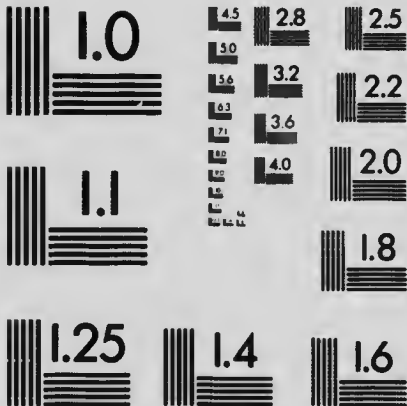
"I think she seems well," replied the girl, striving to cheer him. "You would have thought so if you had seen her in the garden this afternoon."

"She is always happy playing with her children, and it does her good. Good-bye, Barbara. Come again



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soon, and tell Stephen Grant, if it is he who is coming, that I shall expect to see him."

"I won't promise to do that," she answered, smiling. "I do not suppose I shall have an opportunity to speak to him."

"Have you heard from Maddy?" asked Molly, as the two walked up the road together.

"Yes, I had a letter this morning. I am glad to say that a niece is coming to live with her for the summer. It will be a great help."

"It is a pity that she cannot come and live in England, so as to be nearer to you."

"It would be heavenly, but it is quite impossible. The Pavilion is her own, you see, and she does not have to pay rent for it. That was why we went to live there after Père Joseph died. Also there is Melanie to be considered; she is old, and I do not think she could ever leave France."

"Do you remember anything about your people, Barbara?"

"No, nothing," said the girl quietly.

"You never knew your parents?"

"Père Joseph and Petite Mère are the only parents I have ever known," she said, and there was an inflection in her voice which, although perfectly friendly, warned Molly she was not to be questioned further.

She had often wondered what the girl's history could be, and whether she had any relations of her own. For, fond as she had been of her old governess, there was a certain distinction about Barbara which made it evident to the elder woman that she did not spring from the same worthy but somewhat humble stock as her guardians. At the same time she felt that the girl had every right to be reticent on the subject of her parentage if she chose, and she had no intention of trespassing on her friendship to gain information at the risk of endangering it. After all, it was no business of hers, and the girl was so charming that she could well be accepted for herself alone. And Molly greatly admired the courage with which Barbara had determined to support herself in a sphere of life which was, to say the least of

it, unusual for a girl of gentle birth, in England at any rate. And yet, as Barbara herself had said, was there not much greater chance of happiness in doing work which you knew you could do well than in undertaking a task which you detested, and, detesting it, were hardly likely to make a success of it?

"Isn't it curious," said Barbara presently, "how one's life changes? If any one had told me last year that I should be living in England and far away from Petite Mère I should not have believed them."

"Yes," agreed Molly, with a little sigh, "life does change in the most unexpected ways. The only mercy is that one does not know what is going to happen beforehand. As it is," she added, smiling, "when things look particularly black, it is a comfort to know that any change will probably be for the better. At one time I should have felt desperate if I had imagined for a moment that I was going to live in a tiny house with Dick ill, and all sorts of silly bothers, but when it came to the point I was only too thankful to have the little house to come to, and have somewhere peaceful and quiet for Dick to live until he gets strong again. It would be much worse for him to be ill in London, knowing all that was going on and not being able to take any part in it. Here he is quite out of the stream, and although I know at times he longs to be in it, still the desire does not haunt him so constantly as it would if it were always in his ears. Men are not like us, you know, Barbara; they cannot be satisfied with a lot of little things like we can. They say small things amuse small minds, in which case I fear my mind is pitifully small."

"So is mine, I suppose," agreed Barbara, smiling; "but the saying isn't really in the least true, because it is only a question of proportion. Our affairs and interests would be extremely small to—well, let us say a statesman, or some one of that kind, but for us they are important, and it is right that they should be so."

Molly nodded. "Yes, it is certainly of far greater importance to me that Lance's new coat should last him for some months to come than that we should win the

next election. I watch the progress of the coat with far more interest than the political situation; it concerns me far more closely. After all, I suppose that is a woman's life—doing small things all the time, and taking care to do them thoroughly. My dear, I must turn back now. I need not tell you that we are always delighted to see you whenever you care to come. You always cheer me up."

"I think that it is the other way about," said Barbara, as she bade her an affectionate farewell.

The girl walked on quickly, for it was already later than she had intended; but she had not gone more than half-a-mile when she heard the sound of wheels behind her, and, looking round, she saw that it was John Strong in his tax cart.

He pulled up when he saw her.

"Why," he said heartily, "this is a stroke of luck! You'll have a lift, won't you? I didn't think you would be on the road to-day."

Barbara accepted his offer with gratitude, and clambered up beside him. "I've been into Ethel's on a matter of business, and stayed a bit longer than I meant to," he said; "but it turns out all right, as it happens. My youngest brother is going to Canada, to try his luck there. He's been restless this long time, but mother didn't seem to like the thought of losing him; but she has consented now, and he's off next week. He ought to do well; he's a steady lad, and he's got a bit of capital."

"It will be hard for your mother to lose him," said Barbara. She had come to know John Strong pretty well, and was getting used to his simple way of confiding his family affairs.

"I expect it's all for the best. Tom—that's my second brother, who is married, and lives at Water Farm—Tom and I paid him out his share in the old place."

"Then you and your mother will be alone now?"

"Well," said the man rather doubtfully, "it seems as if we might be for a bit. It's a dear old place, ours. I wish you could come down and see it some day."

"I should like to very much."

"I think you would like it. I'm just a farmer, of course, but I think that simple folks can be just as happy as great ones. Don't you?"

"Certainly," agreed Barbara; "I am sure of it."

The man's face brightened. "It isn't as if we couldn't live well, and have all we need, and people to do the rough work for us." He hesitated. "I wish you'd come and see mother; I think you would like her." His cheery red face grew even redder for a moment, and he changed the conversation without waiting for the girl's reply.

"How are the chickens getting on?"

They talked for a while about this homely subject, and Strong promised to let the girl have a setting of his best Minorcas; and then Barbara told him of Patsy's delight in her new pet, and of the disturbance its advent had created at the White House.

He asked about the boys, and on hearing that Lance and Tony were at the Grammar School at St. Ethel's, volunteered the information that he and his brothers had been educated there. "They must come out to my place some day and have a go at the rabbits; they will enjoy that—all boys do," he said hospitably; and Barbara, who knew how entranced the two boys would be at the treat, thanked him warmly for the suggestion. It may be that this gave the man some small encouragement, for as he pulled up at the little gate he said shyly—

"I suppose you wouldn't let me fetch you on Sunday afternoon, and take you over to see mother?"

Barbara hesitated, and with ready tact he added quickly, "Or perhaps you'd come over one day with the little maiden and her brothers. Bring them over to tea, couldn't you?"

"That would be delightful. Thank you very much. I will ask their mother about it, and let you know."

He raised his cap, and, wishing her good-day, turned his horse and drove away down the lane.

"He is exceedingly kind," thought Barbara, as she ran indoors. "How Patsy would love to spend an afternoon at the farm! I must not forget to ask Molly about it."

CHAPTER XIX

STEPHEN GRANT

"A simple man, perhaps, but good ez gold, and true ez steel."
EUGENE FIELD.

THE little house at Fiddler's Green usually known as the "Porch Cottage" had been in a state of bustle. Miss Anne had been trotting up and downstairs all the morning, producing her most treasured possessions from their hiding-places to do honour to the occasion, for she did not often have a guest. The finest linen sheets which had been, as she carefully explained to Barbara, a part of her mother's marriage chest, were taken from the lavender-scented shelf, where they had lain undisturbed for months; the best silver spoons had been extracted from the concealed cupboard at the head of the old lady's bed and dragged from their green baize nest; the cherished Worcester cups, carefully washed and dried with a soft cloth; even Miss Margaret had been pressed into the service, and had spent a good two hours arranging as many little vases of daffodils to decorate the table.

And now it was afternoon. More than forty-eight hours of brilliant weather had brought the blossom in the orchard out with a rush, and the thrushes were carolling as if with the mere joy of living amid so much beauty.

A portly Brahma hen was strutting under the apple-trees, where the sunlight filtered through the branches and spread a carpet of chequered light and shade, followed by a brood of diminutive downy chicks. On the threshold of the back door a sleek tabby cat sat performing its ablutions with a dexterous moistened paw, interrupting her task now and then to watch the mother and her young with a mildly contemplative eye.

Just inside the kitchen Barbara sat busy with needle and thread, covering a pin-cushion with dainty white muslin for the still further adornment of what Miss Anne insisted upon calling the guest chamber. She sang to herself the while, for even an exile might well be moved to sing on such a day, and it is good to be young when spring is in the air. It was not possible to avoid being infected in some degree by the agitation of the two old sisters, and the girl's mind kept recurring to the advent of this wonderful nephew, whose arrival caused such a flutter in their quiet life. On one thing she was determined. This great gentleman from London, whoever he might be, should have no cause to say that his aunts' home was any less comfortable than it was wont to be during the reign of Marie, and she had roused herself to the highest pitch of endeavour to have the little house the pink of neatness and perfection. As a matter of fact, Miss Anne had not once mentioned Marie the whole morning, so entirely satisfied was she with all the preparations, and so grateful to the girl for her willing interest and assistance.

Having completed her task, Barbara ran out into the garden to pluck a bunch of white lilac from the bush that was just bursting into flower, scenting all the air around it with delicious perfume. And as she did so she heard the gate click, and looking round she saw Major Vasey walking up the path.

"Oh yes, Miss Anne was at home," she answered in reply to his question, thinking that it was hardly worth while asking, since the old lady was never known to venture out except on Sunday morning, when she went to church.

"She is well, I trust?" he asked again, as he walked into the little parlour.

"She is very well, thank you. I will tell her that you are here."

Miss Anne was upstairs assisting her sister to fasten some blue bows on the gown she wished to wear for her nephew's welcome, and Barbara found her on her

knees just attaching the last of the series, which ran from throat to hem of the quaint white gown. She looked up as Barbara entered, her white face rather flushed from her exertions and the strain of her unwonted position.

"Let me finish it, Miss Anne!" cried the girl. "Why did you not tell me? I would have been so pleased to help Miss Margaret. Major Vasey has come to see you; he is in the parlour."

"You go down, sister, and Barbara will finish it," said Miss Margaret. "Do you not think it looks very nice?" The little lady added, with childish vanity, and as she spoke she twisted herself this way and that in front of the mirror to obtain a better view of her finery.

"I think it is charming; if you will but stand still for one minute it will be finished. So; that is done. Ah! wait one moment longer, there is a stitch to be put in here at the back."

"It is so long since we had a guest. We see so few people now-a-days, but it was not always so. There was a time when we received a great many friends, both gentlemen and ladies, but of course now that Mamma is no longer here, it would not be very suitable for us to entertain gentlemen, although of course Anne is really of an age to be able to chaperone me. And one does not require, after all, to be chaperoned in the society of one's nephew; and Stephen was always such a charming boy. He is a great favourite of mine." The little lady heaved a sigh. "It seems strange to think I should have a grown-up nephew, doesn't it?" she added, with a little prink sideways in the glass.

So it *was* Stephen who was coming!

"There, that is finished now. Is there anything more I can do?" asked Barbara.

"We used to have such very pleasant parties," continued Miss Margaret, without paying any attention to the question. "Such very pleasant parties; with music, too. My poor sister Charlotte—she was Stephen's mother, you know, played very nicely on the violin, and

Anne on the piano, and I used to sing. My voice was very much admired, although perhaps you might not think so, for you have never heard me at my best. I used to sing in the Glee Society at St. Ethel's. I sing soprano—but I have very little opportunity for it now, and my voice is not quite what it used to be. Oh, I should like you to help me to select a ribbon for my hair, if you will be so kind; I have different widths, but I do not know which will be the most becoming. They are in the drawer of the dressing-table, please."

Then, as Barbara turned to get them, she went on talking half to herself, "He said he liked my singing, and the day he was coming I had a song all ready on the piano—I remember the name of it quite well. Perhaps you know it—it is called 'Ever of thee I'm fondly dreaming,' and it goes like this—

"Ever of thee I'm fondly dreaming,
Thy gentle voice my spirit can cheer,
Thou art the star that mildly beaming
Shines o'er my path, when all is dark and drear."

The little old lady sang it in a high, shaky voice, but Barbara, who could not refrain from smiling when she commenced, had felt more like shedding tears before the end of the verse. There was something extraordinarily pathetic in the sight of the poor little old thing standing in front of the high Chippendale mirror, in her curious and extravagantly trimmed gown, singing the foolish old song with quavering tenderness.

Miss Margaret's face fell, and her voice dropped very low as she murmured dreamily, "He never came, you know. He was killed," the last word breathed in a faint whisper.

She stood silent for a moment, and then, her eyes falling on the box of ribbons in Barbara's hand, her mood changed in a second.

"Oh!" she cried gleefully, "they are pretty, aren't they? Which do you think will be the best?"

About half-an-hour later Barbara came downstairs to find Major Vasey on the point of departure. He and

Miss Anne were exchanging a few last words in the hall. The girl walked forward to open the front door, and stood holding it to allow the visitor to pass out.

She did not catch their conversation, for they were speaking in low tones, and she was not listening; but after a minute or two they drew nearer, and she heard the old gentleman say—

"Well, I wish you good day."

"Good day, James," said Miss Anne in her usual gentle way. He walked a step towards the door, and then, turning quickly back again, he took her hand in his. "Better, Nancy, better!"

Miss Anne looked at him with a faint smile, but made no answer, and he went without a word.

"I will get the tea now," said Barbara cheerfully; "Miss Margaret will be down directly."

"Has she finished all she has to do, or shall I go up?"

"I do not think there is any occasion, for she said she was just coming down."

"I shall be glad of my tea," said Miss Anne, "I think I am a little tired," and she stepped into the parlour.

It appeared that this was to be a day of visitors, for no sooner had the sisters seated themselves to partake of the refreshing cup than Mr. Poole arrived.

He greeted Barbara very kindly, and made inquiries about her welfare; and then, stopping with a little jesting air, he placed his glasses on his nose and examined the doorstep with careful scrutiny.

"I congratulate you," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "It does you great credit."

Barbara smiled; the kind vicar was always very friendly to her.

"Is it," she asked, with a spice of mischief in her voice, "as good as Miss Tichy's?"

"I should say, quite," he returned with mock gravity. "I am certain she could find no possible fault with it."

After tea Miss Anne and Mr. Poole took a stroll in

the garden, and came upon Barbara watering some young plants which required especial care. They stayed and chatted with her for a while, and then passed on; and Barbara overheard, for the second time that day, a few words.

"How is Jim?" It was the vicar who spoke.

"Really better, I think. He was here this afternoon."

"Poor Nancy, poor Nancy!"

And then they walked out of hearing. And the girl could not help wondering, for the two fragments seemed to fit into one another. Did Major Vasey, then, suffer from some illness? He certainly did not look delicate, only extraordinarily sad.

Presently Miss Margaret joined her. "Do you think everything will be ready for our nephew?" she asked nervously. "Anne seems so very anxious about it. And do you think it will spoil the look of my gown if I wear this little shawl over it? It is getting a little chilly."

Barbara reassured her on both these points, and added the information that she was just going indoors to attend to several small matters which required attention.

"Oh, may I come with you?" asked Miss Margaret, clasping her hands with a little pleading gesture.

"By all means, if you wish, Miss Margaret."

"Oh, thank you, you are so very kind. Marie did not like my coming into the kitchen. There will not be anything to spoil my gown there, will there?" she added in evident anxiety.

Barbara smiled. "No, you need not be at all afraid. I am going to prepare the lettuces that they may be ready for the salad."

"Mr. Poole begins to look very old," was the little lady's next remark, as she watched the girl separating the tender green leaves with dexterous fingers. "And yet, you know, it is not so very long ago since he was such a handsome young man. He had such an upright carriage, and now he is quite bent. It is curious how

some people age before their time." This was certainly rather hard on poor Mr. Poole, who had the advantage of many men in point of looks.

"He used to wear an evening coat with a velvet collar; he often came here to sing when he was young. I used to think that he admired my sister. Anne was very pretty. Do you know that all the young men used to sing that sailor song on purpose for her? I expect you have heard it. It is very stirring—

"'Of all the wives as e'er you know,
There's none like Nancy Lee I trow.'

We used to call her Nancy long ago. Mamma never quite approved of the song—she thought it so very marked; but they used to sing it all the same, and they quite vied with each other over it. I used to sing duets with Charlotte. Poor Charlotte!—she was Stephen's mother, you know. Our duets were very much in request. We were very happy when we were young, although perhaps Anne was never so naturally gay as Charlotte and I. We lived in this house until Mamma thought it best for us to go and live abroad. We were all very sorry to leave it; then, when Mamma died, we came back here."

The little old lady rippled on in her harmless gossip of the past, while Barbara moved about, her thoughts more on what she was doing, and what yet remained to be done than on the ceaseless flood of chatter.

And meanwhile the man for whom all these preparations were being made, sat in a first-class carriage in the express which was bearing him from London to St. Ethel's. His hands and arms were folded across his chest, and he leaned back in his corner looking very comfortable and more than a little thoughtful.

He was a man of rather over medium height, with strong, somewhat irregular features, and dark hair turning slightly grey at his temples. He was clean shaven, and his mouth, which was well shaped, had a rather cynical twist at the corners, as though its

possessor was apt to look upon life with somewhat scornful toleration, but without unkindness.

The visit which Stephen Grant was about to pay to his old aunts was not entirely one of duty: He was sincerely attached to the two old ladies in the quiet undemonstrative fashion which was habitual to him. They represented to him all the affection and happiness that he had known in a childhood that had not been as full of joy or as free from sorrow as youth has every right to expect.

His mother, the Charlotte of Miss Margaret's recollection, had married hastily and without the consent of her parents. This does not mean that the consent was arbitrarily withheld, but that it was never asked, and the subsequent history of the lady had borne out the truth of the adage that those who marry in haste not infrequently repent at leisure. Not that the man of her choice was entirely unworthy, or guilty of any crime which estranged the sympathy or friendship of his fellows—not at all; but he possessed unfortunately a violent temper which, it must be confessed, he was at small pains to control; and Charlotte, who was blessed with none of Miss Anne's gentleness and more than a little of Miss Margaret's foolishness, was certainly not the woman to make the best of the undoubtedly excellent points in his character as a young man.

It was not long before the constant quarrelling of this badly suited couple ended in open rupture, and they agreed to part. This happened when Stephen, the only child of the marriage, was about six years old, and his earliest recollections of home life consisted of part of the year spent with a doting and very injudicious mother, who alternately spoilt and neglected him, and the other part with a father whose moods varied between excessive severity, and rough, good-natured horse-play, which the child dreaded more than punishment. Grant had been sincerely devoted to his wife, and had treated her not amiss according to his lights, and a woman of finer and more evenly balanced mind might have

helped him to overcome his weakness and make something of his life. He was not without ambition or abilities, and the downfall of all his hopes left him a soured and embittered man. He lived chiefly at his club, and migrated to seaside lodgings when his little son joined him. These visits irritated and bored him, and he only insisted on them because he knew his wife would have been delighted if he had never seen the child.

Charlotte, whose good looks made her popular amongst her friends, spent a few years flitting from one amusement to another until her health, which was never of the best, failed altogether. She lingered for awhile and then died. It was after her death that Mrs. Leigh came forward and suggested to the willing father that she should take charge of her grandson, who was now of an age to go to school, and so it came about that Stephen's happiest recollections were of holidays spent with the old ladies. He saw his father from time to time, and indeed went to live with him for some months during his last illness; but there had never been any love between them, and when his father died, the son was quite unable to feel any real sorrow.

Stephen found himself at the age of twenty-two possessed of a fine income, for his father had been a rich man, with few responsibilities and perfect freedom of action. There was no reason for him to follow any profession unless he cared to do so. His original intention had been to enter the army, but he had been tied to his father during just the time when he should have been working and passing examinations, and his chance was over. So he drifted for a while, and then joined a party of friends who were going on an expedition of exploration in Northern Canada. He returned after two years, but a spirit of restlessness had him in its grip, and since then he had travelled, with short intervals spent in London, all over the world.

His life had not been fruitless or wasted. Although he had never had any obligation to do other than follow his inclinations, no one would have thought of him as

an idle man. He had gained a good deal of valuable and out-of-the-way knowledge in his wanderings, and had done one or two really fine things. His name was well known to the Geographical Society and to sundry other societies who are interested in matters which the world at large designates as dull, but he was at no time a great talker, and few persons beyond those immediately concerned knew anything of his exploits.

He was perhaps not naturally reserved, but he had been singularly sensitive as a child, and there is no doubt that the unfortunate relations between his parents and their constant disagreements had left their mark on his character.

He had early learned the necessity of depending on himself, and making no claim on the sympathy of others for anything beyond the easy social intercourse of every day. Frankly, while not exactly distrustful, he had no great opinion of his fellow creatures, and more especially of women, but he took the world as he found it, and kept his private opinions carefully to himself.

It followed that he was a man of few real friends, although he had a large circle of acquaintances in every part of the globe, and among those few he numbered Dick Arkwright, although, of late, circumstances had prevented him from seeing him often.

Since his return from his last journey he had been detained in town by business that was now satisfactorily completed, and so far he had made no definite plan for the next few months; but he had some idea of prevailing upon Dick to come away with him if he was well enough. He would go to the "White House" after visiting his aunts and see for himself the state of Dick's health, for his letters had been few and far between, and had not told him what he wished to know.

On arriving at St. Ethel's, he chartered a conveyance and drove through the Market Place in the gathering twilight. He noted with some amusement

well-known landmarks of his boyhood, absolutely unchanged, absolutely familiar. There was perhaps a little more grass growing between the cobbles, he thought to himself, but that was all. Time's hand was tender with St. Ethel's, and mellowed without marring the ancient monuments of bygone days.

He reached Fiddler's Green in darkness, but as he opened the wicket gate and walked up the flagged pathway, the door was flung open in welcome; a lamp was burning brightly within, and Stephen Grant, entering, found himself face to face with—the adventuress!

CHAPTER XX

ONLY A SONG

"A slumberous sound—a sound that brings
The feeling of a dream."

LONGFELLOW.

DICK ARKWRIGHT may have been perfectly right when he stated so emphatically that Stephen Grant was not unduly particular in the matter of food, but there does not exist a man who does not find himself soothed and comforted, even against his will, by a meal which is perfectly prepared and perfectly served: unless it be, perhaps, one of those unfortunates who consider that everything that appeals to the palate constitutes a serious danger, and imagine that life should be sustained on a diet of cereals and nuts! Stephen Grant was no gourmet, but, manlike, he appreciated comfort when he could have it, and he merely spoke the truth when he brought a flush of pride to Miss Anne's gentle face, by saying that never in all his wanderings had he tasted a better salad, or such superlative coffee.

The trio had adjourned to the parlour and taken their seats, Miss Anne in the narrow straight-backed chair, covered in Berlin wool-work, on one side of the hearth, while her nephew occupied the great winged arm-chair opposite to her. Miss Margaret had laid a square of faded silk upon the corner of the polished walnut table in the centre of the room, and was playing Patience. She demurred at first, doubtful whether politeness permitted her to indulge in her favourite game in the presence of a guest, but Stephen, knowing her invariable habit, had over-ruled her objections, as always on previous occasions. The same little comedy was always played for his benefit.

Miss Margaret would walk in after supper, and take her box of cards from the what-not in the corner as if half unconscious of her action. Then she would stop, as if recollecting herself, and, laying them down with a sigh, she would seat herself stiffly on a small chair, and fold her hands together primly. This was Stephen's cue.

"Are you not going to play Miss Milligan, Aunt Daisy?" he would ask.

"I think it would be hardly courteous when we have a guest," the little lady would say, cocking her head, with its erection of curls, slightly on one side, and, if the truth must be told, simpering a little.

"Oh, do have your game, I should not like to think you gave it up for me."

A little more coyness on the part of Miss Margaret, a little more coaxing on the part of her nephew, with Aunt Anne as chorus to his remarks, and the little lady yielded, with undisguised pleasure.

"So Marie has left you?" said Stephen, after a while.

"Yes," returned Miss Anne, "she was obliged to go home to keep house for her brother, after his wife died. She left him with a young family; it was very sad."

"I see you have managed to replace her. Where did you hear of your present—Abigail?"

"Mr. Poole sent her to me."

"Oh, did he?" murmured Stephen in surprise.

"Yes, and she is a friend of your friends the Arkwrights."

"Oh!" repeated her nephew.

"Yes, I really was very doubtful about engaging her. She is, of course, not of the usual class, but Mr. Poole sent her, and she seemed so anxious to come, and really, Stephen, I was so dreadfully harassed. We had a very objectionable person after Marie left, and I had not been used to English servants for so many years that I did not know what to do. They seem so hard to manage. Do you think I did wrong?" Miss Anne looked at her nephew with some anxiety, and spoke timidly.

"I do not see why. If Mr. Poole sent her, I expect

you are all right. Did she give any reason for wanting to take up this kind of work?"

"She only said that she was obliged to earn her living, and was not qualified for teaching, and would prefer this kind of occupation."

"I don't blame her. Does she suit you all right?"

"I am really quite attached to her already," said Miss Anne, "she is so capable, and——"

"So very kind," added Miss Margaret.

"I only hope she will not find the life too dull," continued Miss Anne; "girls do not like living in the country."

"I hope for your sake that she won't, if she is a comfort to you."

"You are not thinking of starting off again soon, I trust," said Miss Anne presently.

"I have made no plans at present. At the moment I am feeling that it is pleasant to be back in England for a while."

"You do not think—you will stay altogether?" suggested Miss Anne.

"I could hardly say that."

"I mean, you are not thinking of getting married, are you, dear Stephen? I hope you will not mind my mentioning it, but I had so much hoped you might have——"

"Say anything you like," he returned kindly. "But I am afraid your hope will not be realized. I have no thought of marrying, either now or in the future."

Miss Anne sighed. "I am sorry. I do think, dear Stephen, that the time has come when you will be happy with a home of your own, and a pleasant wife to attend to you."

Stephen smiled. "The pleasant wife to attend to me has not come my way, Aunt Anne, and as I have told you before, the prospect of matrimony does not tempt me. I am happier as I am."

"Perhaps, some day," she murmured.

He shook his head. "Give it up, Aunt Anne. You are doomed to disappointment."

She raised her head quickly. "But," she said persuasively, "I have always heard that those who say they will never marry are generally the ones who do so. I shall not give up hope."

"And the ones who think they are going to marry, don't, after all," said Miss Margaret, in a small, plaintive voice.

Miss Anne's hand trembled, and she dropped her crochet-hook, but by the time Stephen had retrieved it for her, her agitation had subsided.

"Have you made the acquaintance of Mrs. Arkwright?" he asked, a little later.

"No, I am sorry to say I have not had the opportunity. You see, Stephen, I never go out. I have not ventured into a carriage for years, and I could not walk the distance."

"No, I am sure you could not do that. I should like you to know her. I'll try and bring her over to see you one day, if I can. But her husband is more or less of an invalid, and I fancy she does not leave him more than she can help."

"I shall be pleased to receive her at any time," said the old lady in her best manner, which was at all times a mixture of deprecatory nervousness and simple dignity.

Inwardly Stephen was mentally registering a note that he would make some inquiries from Dick as to this lady, who had assumed so much importance in the eyes of the unsophisticated residents of the "Porch Cottage."

They would be very easily deceived by the most flagrant pretender, and yet surely Mr. Poole would hardly have sent the girl along, if he had not been sure of her character.

Stephen himself had not seen her since the first flash of recognition at the door. He had supped alone with his aunts, and as everything had been ready upon the table, no waiting had been necessary. On his previous visits it had been the recognized thing that he should be allowed to smoke his pipe in the kitchen after the ladies had retired, a privilege which had been accorded

to him originally in his Cambridge days, and which had always been accompanied by the most precise instructions as to the turning out of the lamps when he was ready to go to bed. Miss Anne had from the first viewed the proceeding with a good deal of trepidation, but she had been aware that certain liberties were due to him when he reached manhood, and she had herself suggested the arrangement. It showed considerable self-sacrifice on her part, for it meant that she must lie awake till she heard his footfall, and then creep downstairs in her dressing-gown to assure herself that the house would not be burnt down during the hours of darkness. But this her nephew did not know.

On this particular evening, when the old ladies had betaken themselves upstairs, he walked into the kitchen, and his first thought was how extremely comfortable and cosy it looked. It was an old-fashioned "house place," with a wide, open chimney and a tiled floor. The old fire-place had been replaced by a small closed stove, such as are used in France, and on one side of it, rather far back, stood a heavy oak settle. The fire was low, but the air was pleasantly warm; he seated himself, and taking his pipe from his pocket, filled and lit it, and leaning back glanced round him. There were several changes since the reign of Marie, he noticed. First of all, a large bowl of daffodils on the centre table lent an air of refinement, which he felt to be unusual. There was a bird in a carefully shrouded cage hanging before the window, and on a small table below it was a work-basket and some books. Except for the copper and brass utensils, which hung here and there upon the walls, nothing in the room suggested that it was reserved for domestic uses. All evidence of such a thing had been carefully removed.

After a while he rose, and strolling over to the table picked up the books and glanced at them. The first was a cookery book; this he felt to be entirely suitable, but the second occasioned him some surprise. It was Maeterlinck's *Wisdom and Destiny*, in French—surely an unusual volume to find in a cottage kitchen. Below

it lay a volume of Henley's poems, with Molly Arkwright's name on the fly-leaf, and close beside it a "Tennyson," on the first page of which were inscribed the words, "Barbara Claudia Vincent, de sa bien affectionnée Mère."

So that was her name, Barbara Claudia Vincent; rather an unusual name for a maid-of-all-work—or probably she described herself as a lady's help; he believed such a profession existed. Well, he hoped it was all right; certainly the aunts seemed proud of their new treasure.

From what he had seen of her, the girl looked like a lady, but in these days every one could do that, with clothes cheap, and free education for all. Most probably she was some one whom Molly was befriending in the kindness of her heart. If any one could have made Stephen Grant alter his opinion on the utter selfishness and shallowness of women in general, it would have been his friend's wife; but although he appreciated and admired her, it was more as the one particular exception that proves the rule than as serving to alter the general principle he held.

Finally, having finished his pipe, he extinguished the lamp and went upstairs to bed, and gave no further thought to anything except sleep.

He was awakened the next morning by the sun falling straight on his face through the open window, which he had purposely left uncurtained the night before, and his first impression was that the wheels of time had suddenly turned backwards. For he heard sounds which, in that half state midway between dreaming and waking, transported him back to the house his grandmother had occupied in a little French village not many miles from St. Malo, and for a moment he was a boy again.

He listened in bewilderment. A fresh young voice was singing something he had often heard in boyhood's days, and he raised himself in bed to hear more clearly.

* Au clair de la lune, mon ami Pierrot,
 Prête-moi ta plume, pour écrire un mot,
 Ma chandelle est morte, je n'ai point de feu—
 Ouvre-moi ta porte, pour l'amour de Dieu."

And then he remembered. How absurd it was! He was a grown man of five-and-thirty, and in his aunts' house at Fiddler's Green.

He looked at his watch: it was close upon eight o'clock. He sprang up and walked to the window, and peeping cautiously out, caught his breath with a little gasp of surprise, which was really quite unnecessary, for all that met his gaze was an orchard in bloom and a gleam of white linen hanging on a line at the far end of it, while close to the house a girl was engaged in the very natural task of placing some small articles to dry upon a clothes-horse.

She was dressed in a simple blue cotton gown, and her sleeves were rolled up to the elbow, leaving her white arms bare. She wore no hat, and the sunlight flickered through the cloud of blossom, and played like an auriol on her soft brown hair.

And the song continued—

"Je n'ouvre pas ma porte pour un pâtissier
 Qui apporte la lune dans son tablier."

And then it broke off, for a homelier voice interrupted it.

"Well, miss, if this ain't a morning sent just from above, just for to dry them sheets, I don't know what it is!"

Mrs. Dodge, stout, commonplace and verbose, loomed into his vision.

"It is most fortunate, is it not? because we do not want to be late with them this week," replied the girl, and the unseen listener noticed that her voice was clear and soft.

He turned away from the window and contemplated dressing, when a horrible thought struck him. If he rang would she answer the bell? Upon reflection he opened the door, and looked out into the passage. To

his great relief, there was a large can of boiling water outside, neatly shrouded in a towel, while on a chair beside it reposed a tray with a teapot and other adjuncts of the early *déjeuner*.

The bath stood ready in his room since the night before, and nothing now lacked, so without delay he began his toilet.

Meanwhile Barbara, in the orchard, had not considered that the window of the guest chamber looked out that way, and was blissfully unconscious of an audience. She had been up early, as was her wont, and had washed a few little fal-lals for Miss Margaret, certain cherished adornments which suffered from Mrs. Dodge's rough handling, and she was now taking advantage of the sunshine to dry them, previous to ironing. Mrs. Dodge, from the other end of the orchard, fired off a constant round of remarks, but that good lady never waited for a reply, so her garrulity was not disturbing.

"Hullo, Tommy!" cried Barbara suddenly. She pronounced it with a certain lingering inflection, "Thomee," being still unable to achieve the clipped accents of characteristic English. "Good-morning, Thomee, how are you this morning?"

Tommy sucked a reflective and somewhat grimy thumb, and made no reply. He was very short and very round, and only four years old, but he had the advantage of many of his elders, since he possessed a great gift for silence. It was not that he could not talk, although you might easily have imagined him afflicted with dumbness. It was that he did not choose to. When the fancy took him he could string words together with a velocity that left even his redoubtable grandmother, Mrs. Dodge, hopelessly outclassed, but these occasions were very few and far between. One of the reasons for his lack of conversation may have been that he was generally occupied in sucking something—a green apple or a lollipop, or if nothing better was available, his own thumb, and judging from the foreign substance which encircled this chubby member, it is possible that he derived considerable nutriment from it.

He stared for awhile, and then removing his digit, said shortly, "Thing!"

Barbara laughed. "Sing, must I, then, little fat one?" and she commenced again—

"Je n'ouvre pas ma porte pour un pâtissier
Qui apporte la lune dans son tablier."

And as she sang, she made a few dancing steps towards the child in time with the tune.

Tommy's mouth widened into a grin of delight, and then feeling doubtless that imitation was the sincerest form of flattery, he proceeded to raise one foot after the other in a clumsy reproduction of her movements. Barbara, rippling with merriment at the absurd sight the stout little imp presented, quickened the tune and her steps. Tommy, not to be outdone, did the same, chuckling with glee, but only for a moment. His short fat legs were unable to keep pace with his excellent intentions, and he fell sprawling on his face. This proved too much for his feelings, and he wept—not gentle weeping, but a perfect bellow of disgust, which brought his grandmother hurrying up the path, balancing, as she walked, a large basket on her ample hip. Barbara had already rescued Tommy from his lowly position, but she was quite unable to comfort him. In spite of her kind ministrations he continued to wail loudly. Mrs. Dodge tried another method.

"Stop it!" she cried, "or I'll skin you! Was there ever such a boy, making himself all of a mess!" With that she proceeded to slap the dust from his stomach with so much firmness that Tommy ceased crying, for the simple reason that he had no breath to cry with. Barbara flew indoors, and returned in a moment with a slice of bread thickly spread with brown sugar.

Tommy spied her coming, and immediately uttered another howl, thinking possibly that the dainty was a reward for his previous efforts in that direction, but he soon discovered that it is impossible to eat and sob at the same time, so being a wise lad he chose the better part.

"He ain't hurt, not a bit, are you, sonny?" said Mrs. Dodge cheerfully. "He can't abide falling, but he don't never hurt hisself; he's too fat, Tommy is, to hurt hisself when he falls. 'Tis a marvel to me how that boy keeps so fat, with all the running about he does. 'Tis his nature, I suppose. I ain't never been one of the skinny ones myself, so I haven't got no cause to talk. His mother she took after me, and was just about as slender in the middle as a cow in the waist, she was." Mrs. Dodge broke into a hearty laugh at her own wit. "Well, for my part, I'd rather be comfortable than skinny, seein' that grumbling runs in the skinny sort. You've noticed that, maybe, miss?"

"I can't say that I have," replied Barbara, thinking of Petite Mère and her tiny thin body and great spirit. "I am glad to say I have never had to live with people who grumbled, at least, not for long!" she corrected herself, for she suddenly remembered Mrs. Waghorn.

"I hate them sort," continued Mrs. Dodge, with emphasis, "as walks through the world a-mopin'. They do say as how this world is nothin' but a house of bondage, but I say 'tis mostly what you makes it. Where you goin', Tommy?" she called suddenly, for her grandson was making off down the path, having finished his repast, as fast as he could go.

He pulled up at the question, faced about, but made no reply.

"If you're goin' down to the Green, just you come back in time for dinner. I've no time to come fetchin' of you. See?"

Tommy nodded and ran off.

"And just you mind that motter'orn," yelled his grandmother at the top of her voice, as his departing form vanished round the corner.

This was Mrs. Dodge's invariable cry whenever she parted with her grandson, and it is to be doubted if the child had the very slightest comprehension of what she meant.

"Them nasty things come twisting on the Green that fast," she explained, "and the children they won't listen.

As I tell him there'd be plenty of time to get out of the way, if they'd only hark for the 'orn. But lor, bless you, they don't heed nothing, when they're hoppin' about playing Beggarly Scot in the middle of the road, as if there was no such thing as metters in the land. No, nor even a horse and cart!" The end of the worthy woman's speech was somewhat indistinguishable, owing to the fact that she was stopping to take some clothes-pegs out of the basket, and had stuck one or two in her mouth for safe keeping.

Stephen Grant was standing in the garden as Barbara walked in a few minutes later. He said "Good-morning" as she passed.

"Bonjour, Monsieur," she replied, as she walked on. She had hardly seen his face on the previous evening, but now in the morning light she recognized him at once.

"C'est drôle," she said to herself. "That is surely 'the Newspaper Man'! Strange that he should be the nephew of Miss Anne. He looks as solemn as he did when he rescued me from the *Petit Journal*! Oh, it was very funny, but he never smiled at all! I was right, after all, when I told myself that the nephew of the old ladies could not by any chance be young!"

CHAPTER XXI

FLORA MOULTRIE

“Coquette and coy at once her air
Both studied, tho' both seem neglected;
Careless she is, with artful care,
Affecting to seem unaffected.”

WILLIAM CONGREVE.

ONE of the first questions which Molly Arkwright asked Stephen Grant when he came to the White House later on in the day was—

“Well, did you see Barbara?”

Molly spoke with some amusement in her voice, for, to tell you the truth, she thought it not unlikely that Stephen might hardly have thought the new addition to his aunts' household quite old enough for her position of responsibility.

“Yes, I saw her,” he answered. “My aunt tells me she is a friend of yours.”

“I expect you were rather surprised.”

“I was, a little, but my aunt seemed very contented. Curiously enough, I crossed on the same boat with the young lady when I came home last time.”

“No, did you? Then you knew her.”

“I can't say that I knew her. I think I did just speak a few words to her on that occasion, but I don't suppose for a moment she remembered me. Who is she?”

“She is, or rather was, a ward of an old governess of mine, whom I was very fond of, and when she was coming to England my old friend asked me to be kind to her.”

“She stayed here,” added Dick; “she is a very charming girl, and I think it is jolly plucky of her to stick to

her job in the way she does. She seems to like it, though."

"She tells me your aunts have been very good to her. You see, she has got no people, so far as I can gather, but Barbara isn't the sort of girl one can ask a great many questions of. It seems that she has lived with my old friend ever since she was a baby, and now feels bound to support herself. I can't say that I haven't felt rather curious as to who she really is, but she seems to look upon herself as a daughter of Madame Maurice, her guardian."

"The children are very fond of her; in fact, we all are," said Dick, "and she comes to us whenever she gets the chance."

"I wish she were nearer," added Molly. "Four miles is a very long way to walk, although Barbara always comes in on Saturdays for the market. She is very French in some ways, particularly in her ideas of house-keeping. French people always think the weekly market a sort of sacred institution."

Stephen Grant did not continue the subject, but suggested after a while that Dick should come away with him for a change.

"I've got a car," he said. "I did not come up in it, as it had to go back to the works for a slight alteration, but it will be ready in a day or two. Won't you let him come, Mrs. Dick? We could have a little tour anywhere he likes, and I promise you I'll take great care of him."

"I am sure you would," returned Molly gratefully. "I only wish it were possible."

"I don't see why not; or, if you can get some one to look after the children, why don't you come too? There's plenty of room, and you would be quite comfortable, I promise you. What do you say to Devonshire or Cornwall?"

Molly sighed; the idea was so very alluring.

"It is awfully good of you to suggest it, but I am afraid we cannot think of it for a moment."

Patsy came running in presently, and insisted on

Stephen coming out to see Badajos. He was very friendly with all children, and Patsy had not in the least forgotten his last visit.

"He is perfectly beautiful," she explained, "and has trousers!"

"Not really?" murmured the man, rather surprised. "I have heard of horses wearing hats and dogs wearing coats, but never in the whole of my life have I seen a pig with trousers. By all means let me come and make acquaintance with this wonderful animal."

After he had gladdened the child's heart by his unstinted praise at the unusual beauty of her pet, he found an opportunity for a few words alone with Molly.

"Don't you think you could really persuade Dick to come with me?"

"No," she said sadly, "he simply could not go; he is not strong enough. I doubt whether he could stand even the shaking of the most comfortable car. He is better; I refuse to think he is not better, but he suffers horribly at times."

"Oughtn't he to go somewhere, to some baths or something? I should think there must be some treatment that would do him good."

"Yes, the doctors say he ought to go to Germany."

"Can't it be managed?"

She shook her head, without speaking.

Stephen looked at her thoughtfully for a moment.

"Mrs. Dick," he said rather awkwardly, "do you think it's worth while letting your pride stand in the way of—letting a pal——"

"My pride!" echoed Molly quickly, with a little tremor in her voice. "I don't think I have any left; but Dick simply wouldn't hear of it. You are a pal of his, I know, and I know you would do anything that was kind, but I do beg of you not to let him even see that such a thought is in your mind. He has got a little touchy about that kind of thing since he has been ill, and it would only upset him."

"I don't want to do that," was the quiet reply, and Stephen said no more.

He thought a good deal more, however, of the matter as he travelled back to town that night. He had been really shocked at the alteration in Dick Arkwright's appearance, but he realized the uselessness of attempting any material help, however carefully it might be suggested, and however thickly disguised; the man was not in a state of mind to accept it, even from a friend. There might, perhaps, be other ways of lightening the burden which pressed so sorely on his shattered nerves and fragile body. It seemed particularly tragic to see Dick so sadly changed, and undoubtedly ill, when it was quite possible, even certain, that he could recover with the proper treatment. He drove up to his comfortable flat in Whitehall at a little after seven, and, telling his man that he would dine at home, sat down in his arm-chair and, lighting a pipe, gave himself up to reflection. The room was very comfortable, not to say luxurious; the walls were panellèd with a dark wood, while above the panelling ran a frieze of a light colour on which were arranged several trophies of arms and other curios collected during his many wanderings. On the panelling itself hung a few good sketches in water-colour, and some prints. More curios were contained in a Chippendale cabinet, many of great beauty and delicate workmanship, and some porcelain of considerable value. On the mantelpiece stood a very fine Jade carving, flanked by a silver Kwannon from Japan, and a fantastic carving in black crystal from China. Altogether it was the room of a man who possessed good taste and a love of the beautiful, and showed that he also possessed plenty of money to gratify his fancies.

During his frequent and long absences, the man and his wife who looked after him had charge of the flat; for although he used it seldom, he preferred to have some place which he could really call his own, and to which he could return at any moment.

He leaned back in his chair, and the minutes slipped by unheeded. It was curious that a certain little refrain kept recurring to his mind, a little childish tune, with fanciful words—

*"Je n'ouvre pas ma porte, pour un patissier,
Qui apporte la lune dans son tablier."*

Perfectly senseless and absurd, of course, but they haunted him nevertheless, and before his eyes there floated a picture of a girl with soft brown hair standing in a sunlit orchard among the blossoming trees. He wrenched his mind away from the picture more than once, but it recurred in a most irritating way, and always with the little melody like an undercurrent of soft music to his thought.

The telephone bell roused him at last, and he crossed the room to the instrument.

"Hallo! Yes, that's me. That you, Flora? I've been away. No, not to-night, thank you. I've only just got back. It'll be back to-morrow or next day. All right, I'll dine to-morrow; thanks very much. Good-night."

He sat down in his chair again with a murmur of vexation. Bother Flora; he didn't feel a bit in the mood for her to-night. Who wanted to go out to dinner when they had a comfortable room and a good dinner of their own, and could be quiet and peaceful, without any chattering women asking foolish questions?

Flora Moultrie's mother and Stephen's had been first cousins, and although the younger generation had never met until a few years before the date of my story, they had seen each other very constantly of late. As a matter of fact, they had first become acquainted in Cairo. Stephen had been passing through after an expedition into the interior, and had come across Flora Moultrie and her husband in an hotel. She had claimed connection with him, and as it happened that very shortly after Stephen was taken seriously ill with a bad go of low fever, she had nursed him, and practically saved his life. Or so he was given to understand when he became well enough to understand anything—he had been far too ill to know or care who nursed him; but during the long and protracted period of weakness which followed Flora had undoubtedly been kindness itself, and gratitude was a very strong trait in Stephen's character.

He had since endeavoured to return his obligation to

her, by any small attentions which lay in his power, whenever he chanced to be in London. For the last few weeks he had seen her almost daily. Flora Moultrie's husband was an honest, worthy creature, with a partiality for loud checks and the latest thing in waistcoats. He had no particular vices, and very few brains. Flora herself was, or rather had been, a very pretty woman, and even now, when she was, as her husband would have expressed it, dressed to kill, might easily pass for five-and-twenty, instead of ten years older, as she actually was. She was small and slender, and affected a plaintive, rather babyish way of speaking which some men found very attractive. She was thoroughly bored with her husband, although she did not as a rule show it too plainly, and very fond of having some one of the opposite sex about to amuse her, and afford her the interest and amusement she failed to find in him. It is fair to say that no breath of scandal had ever been busy with her name. The reason for this might have been that she was very wide awake, for all her babyish manner, and valued her position in society too much to risk any serious folly.

She found Stephen Grant a pleasant and useful companion, and the fact of their being cousins made it natural for him to act as her escort when, as not infrequently happened, her husband had engagements of his own. It is undoubtedly useful to go about with some one to whom theatre tickets, or a box at the opera, or supper at the Ritz are matters too small to be regarded, especially when, as in Flora's case, you are endeavouring to swim in the social stream on an income a good deal smaller than that of most of your associates.

Flora's little parties were always bright and amusing: she took pains that they should be so, but she also had taken considerable pains lately that they should consist mainly of married women. She had not the smallest intention of introducing Stephen to any girl who might take his fancy, for she was well aware that attachments spring up between the most unlikely people. She was enjoying herself enormously, and she had no wish to relinquish one of the many benefits which their

intercourse afforded her. She laid herself out to keep him amused and happy, being quite aware that if he was the least dull he would probably be off again to the back of beyond, and there would be an end to many of the extravagances in which her soul delighted. Knowing this, she was determined to make the most of her present opportunities.

Stephen dined with the Moultries, as arranged, on the following evening. The party consisted only of one other married woman and an odd man. Jack Moultrie was going out after dinner, so the four of them went on to a theatre, as Flora had planned. The gaiety of the evening was, however, somewhat spoiled for her by Stephen's announcement that he could not make some engagement she wished for the next week, as he was going away again.

"Where are you going?" she asked, with a pretty pout. "You have only just come back."

"I'm going down to X-shire again."

Flora's quick suspicions were immediately aroused, but she disguised them carefully. Men needed to be driven with a light hand if they were to be driven at all, and this she knew full well.

"To Cousin Anne's?"

Flora had never met either Miss Leigh, but she was always careful to never lose an opportunity of emphasizing her relationship to Stephen.

"No, I am going to the Arkwrights'. He's a pal of mine, and has been very ill for a long time, poor chap."

"How sad!" she murmured sympathetically. "Tell me about him."

She learnt from Stephen's short reply that Arkwright must be a man of his own standing, and mentally registered a note that there could be no daughters to be dangerous, but probably a wife. This she did not fear; she knew Stephen too well for that. Still, it might be wise to remember it.

"Perhaps," she said in her soft voice a few moments later—"indeed, I hardly like to suggest it—but perhaps you would be perfectly angelic and let me have the car if you will not be in London."

"I'm awfully sorry, but I am afraid I have arranged to take it with me."

"Never mind," she returned. "It was only if you had not wanted it. It is so much pleasanter to go to Hurlingham in one's own thing. One never can find a taxi afterwards when all the crowd is coming away, and, of course, to hire one for the day is quite out of the question for poor me. I'm going down to a function at Hampton Court, too, the day after, and then there is Lady Vernon's show, too. Altogether a very busy week. It is too disappointing you won't be here. I had so looked forward to your coming with me, but it can't be helped."

She waited until the next act was over, and when the curtain fell again she said plaintively—

"Didn't you say that there were some cars for hire at the garage where you keep yours? I wonder if the man would really charge too exorbitantly——"

"I'll ask him, if you like," said Stephen good-naturedly.

Flora thanked him prettily, and begged him not to bother about it, but was quite triumphant when she received a letter on the following Monday, stating that by Mr. Grant's orders a car was at her disposal for the week.

Meanwhile, during the days that were left to her, she strained every artifice to induce Stephen to make some definite plans for the summer. Once she could pin him down, the rest should be easy, she thought, but in this she was not very successful.

He agreed that a fishing tour in Norway might be a very pleasant way of spending September, and even went so far as to get some lists from an agent at her request, but further than that he did not seem inclined to go. He had accepted one invitation to stay at a country house in August, where Flora and her husband were also invited. The date had not been actually settled, but she reflected with some complacency that it ought to be easy enough to keep up to that. She was not lacking in self-confidence, and anticipated no real difficulty in arranging matters to please herself.

CHAPTER XXII

JEAN PAUL

"What act proved all its thought had been?"

R. BROWNING.

MRS. DODGE rushed out of her cottage one bright afternoon, a fortnight or so later, with the warning cry—
"Tommy! Jest you mind that motter-'orn!"

But Tommy was standing safely inside the garden gate, his face pressed close to the bars, and his eyes wide with wonder, as a large grey car swung round the corner, and pulled up in front of the Porch Cottage with a warning hoot. Barbara, looking out of the window, saw, to her astonishment, a small crowd of people walking up the flagged path, and it was a minute before she recognized the slim figure shrouded in dust coat and veil to be Molly Arkwright. She ran quickly out, and soon found herself in the centre of a hubbub of voices. Patsy was shrilling out excited words of explanation.

"Oh, Barbara, we've come 'cos Stephen brought us in his lovely motor. It was such fun; we flew ever so fast. So fast we couldn't hardly see the hedges."

"There," laughed Molly, turning to Stephen Grant, who was behind her, "is strong evidence that you pay no attention to the speed limit. Barbara, dear, I am so pleased to see you. I've come to call on Miss Leigh, and I don't know what she will say to my bringing the whole of my family with me, but they simply wouldn't be left behind. All the boys had a holiday, and Mr. Grant packed us all in, and here we are."

"Where is your husband?" asked the girl, looking round.

"Oh no, Dick isn't here. I think this noisy crew would have been too much for him; but do you know,

Barbara, he has been out several times in the car, and I really think it did him good."

"Where are my aunts?" asked Stephen.

"I will tell them you are here."

"Yes, do," added Molly; "and, Barbara, don't you think you might take this horde into the garden while I see Miss Leigh?"

"That is the nice way in which she designates her cherished offspring," said Phil, laughing. "But come along, Barbara. I want to see round. What a topping little place!"

"Isn't it lovely?" agreed the girl, as they trooped into the orchard.

"A jolly good place for birds, I should think," said Lance.

The younger boys were interested in natural history.

"Yes, there are plenty of them. Sammle says there is an owl's nest in one of those trees in the field over there. I haven't seen it myself, but I hear them calling sometimes at night."

"Oh, I say, can't we go and look at it?" asked the boy.

"Of course you can."

"Don't be too long," said Phil. "Mother may want to be going."

"Oh no," cried Barbara; "I am sure you must stop to tea now you have come at last. You had better ask Sammle where it is."

"Who's Sammle?" asked Phil.

"The old man working in the garden over there."

Phil stopped suddenly, and burst into a roar of laughter.

"What is the matter now?" demanded Barbara, joining in his merriment, for it was very infectious.

"Did you ever see such an apparition?"

"Don't laugh," said the girl severely; "he is a dear old man."

"He may be a dear old man, but all I can say is he is exactly like Badajos."

Sammle Dodge had found the day rather warm, and

had discarded his outer clothing for the nonce. He was clad only in a woollen vest and a pair of black trousers, which were secured by a garter of string below the knee. They had once been his Sunday best, but were now degraded to humbler use. He wore no hat, and as he bent—nearly double—over his weeding, his stout figure and his round face and perfectly bald head did certainly give him the appearance of an elderly pig.

"Oh, do be careful," pleaded the girl, stifling her laughter. "I am so afraid he will hear you!"

"Come on, boys! Let's come and beard old egg-face. Don't be afraid, Barbara; we'll be fearfully nice to him."

Sammle raised himself as the happy party approached.

"Owls?" he said in answer to a question. "Why, yes, to be sure! There's a nest in the hollow willow yonder." He pointed as he spoke. "If you go up along the hedge side through that gap, you'll find it sure enuff."

"Do you ever see any kingfishers here?" asked Tony eagerly. The boy's great ambition was to find a kingfisher's nest.

Sammle scratched his head with an earthy forefinger.

"Can't say as I never see'd 'em down by the stream below the old mill, but you won't find no nest, I'll reckon; no, not till some Sunday in next week, then happen you might." He chuckled softly. "There be thrushes, and chaffinches, and white-kitties plenty in these parts——"

"What is a white-kitty?" asked Phil.

"Well, young sir, there's some as calls 'em white-throats, and some as calls 'em white-kitties—but that's the same bird."

Lance and Tony marched off in the direction he had indicated. As they went the old man called after them.

"Seeing as it's nesties you're after, you'd best be careful, sirs. There was a fine nest there last year, up in the stump of a tree."

The boys looked back to listen with interest.

"If so be as you find it, that'll make you properly

hop. Hornets they was, as big as my thumb, and no mistake about 'em."

He chuckled again at the look of disappointment on their young faces.

"I thought you meant a bird's nest," said Tony.

"Eh, boys, they're all the same," said the old man, as they departed. "I was just like that myself. Must always be huntin' for something, huntin' for to catch. Birds, or butterflies, or rabbits. 'Uman natur that is. There's many a time as I've laid in a ditch for to catch one of Farmer Strong's rabbits, aye, an' a wet ditch too; but there, I was as happy as a little pig in new straw—I didn't mind no wet when I was huntin'."

"I have a little pig," volunteered Patsy shyly.

"Well'um, have you now? Why, so have I. Aye, an' more'n one. Old sow, she had a litter of as fine a lot of little 'uns as you could wish to see, a fortnight come last Tuesday."

"I call him Badajos."

"Well'um, do you now? That's a strange name for a pig, ain't it?" The old man chuckled again. "My grandfather, he fought at Badajos. I've his medal an' clasps hanging up at home now. I've often heard my father tell how his father fought at Badajos. Fine warm time they had, too, seems like, in the breaches at Badajos."

"Then Badajos really had breeches?" asked Patsy, with deep interest, and not a little relief in her voice. "Phil said so, but I didn't quite believe him, because every one laughed so when I told them."

"Well'um, I reckon there wasn't much to laugh about in the breaches at Badajos, if all I've heard be true! I could show you the medal, little missy, if so be you'd care to see it. I've got that, sure enuff."

"Oh, I should love to see it," said Patsy, ecstasy and politeness mingled in her voice. "I am so fond of Badajos."

Sammler stepped on to the path, and scraped his boots carefully with a piece of stick; then he resumed his coat, and announced himself ready. Patsy, without

hesitation, offered him her hand in her friendly fashion, and trotted off with the funny old man.

"My dear, he's a perfect old gem," said Phil, when the two were out of earshot. "Fancy his having a Peninsular medal. They're worth a lot of money now, I believe. I wonder what in the world Patsy thinks she's going to see? She'll probably think the medal is a button of Badajos's breeches!"

"I think it is rather a shame to deceive her like that," said Barbara through her laughter.

"Who is deceiving her?" asked the lad quickly. "Not a bit of it. She's blissfully happy, is Patsy, dear little soul."

"I must see about the tea now," said Barbara presently.

"All right, I'll come and help you," was the cheerful reply. "I say, can't we have it out here in the orchard? It would be much jollier than indoors."

"I'll go and see. It certainly would be nice."

Barbara ran to the parlour, where Molly Arkwright and Stephen Grant were sitting talking to the old ladies.

"May I put tea in the orchard for the children, Miss Anne? I think they would like to have it there."

Miss Anne looked at Molly.

"Do you think it would be warm enough?" she asked doubtfully.

"Oh yes," said Molly quickly, with her pretty smile. "I think it would be delightful; it is such a glorious afternoon."

"Would you perhaps care that we should all join them?" suggested the old lady. "I have not seen your children, and I should like to do so. We frequently take our tea out of doors when the weather is suitable."

"I should enjoy it very much indeed."

"I will let you know when it is ready," said Barbara, and she hastened to make preparations for the entertainment.

"Do you know," she said to Phil as he helped her to set the tray, "this is the first time we have ever had a

party. Phil, I wish you wouldn't put the cups on the plates instead of the saucers."

"I can't see much difference," said the lad cheerfully. "Let me cut the bread and butter. I'm a whale at bread and butter."

But his subsequent efforts proved that his previous experiences must have been more in the way of consumption than preparation, for Barbara cried out in horror at the result.

"Oh, la, la! Who do you think is going to eat a slice nearly an inch thick?"

"I am, for one. Very neat thing in slices, I call it."

"No, no; go away! I will do it myself."

"How's that for base ingratitude?" murmured Phil, helping himself to a large lump of sugar, which he scrunched contentedly, while Barbara covered a plate with delicate slices.

"Do you really think, my dear girl," he remarked presently, "that the appetite of any well-grown person is going to be satisfied with bits like that?"

"That is for the grown-up people," returned Barbara composedly. "For you, my friend, I will bring out a large and wholesome loaf, so that you will have no cause to complain of being starved."

So, laughing and arguing, they continued their task. Between them they carried a table and chairs out to the orchard, where they set it under an old apple tree. Repeated journeys to and from the kitchen followed, until the repast was spread. A pile of dainty cakes of this morning's baking (fortunately, as Barbara reflected, it happened to be baking day), home-made strawberry jam, crisp fresh lettuce, and a huge cottage loaf and rich yellow butter. Truly, as Phil remarked, a feast for the gods.

In a few minutes more they were all seated. Tony and Lance returned happy and hungry, as boys ought to be, and Patsy arrived safely under the escort of old Sammie. Barbara presided over the teapot, at Miss Anne's request. Miss Margaret, seated beside Phil, was engaged in

recounting reminiscences of her vanished youth, and looking even more coy than usual in reply to his remarks. She quickly formed an opinion that he was a most agreeable young man, and compared very favourably with her earlier admirers.

Miss Anne at the commencement had remarked nervously that she hoped there was enough to eat, but was reassured by the enjoyment with which the young people attacked the good but simple fare.

"We are so unused to receiving company," she said, "but now that you and your children have found your way here, I trust that you will come whenever you feel so disposed."

"It is through your nephew's kindness that we are able to come to-day. It is his motor which has made the treat possible to us."

"I wonder you have the courage to go in it," replied the old lady nervously. "It seems to me very alarming. So much has altered since I was young. So many ladies ride bicycles now. It is quite difficult for elderly people to accustom themselves to the changes they see round them."

"A bicycle is very useful when you have no carriage. My children get a great deal of fun out of theirs. Even Patsy can ride a short distance."

"I think you must let me send you one, Aunt Anne," said Stephen.

The old lady held up her hands in dismay.

"Stephen," she cried, "what should I do with a bicycle?"

"Oh, I didn't mean you to ride it; but it is a good thing to have one in the house, for messages and that kind of thing."

Molly said nothing; she could not well say what was in her mind, but she was thinking of the pleasure such a thing would afford to Barbara, who had been regretting only a few weeks before that she was not able to afford one at present. The four miles which separated the friends would be nothing then, whereas now it was rather a formidable distance.

Stephen carried his aunt's cup to the end of the table, and stood beside the girl as she filled it.

"There will be a good show of apples here, if one may judge by the blossom," he remarked. "But I suppose you are accustomed to it, for you come from an apple country, do you not?"

"Yes," she replied. "My home is in a district where they grow in great quantities."

"How do you manage to eat so many?" asked Patsy.

"They don't eat them, they drink them," said Stephen.

Patsy looked puzzled.

"They make them into cider," he explained, "by putting them all into a great round wooden trough, and rolling them with rollers. It is a curious sight to see the old cider press with an ancient horse tramping round, half asleep, working the rollers."

"Have you seen it?" asked the child again.

"Yes, I have seen it both in France and in England."

"You know France, then, Monsieur?" said Barbara shyly.

"I know it very well. Whereabouts is your home?"

"Oh, I have stayed in the forest of Elbœuf," he added, as she told him. "I have shot there with a friend of mine. It is a delightful part of the country."

The girl made no reply, and Stephen glanced at her. She was standing stock still, with a look of utter consternation on her face. He turned quickly, wondering what could be the cause.

A young man of most peculiar appearance was walking up the flagged path in full view of the party under the trees. He was dressed in a suit of grey, with a cut-away coat, the tails of which were very short, and wore a large red tie with loose flowing ends. In one hand he grasped a rather baggy umbrella, and with the other he removed his small straw hat with a deferential air as he perceived the ladies. His straw-coloured hair was cut very closely, and what was left of it stood up quite straight all over his head.

"Who in the world is this?" ejaculated Phil, and they all looked at the stranger.

He advanced slowly, bowing low several times.

"Miss Anne," stammered Barbara piteously—"Molly—what shall I do?"

"Is this a friend of yours?" asked Miss Anne in surprise.

"He is not—a friend—but I know him—it is Monsieur Jean Paul Laurent. What shall I do?"

"Whoever he is, he can't eat you when we are all here to protect you," said Molly. "Don't look so aghast."

Miss Margaret, who eyed every man in the light of an admirer, scented a love affair at once, and grew very excited.

"Sister," she whispered hurriedly, "we must, of course, ask the gentleman to join us."

Miss Anne rose, and she and Barbara moved a few steps to meet him.

"My aunt!" exclaimed Phil, as he watched the meeting; "did you ever see anything like the way he bows? It looks exactly as if he were being jerked from behind by a bit of elastic. And look at his tie! It is perfectly priceless!"

"Hush!" said his mother sternly. Molly was much interested, and wondering what would happen next.

Miss Anne walked back with Monsieur Laurent, followed by Barbara, and when they reached the table the little man bowed again all round the circle with scrupulous care.

"Bonjour, Messieurs. Bonjour, Mesdames," he said in a little high voice; he was evidently exceedingly nervous. "Mademoiselle Vincent, I am enchanted to see you once more. I trust I do not intrude—but it is my earnest desire to have a few moments' private conversation with you. For that I have voyaged to your distinguished country."

Stephen, who was standing close to Barbara, heard her murmur under her breath, "Oh no, no!"

"Monsieur will first refresh himself with a cup of tea," he said easily, and in excellent French. "Take a seat

here, beside my aunt." He pulled a chair forward as he spoke.

Jean Paul placed his hat and umbrella on the ground, and seated himself on the extreme edge of the chair. He looked supremely uncomfortable.

Miss Anne, with gentle dignity, strove to put him at his ease.

"You are, without doubt, acquainted with Miss Vincent's guardian," she said. "You can perhaps bring her the latest account of her friends."

Jean Paul looked still more confused.

"Non, Madame," he replied. "I regret that on the occasion of my last visit to my native place I had no opportunity of paying my respects to Madame Maurice. I live now in Rouen."

"How did he get my address," thought Barbara, "if he has not seen Petite Mère?" As a matter of fact, Jean Paul had obtained it by the very simple means of bribing old Albert, the postman, to let him peep into the post-bag. It had not needed much pressing to make the gossiping old man betray the fact that Madame Maurice had posted a letter that afternoon.

"Miss Vincent is, I am sure, very pleased to welcome a friend from her own home," said Miss Margaret, simpering.

Barbara's face grew pink with vexation, but Jean Paul looked distinctly cheered by the old lady's statement.

"It is we who are in exile without Mademoiselle," he said haltingly.

"How romantic!" whispered Miss Margaret, clasping her hands. French people always know how to put their words charmingly. "That is indeed a delicate compliment," she added out loud.

Barbara felt in despair. How should she ever get rid of the man if the old lady encouraged him so?

"I trust your mother is well," she remarked rather stiffly. "She was no doubt distressed at losing you even for a short time."

This was rather hard on Jean Paul, and had the effect of driving him into silence. The prospect of meeting

his mother after this expedition, of which at present she was entirely unaware, was far from delightful, but he fortified himself with the reflection that, should he be successful in his quest, he should not have to meet the intrepid lady alone. He was desiring to be able to persuade Mademoiselle Vincent to return at once, under his escort if possible, but at any rate without delay, and marry him as soon as the necessary formalities could be arranged.

He opened his mouth once or twice in a futile effort to speak, but was daunted by the company in which he found himself, and swallowed his impatience in two cups of tea.

At last Miss Anne rose.

"You will like to have a few words with Mademoiselle Vincent, Monsieur," she said politely. "We will adjourn for a short time, and thus give you the opportunity of discussing your home news with her."

She strolled off with Molly, leaving the others to follow, which they speedily did, and Barbara most unwillingly was left to entertain her unwelcome suitor.

"What in the world has the fellow come for?" asked Phil. "I can't understand his lingo myself. I never was much of a hand at French."

"It is a beautiful and most poetic language," said Miss Margaret.

"It may be," returned the lad. "I know a few words, of course. Just a few useful sentences like 'Rien ne vas plus,' and 'Cherchez la femme'; also I am aware that the French for legs is 'legumes,' but that is pretty near as far as I can go."

Miss Margaret laughed rather primly.

"You are mistaken," she corrected; "'legumes' means vegetables, not—ahem!—what you suppose."

"Shall we walk this way?"

They proceeded along a path which brought them in a few minutes in full view of the orchard, although at some distance away, and there they saw a sight which held Miss Margaret positively enthralled with interest, but which sent her companion off into a muffled paroxysm of laughter.

Barbara, looking hot and flushed, but very determined, was standing with her hands clasping the back of a chair, which she held firmly in front of her, while on the other side of this frail but effectual barrier Jean Paul knelt upon the ground, his hands clasped over the region of his heart, his face and his voice raised in impassioned entreaty.

"I say," muttered the boy, "I call that a bit thick. I think some one had better go and rescue Barbara."

He found his mother, who was walking with Miss Anne, who leaned upon her nephew's arm.

"I say, mother," he began, "the worthy French gentleman is getting a little out of hand. I think it is about time some one got an oar in; he's making the running pretty hot."

"What do you mean?" asked Molly.

"Well, he's on his knees in front of Barbara, who seems to be doing a bit of useful work in warding him off with a chair."

Molly laughed, and looked at Miss Anne. She could hardly volunteer to go to Barbara. That was Miss Anne's place, surely.

"The gentleman's attitude certainly sounds a little—dramatic," said Stephen calmly. "Frenchmen are rather apt to be excited when carried away by their feelings. I think I should join them, Aunt Anne, if I were you."

The old lady hesitated.

"But," she said timidly, "Miss—Barbara may be reciprocating—I certainly trust she does not—but she may—"

"Oh, you needn't be afraid of that," said Phil quickly. "Barbara isn't quite such a goose as to want to—er—reciprocate anything to a little bounder like that—"

But Molly stopped him with a gesture.

"If you think I should go, of course I will do so," said Miss Anne, gathering up her little white shawl about her shoulders with the air of one donning armour for the fray.

"You go with her, Mrs. Arkwright," said Stephen Grant. "I'll give you five minutes, and then I'll come and com. 'e the rout."

Jean Paul rose from his lowly position at the approach of the ladies, but so great was his excitement that he was utterly unable to control it.

"Ah, Mesdames," he cried, wringing his hands together, "I beseech you to help me. I came—all the way from Rouen—to offer to Mademoiselle Vincent—to offer—myself! My intentions are all that there are of the most honourable. But Mademoiselle will not hear me. I have, in consideration for the feelings of Mademoiselle, removed myself from the house of my respected parent, thinking that my wife might perhaps prefer to have her own ménage—I have entered into a business which enables me to support a wife in a position most respectable. My business is prosperous; I can assure to my wife an income of at least four thousand francs a year, and that, Mesdames, you will agree, is absolutely satisfactory. My character is without blemish; my wife would receive every attention." He paused, and then added with increased fervour, "Also I have for Mademoiselle an adoration the most profound——"

Miss Anne's gentle voice stemmed the current of his protestations.

"I have no doubt, Monsieur, that all that you say is perfectly true, and no doubt that you pay the highest compliment to Mademoiselle; but it would be well to discover whether she views your distinguished proposal with—with—favour——"

"No, Madame," replied Barbara hotly. "I do not view the proposal of Monsieur with favour. My guardian has already, on my behalf, refused the proposal—that is to say, the proposal that Madame Laurent made on behalf of her son——"

"But," interrupted the little man, "I come now to make it for myself, to assure you personally——"

"Yes, Monsieur, that I understand," replied Barbara firmly. "but my answer is the same as that which my guardian made clear to Madame Laurent. I entirely decline your offer of marriage, and I regret that you should have been at pains to travel so far on a journey so utterly fruitless."

This was certainly plain speaking, but it did not prevent Jean Paul from repeating the numerous advantages which the girl would reap in becoming his wife, and from repeating the embarrassing assurances of his affection, which he had already given more than once.

Miss Anne looked flustered; the situation was becoming too much for her. Never in her quiet life had she been called upon to cope with a persistent lover whose passion brought him perilously near the verge of actual weeping. Molly, although she understood French, had forgotten a great deal of *Petite Mère's* teaching, and could not collect words adequate for the occasion. Barbara was looking angry and scornful. What was to be done?

"Monsieur without doubt is aware that the train leaves the station in about half-an-hour." Stephen's level tones fell like a douche upon the heat of the moment. "I do not know, of course, whether he proposes to return to London this evening, but if he does, I am reluctantly compelled to tell him that he must be thinking of departing."

Miss Anne held out her hand.

"I will wish you good-afternoon, Monsieur. I can but repeat what Mademoiselle has already said, that I regret that you should have had a fruitless journey."

"Bonsoir, Monsieur," repeated Molly, bowing.

"Bonsoir, Monsieur," repeated Barbara inflexibly.

Poor Jean Paul glanced first at one and then at the other with an expression not unlike that of a frustrated rabbit, and then, bowing with but little of the exuberance which had characterized his previous display of politeness, he accompanied Stephen without another word.

"Monsieur will, I trust, accept the convenience of my car. It will take him to the station, and ensure his rapid and safe arrival. Permit me to offer you a cigar. I have found a cigar most soothing on occasions."

The Frenchman's spirit had departed. He accepted the cigar; he then allowed himself to be conducted to the car without a murmur, and in another moment found himself speeding away from the vicinity of his adored

one at a pace which made the safety of his life his first and most engrossing consideration. For the time at least his abject terror drove all thought of his personal affliction from his mind.

For Stephen, who for some reason which he could not have explained was raging with suppressed fury under his calm exterior, had, by way of working off some of his feelings, whispered a few words to his man, and that worthy was only too willing to follow his master's injunction and "drive like——"

Miss Anne's only comment to Barbara upon the occurrence of the afternoon was to express her fervent hope that such a thing would not happen again, and the girl, who had felt some apology necessary for the disturbance created by her would-be suitor, could only echo the wish from the bottom of her heart.

CHAPTER XXIII

FAIR DAY

"Chafferings and chatterings at the Market Cross."

TENNYSON.

THE old square at St. Ethel's presented an unusually gay appearance even for a Saturday; for it was the day of the annual fair, and in addition to all the usual weekly booths which stood in their accustomed positions, a quantity of gaily-painted caravans were lined up on one side of it. Close beside them a merry-go-round was whirling to the discordant strains of a full band, as represented by a huge orchestrion which blared out popular airs at the utmost strength of its iron lungs. Men in charge of cocoanut shies encouraged their patrons with forcible and cheering remarks, while above the din echoed the somewhat hysterical laughter of young men and maidens who found the precarious angles and dizzy soarings of the swinging boats highly exhilarating.

A small crowd had collected round the seller of a much appreciated sweetmeat, known locally as "hum-bugs," large lumps of sugar, striped brown and yellow, and strongly flavoured with peppermint. The man was at the moment engaged in manufacturing a fresh supply of the dainty, and stood beside his caravan, drawing out a rope of sticky sweetness as thick as his arm, and curling it back upon itself with a dexterous twist born of long practice in the art. The further end of the "rope" was attached to an iron hook on the van, and again and again he looped and twisted and kneaded it until it should arrive at the precise consistency which would make it brittle when cold. He punctuated the performance with scraps of

conversation, and his rough wit was evidently well received by the onlookers, who roared with laughter at each fresh sally.

Barbara, with a large basket on her arm, was standing with the Arkwright children watching the man with interest, not unmingled with aversion, for the state of his hands was not all that could be desired.

"Wait until he has finished," said Tony, "and then we will buy some of the fresh lot; it is much better when it is freshly made."

"Oh, Tony, you can't eat that; I am sure it could not be good, his hands are so dreadfully dirty."

"Can't I? That's all you know; and, what's more, you'll find it jolly good yourself."

"'Humbugs' are heavenly," murmured Patsy, with glistening eyes.

"Don't look at his hands if you don't like them. I expect after all it's only the suger that makes them look black. Besides, you can't be too particular. So long as a thing's good, it's much better not to worry."

After which philosophical remark Tony dashed forward to obtain his pennyworth.

"I should like to make that stuff," said Lance. "I wonder how long it would take me to learn that twist he gives it? I can't see why it doesn't break; he must have pulled it out three or four yards before he flung it back again."

"He certainly was very clever," agreed Barbara, "and I grant you the sweets, now they are finished, look very good."

Tony returned, his cheek betraying the lurking presence of an enormous "humbug."

"Jolly good. Here, Barbara, take one. Here you are, Pat. Put it in whole, Barbara, it's not a bit of good to try and bite it."

"But supposing we meet any one, I certainly couldn't speak!"

"We shan't meet any one; or, if we do, they'd be in the same state. Every one eats 'humbugs' at fair time."

"There!" said the girl in triumph, after a moment, "I have broken a piece off."

"Coward!" mumbled Lance, with a grin.

Happy but speechless, they wandered on past the rows of toys and china and odds and ends, and lingered for a while to listen to a man who was selling cheap lace curtains. He was evidently a foreigner, for he wore large gold ear-rings, and his English was decidedly quaint.

"Missus! Missus! you come buy—sheep! ver' sheep! Goot! ver' goot! Von shillin' 'levenpence for von pair. You not fin' so goot, no, not in any ole place as vot I sell you 'ere."

"They was one and six-three last year," retorted a buxom woman in the crowd.

"But not so goot. I haf never had so good before, they are mooch better."

"Garn! not a bit of it. The ones I had was just the same, same pattern an' all. The very spit of those; I've got 'em hanging up at 'ome now. I'll give you one and six-threc for another pair, but not a happence more. Not if I knows it."

"No, no, me ver' poor man, me, and all things ver' expensive for me. These goot lace. Cost me lot of money. Von shillin' elevenpence."

"Have it your own way," was the good-humoured reply, "only if yer don't want my money, you can go without."

The man waxed excited, and vociferated loudly; but in the end, as might have been expected, the woman came off the victor, for suddenly he rolled the article in question into a ball and flung it unerringly right in her face, while his assistant youth collected the hard-earned cash. The populace cheered, and the woman marched off in triumph.

The next excitement was the merry-go-round. In vain Patsy and the boys begged Barbara to accompany them and taste the charms of riding on a real striped tiger, or a ferocious-looking crocodile.

I'll stay and watch you. You go on. I'm terrified

at the tiger, and the crocodile frightens me even more."

Patsy looked superior.

"There isn't no sense in being frightened," she said loftily. "I'm not frightened. You watch me do it, and then perhaps you'll come."

Barbara's eyes followed the happy child as she climbed up on to the fearsome beast. Tony seated himself behind, and held her tightly as the machine started. Patsy gave a shriek, half ecstasy, half terror, for the tiger, not content with whirling, was executing a most uncomfortable up and down movement at the same time.

The second time they passed, Patsy was hanging on with a face of grim determination, but presently she settled down, and was able to wave and smile as she passed. Round and round they went, until at last the machine slowed down, and they came running back again.

"Oh, Barbara, it was heavenly! First I was a little frightened, but after you got used to it, it was awfully lovely."

"Oh, let's go again!"

"We can't go again," said Lance. "We finished all our money. I only had sixpence, and the tiger is twopence each."

The child's face fell.

"Are you sure you haven't got even a penny more, because we might go in the car. That's only a penny."

The boy turned out his pocket. "Not a one. I used my pennies for the coconut shy."

"Oh, look!" cried Patsy shrilly, in delight. "There's Mr. Stephen! Here we are! Here we are!" she called shrilly at the top of her voice.

Stephen Grant, striding through the throng, turned in surprise and came towards them.

"Hullo, Patsy! How are you, Miss Vincent? Did you ever hear such an uproar?"

Patsy danced with glee.

"Isn't it lovely?"

"You wouldn't think it lovely if you were staying at the "White Hart" and had this going on all the time under your windows, as I have," he returned.

Patsy gave him a graphic description of her ride on the tiger, adding the information that she hadn't felt a teeny bit seasick, although Daddy had said she would.

"Oh! do make Barbara go on! She won't, and I know she'd love it!"

"No, thank you," said Barbara, laughing. "I feel safer where I am."

"Oh, but Mr. Stephen would go too, wouldn't you, Mr. Stephen? And you could hold her quite tight round the middle like Tony held me, and she couldn't possibly fall off."

"I hardly think I would recommend Miss Vincent to make the attempt," he answered, with his slow smile. "You go again Patsy, and show me how it ought to be done."

There was a slight pause, and Grant, comprehending the difficulty, produced a coin out of his pocket and gave it to the boys.

"Here you are. Cut along with you, and take great care of your sister."

"Couldn't we spend just a little of it on the pig-faced lady?" asked the child longingly. "I do want to see her so much."

"No, Patsy," said Lance, "Mother wouldn't like it."

"She isn't worth seeing," said Stephen, with conviction.

"Are you sure?"

"Perfectly certain."

Patsy's face brightened.

"I'm so glad!" she said fervently.

"It's stopping now!" exclaimed Tony. "Come on, or we shall lose our chance."

They ran off, and Barbara and Stephen stood watching them for a time, until the girl said she must be returning home.

"How did you come?" he asked.

"I rode on the bicycle, Monsieur."

"Does it go all right?"

"Oh! it is a beauty, and I can come so quickly now. It used to take me so long to walk, and now I can save so much time. It is kind of you and Miss Anne to let me ride it."

"Where is it?"

"I left it at the inn at the top of the street. I was afraid to bring it among so many people for fear it would be damaged."

"Let me carry your basket for you, won't you?"

"No, thank you, Monsieur. It is not heavy."

He insisted, however, and they walked on together. Their progress was of necessity slow through the crowd, and after a few minutes they found their way barred by a woman, who burst into a stream of words as she caught sight of them.

"Let me tell your fortune, pretty lady. Let an old woman tell your fortune. Isn't it the best of all that I can see written on the face of you? Just a touch of silver across my hand, kind sir, and I can tell it true."

Stephen motioned her to stand aside, but she paid no heed to his gesture.

"A little silver coin, kind sir. It'll bring you luck. Let the pretty lady hear all the fortune that will come to her. It's good luck, I can see that in the bright eyes of her, and I'll read the future written on her hand as plain as you would read your Bible! Don't say 'No' to an old woman who will speak the truth to you!"

The old gipsy's face, although deeply lined, bore traces of still a certain beauty; she must have been strikingly handsome in her youth, and there was something pleasantly attractive in her voice as she strove to persuade them to yield to her demand. Barbara could not help smiling at her.

"There, now!" was the instant response. "The pretty dear will let me bring her luck. She wants to

know what's coming! 'Twill be a rich husband, dearie"—her voice dropped confidentially. "Let an old gipsy read your hand, you won't regret it." Then, turning to Grant again, she repeated, "Just a silver coin for luck, and it'll be your fortune I shall see plain upon her palm."

Stephen glanced at the girl's animated face.

"Would it amuse you?" he asked.

Barbara laughed merrily.

"Do you think she really can tell what is going to happen?"

"Yes, yes, dearie, that I can," was the rejoinder, and the gipsy, quick to take advantage of the first sign of yielding held out her hand to Stephen. "A bit of silver, master, and you shall hear."

The next moment her pertinacity was rewarded, for Stephen tendered her a florin, and quick as thought she had seized the girl's ungloved hand and had crossed the palm with it. Then, bending over it, she began to speak with the half chanting, half mysterious tone which was part of the magic rite.

"You have crossed the sea, and you will cross it again, not once, but many times. There is sunshine in a distant land. There are lives which cross yours as the tracks cross the open moor. There is a dark woman who bears you ill will—beware of her, for she will try to do you harm. There are two men, both of whom will love you, and one of them you will choose, and there is plenty of gold. It is a great fortune—and it will come to you before many moons are over. It will come in a way you do not expect, but it will come. You will have some sorrow first, but only a passing sorrow, and then you and the one you choose will walk the same track, and it shall be smooth under the feet of you. You will——"

But Barbara drew her hand away, half frightened at the gipsy's eerie way of speaking.

"I don't think I want to hear any more now," she said, with a little laugh that was more than half nervousness.

"Then don't," said Stephen quickly, "we'll walk on. There's nothing in it really, you know."

The woman drew herself up.

"The pretty lady has no need to be afraid," she said, with a certain dignity, "and as for there being nothing in it, time will show."

"Well, you've prophesied good fortune at any rate," he said cheerfully, "so we'll hope it will come true. Good day to you, and thank you."

"They always tell every one the same thing," he continued, as they passed on their way. "A dark woman or a fair woman as the case may be, who is to be avoided, and lovers and a fortune dropping from the skies. It is the gipsy's usual stock-in-trade. I only hope for your sake it will come true."

"At all events she did not foretell anything dreadful," replied the girl lightly; then she added, "the inn is close by now, Monsieur. Will you not let me take my basket; please do not inconvenience yourself for me."

"I'll see you safely started. I have nothing to do."

On arrival at the yard he wheeled the machine out for her, and helped her to secure the basket on the carrier at the back.

"How are my aunts?" he asked meanwhile.

"Miss Margaret is as usual," she answered, "but I do not think Miss Anne is well. She has, I am sure, been sleeping badly of late."

"Has she seen a doctor?"

"No, Monsieur—and indeed I hardly think it is necessary at present, but I have noticed she is very pale, and seems fatigued."

"I can't come over to-day, for I am going away this afternoon, but I hope you will insist on her sending for the doctor if she doesn't get better."

"I will do my best," replied Barbara. "But Miss Anne has an objection to doing so. Should she be worse I will tell her that you wish it."

"I ought to thank you for all your care of her," he said. "If you are really worried about her, and can't get her to see any one, will you just drop me a line?"

He put his hand into his pocket as he spoke and took out his letter case. "I will give you my address. My letters are always forwarded wherever I may be."

They were standing at the edge of the pavement with the bicycle between them, when a large car came swiftly round the corner, without sounding the horn or giving any notice of its approach.

"Look out!" cried Stephen, and the girl sprang quickly back, escaping the wheel only by a few inches.

"What in thunder are you doing, sir?" he shouted angrily. The man at the wheel made no reply, but a lady who was sitting in the back of the car jumped up and waved her hand.

"I hope you weren't startled," said Stephen quickly. "They had no earthly right to come round the corner at such a pace."

"I am quite right, thank you," she answered; and then, taking the car he held out to her, "I will be sure and let Monsieur know should there be any real anxiety, but I do not think you need fear it."

She gave him a little bow, and wheeling her bicycle for a few yards, she mounted and rode away.

Grant stood watching her. A slim, upright figure in a dark linen skirt and dainty white blouse such as she usually wore. Barbara was always extremely neat and dainty in her appearance, and wore her simple clothes with a grace that made them appear finer than they were.

"Hullo, Stephen!" came a laughing voice at his elbow. "We nearly ran your charmer down. Who is she?"

He turned, to find Flora Moultrie standing looking at him with quizzing eyes.

"Where did you come from?" he asked in astonishment.

"I? Oh, I am staying with some people for the week-end at Daunton, and they insisted on bringing me over to see the Abbey. I can't say that architecture is much in my line, but still I am glad I came, because I have met you. I thought perhaps I might see you.

You seem to find St. Ethel's wonderfully interesting. You have stayed here for weeks!"

"The Abbey is certainly worth seeing. It will repay a visit."

She nodded carelessly.

"But you haven't answered my question."

"What question?"

"Who was the fair damsel with the bike?"

"That was—she lives with my aunts," he said shortly.

"She did look like nothing on earth," continued Flora lightly, "perched up with that basket of vegetables behind her! The leeks will probably jolt out on her way home."

Stephen made no reply, and it struck Flora that he was not in a very good temper, so she tried conciliation.

"We are going to lunch at the "White Hart." Come and join us, won't you? We are quite a cheery party. Unless you are too annoyed with Bill Harrison for his reckless driving. He certainly came round that corner a bit fast."

"He did," retorted Stephen. "No, thank you very much, I am afraid I can't come to lunch. I am lunching with the Arkwrights, and going off to Devonshire directly afterwards."

"To Devonshire? That's rather sudden, isn't it?"

"I am often rather sudden," he rejoined. "I am more used to moving about than you are; and, after all, something under a couple of hundred miles isn't a great matter."

"Are you going in the car?"

"Yes, it ought to be rather jolly. The roads are good going now."

As they walked along, Flora was wondering what in the world could be the reason of this sudden journey of Stephen's.

"How long shall you be away?" was her next question.

"Oh, I don't know. A fortnight or three weeks," he said vaguely.

"Here are the rest of the party. Do come and do

the honours of the place, and show us what is worth seeing."

"With pleasure," he replied. "What would you like to see first?"

She could not question him further at the moment, nor could she discover what she was dying to know, namely, who the party going to Devonshire were. She could only summon what patience she could muster and await events to enlighten her.

Before they parted, she reminded him of the engagement they had made to stay with mutual friends in August, and lightly remarked that she should of course be seeing him before that, to which he replied that would probably be the case, a statement which did not commit him to anything, and which was hardly reassuring to her. It afforded her food for thought. Unless she was prepared to lose her hold upon Stephen altogether, it was time that something was done. But at present she could not make up her mind what that something should be.

Meanwhile Barbara rode up to the "White House," where she found Molly very busy and in excellent spirits.

"Isn't it splendid," she said. "Stephen Grant is really a kind friend. He is going to take Phil away for a fortnight's fishing. It is just the very thing for the boy. He needs a holiday so badly."

"It does seem a pity your husband cannot go too."

"Yes, it is; but still I must be thankful for small mercies, and I was horribly bothered to know how Phil could get a change. He has been working so hard. That kind Stephen went down to see Mr. Roach, and settled it all before I knew anything about it."

Phil joined them a little later, full of delight at the prospect.

"We are going to drive all the way down, and then spend our time pursuing the piscatorial art. I shall return an ardent disciple of the venerable Isaac Wiltton, although my efforts in that direction have hitherto been restricted to the use of the nimble but

despised worm. Well, Barbara, have you had an impassioned epistle from your French Johnny?"

"No," returned Barbara, laughing, "thank goodness, I have not!"

"I rather wonder at it. Poor spirited fellow to yield thus easily! I should have unloosed the fountain of my inmost heart—not the fountain pen, mark you—and poured my blood upon the unsullied page to soften the feelings of my stony-souled goddess."

"Phil, don't talk such abject rubbish!" cried his mother.

"Words indited in sanguinary sadness, running red upon the virgin page, might well draw tears from Barbara's eyes."

"Oh, stop, do!" commanded his mother. "You are really too foolish for words, and I am thankful that Stephen is going to have charge of you for a bit."

"Have charge of me! As though I were a lunatic. Not a bit of it. I deny the suggestion utterly. Stephen and I are to be companions, not warder and prisoner. In fact, to tell the truth, Stephen will derive great benefit from my society. The companionship of one whose youthful mind is so full of enthusiasm, and whose eyes are ever ready to behold the lighter and brighter side of life, will, I am sure, be of inestimable value to one who might be called a trifle weighed down by the burden of—well, I don't quite know what. What is it that has frozen the stream of our Stephen's youthful joy? He hardly looks like the victim of an unrequited affection, nor does he seem to me to be brooding over some secret and hitherto unsuspected crime which weighs upon his conscience; but he is not as light-hearted and debonair as I should like him to be. *Nous allons changer tous cela!*" declaimed the boy in atrocious French, and in an accent to match it, "also——"

"I don't want to hear any more," declared his mother, putting her hands over her ears. "Do go away!"

And putting on a deeply offended air, Phil retired.

"I can't stay more than a minute," said Barbara. "I

really ought not to have come, for I have wasted time already at the fair with the boys and Patsy. Miss Anne will think I am lost."

"Did you meet Mr. Grant?"

"Yes, I saw him; he is coming up here to luncheon. How is Dick?"

"Just about the same. Perhaps I might say he was a trifle better, if anything. Stephen's company has been good for him. It has taken his mind off his weakness."

"Which day can the boys and Patsy come up to Fancy's Farm with me?" asked the girl. "John Strong is always asking for us, and I think they would enjoy it."

"I know they would. Why should they not go on Wednesday? It is the boys' half-holiday, and they could ride over and pick you up on the way."

"Very well, that will do excellently. I will arrange it with John Strong next time I see him. I do not see him so often now that I ride the bicycle. He used so often to give me a lift on market day."

"You enjoy the riding, don't you?"

"Very much, and it is kind of Miss Anne to permit it, because every time I go out she expects me to be brought home with a broken head, if not altogether killed. I will come over one evening if I can, and let you know which day we will go to Fancy's."

"Do, dear," said Molly warmly, and soon after the girl took her leave.

CHAPTER XXIV

VOICES IN THE NIGHT

"Sad experience leaves no room for doubt."

POPE.

BARBARA sat by the little window of her room late that evening, her elbows resting on the sill, her chin propped on her clasped hands, and her eyes gazing out into the night. The room was dark behind her, for she had extinguished her candle. The moon was shining brightly, but its light was shadowed now and again by soft clouds which floated across the star-strewn sky. Ever since her childhood it had been her habit to look out at the sky just before going to bed, and to bid the stars good-night, and during the loneliness of her first few months in England she had found comfort in the thought that Petite Mère, peeping out of her window at the little Pavilion, could see these selfsame stars. It seemed a link between them across the distance which divided. Their hearts and thoughts could bridge that distance, could make nothing of it, just as those twinkling stars made nothing of illimitable space. Sometimes Petite Mère would write, "Venus was bright last night, ma bien aimée, didst thou not notice it?" and even though perhaps on the night in question Venus had been shrouded from Barbara's view, still behind the clouds she was certainly there. A foolish idea, perhaps, but strangely comforting, nevertheless!

Everything was very peaceful, very still. Now and again a sound would break the stillness, but it would be a homely, everyday sound, such as a dog barking in the village, or a sheep bleating in the meadow beyond the orchard. The perfume of a sweetbrier bush below her window scented the air, and close to her she could

see a spray of the rose which clambered up the side of the cottage. At the end of the spray was a cluster of buds, some of them already showing a glimpse of white, which would presently burst into delicate blossom. Truly there were, as Père Joseph had told her, many roses in life, white and pink and damask. The garden was full of rose trees, all coming into bloom. They were beautiful, and she loved them, although they were not blue roses—she smiled a little sadly. Evidently blue roses were not for her. It was vain to hope for them. She thought of the gipsy's prophecy, of the fortune which was to come to her before many moons had passed, but—what a ridiculous idea—certainly not worth consideration. It was without doubt true, as Monsieur Stephen had said, that such pleasant predictions were part of a fortune-teller's business. It was their affair to foretell only good things, such as lovers and a fortune, but most decidedly she had made a mistake this time. In this case the absurdity was proved by the mention of a dark woman who bore her ill-will, for she knew no one who could be said to answer the description. No, no, the dreams of her fortune and her journey with Petite Mère were just nothing but Blue Roses. Flowers growing only in the realm of the Unattainable.

Although by dint of strict economy and a certain amount of self-sacrifice she might be able to save enough money for a visit home after a year or two, yet it was obviously absurd and out of all reason to contemplate the possibility, however remote, of earning enough for that longer journey—"to find the fairies," as Petite Mère had called it. In spite of all her determination to put aside all vain longings and expectations, Barbara had not found it easy to uproot the last lingering hope from her mind. Her Petite Fortune had been to her for so long the Golden Key which was to unlock a veritable world of delight, that it was difficult to realize that the enchanted door must remain closed for ever. But now, this evening, after many and repeated inquiries on the part of Petite Mère, she had written and told her the whole truth at last. She had also written more

fully as to the state of her own mind and feelings than ever before, for at last she could say that she was quite happy in her new life. As she thought this over she wondered a little at herself, because it was not so very long since Molly had asked the question, and she had not been able to answer it in the affirmative; and yet to-night, in writing to Chérie, she had not hesitated to say it, and she knew that it was true.

She was quite happy. What had made the difference? Was she, perhaps, becoming accustomed to exile, or was it the beauty and the brightness of summer that affected her, and made her so gay at heart? It was certainly not that distance lessened her affection for Petite Mère and for her home, with all its cherished associations; no, decidedly not—she thought of them constantly with the fondest love; but for all her earnest desire to see them again she was aware that she could not part from her present surroundings without the deepest regret. Dear Miss Anne, with her gentle kindness; simple Miss Margaret, with her foolish affectionate ways; and Molly, and the children, they were all so dear to her now. They had, one and all, shown her so much kindness—they had made her feel so one with them. Oh, if Fate had only ordered otherwise, and her Golden Key had turned in the lock, what could she not have done for Molly? Poor Molly, harassed and distressed by circumstances against which she fought so bravely. Then her thoughts turned to Miss Anne, and the question of her health. It was quite true, as she had told Stephen Grant earlier that day, that Miss Anne was far from well. The old lady had not complained, indeed she seemed to resent any allusion to the subject, but there was no doubt that she suffered greatly from loss of sleep, and that her nervousness had increased of late.

For the first, Barbara thought she knew the reason. The noise in the lane, which she had noticed on the first evening of her arrival at the Porch Cottage, and at intervals during the whole time she had lived there, had occurred more frequently during the last fortnight

or so. She had heard it certainly twice and sometimes three times a week.

It evidently disturbed Miss Anne, and Barbara wondered whether something could not be done to stop the annoyance. It was surely abominable that old ladies, living in a quiet country village, should be alarmed night after night by some noisy labourer returning from an evening spent at the "Fiddle." She thought of telling John Strong about it, and asking him if he could not do something. There was no question but that Miss Anne was terrified by it. It was unreasonable, because it could mean no possible danger to her, but that was neither here nor there. One evening the shouting had been clearly audible just as the sisters were going to bed, and Miss Anne had run hurriedly to the door and pushed at the bolts, which were already perfectly securely fastened, and then had stood with a scared, ashen face, almost fainting with agitation. Barbara had in vain assured her that no one could possibly enter, and that she was perfectly safe. Miss Anne had remained as if frozen into stone, and had not spoken again that night.

The disturbance was getting on her nerves, and if it did not cease, she would undoubtedly become seriously ill. The whole matter was rather mysterious, and in the face of Miss Anne's reticence, Barbara had not liked to tell Stephen Grant the real cause of her failing health. She told herself that she would be on the watch in future, and take care that Miss Anne should never be alone at these times which tried her so much.

Hark! What was that? Voices! Oh, it was abominable!

Never had it happened so late at night before, and just now poor Miss Anne would probably be awakened from her first sleep. The girl leaned further out as the sounds came nearer, thinking perhaps that she would see who the offender was, and be able to put kind John Strong on his track, but the moon had disappeared behind a cloud, and the light was very faint. Nearer and nearer came the footsteps. There must be two men,

she thought, from the steps. And nearer came the sound of singing. It seemed always to be the same tune, a tune she did not know, and it was always roared out in a strong and hearty voice.

Listen!—she could hear it more clearly to-night, she had never chanced to be at the open window before.

“Of all the wives as e'er you know—O—O—O
 Yeo, ho! lads, ho! Yeo, ho! lads, ho!
 There's none like Nancy Lee I trow—O—O—O
 Yeo, ho! Yeo, ho! Yeo, ho!”

“Strange,” thought the listening girl, “that is surely the song of which Miss Margaret spoke the other day. It was, I suppose, fashionable when she was young, and is now sung by the peasants!”

Apparently the singer had halted at the wicket gate for Barbara was almost sure she heard it rattle. Then another voice spoke. Husky, half whisperin' but perfectly distinct—

“For the love of God, will you be coming home now? sure you'll be disturbin' of the ladies wid' your noise!”

“See there she stands and waves her hand upon the quay.
 An' ev'ry day when I'm away she'll watch for me,
 An' whisper low when tempests blow for Jack at sea
 Yeo, ho! lads, ho! Yeo, ho!”

“Arrah! will ye not come home,” repeated the second voice, almost in a wail.

The light was brighter now, and for a second Barbara caught a glimpse of two men standing by the gate, but the next moment it was so dark again. There followed sounds which indicated a struggle, as though the second man had tried a more forcible means of persuasion and with some success, for the footsteps began again, and the singing seemed passing further off.

Still Barbara watched; she knew a bit of the lane about twenty yards further on was visible from where she stood, and she waited in the hope that the cloud would drift away soon enough for her to see, and, if

possible, to recognize the man, for she knew most of the villagers well enough by sight.

And then, for one brief second she saw them. There were two men, and one was holding the other by the arm. The one thus held was reeling as he walked, and it was evident that although his voice was steady, or fairly so, his legs were very much the reverse. But their backs were towards her, and she could distinguish nothing that gave her the slightest clue to their identity.

When all was still again, she came away from the window and went to bed, feeling furiously indignant with the offenders; but even indignation will not keep sleep from healthy youth, and in a few minutes she was lost in a restless slumber.

Meanwhile, in the adjoining room, Miss Anne lay roused, touching every limb, her thin hands pressed against her ears, her poor heart beating wildly with heavy, intermittent throbs—too frightened to move, too anguished even to pray.

Barbara came down next morning with her mind fully made up. She would certainly speak to John Strong next time she saw him. There must be an end to it.

Miss Anne looked pitifully weak and frail, but she put the girl's sympathetic inquiries aside, kindly but quite firmly, and went about her usual occupations with a pretence at composure.

She announced, however, that she should not go to church. This was contrary to her habit, for Miss Anne was regular in her devotions, although Miss Margaret seldom accompanied her. Barbara felt so troubled by the appearance of the elder lady that she stayed indoors so as to be at hand if needed; but after tea Miss Anne herself suggested that she should go to evening service, and the girl, unwilling to oppose her, agreed and went.

Fiddler's Green was an outlying part of the parish of St. Ethel's, and the services were usually taken by the senior curate, Mr. Poole but rarely coming over to preach except on some special occasion. The former, who

officiated this evening, was a worthy young man, but a most indifferent preacher, and Barbara's thoughts wandered very far from the clauses of his discourse. She was thinking of the *pasteur* at home, and the simple services in the bare little church where the congregation of scarcely a dozen souls had sung the old French metrical version of the Psalms with more vigour than musical knowledge, while his old sister, Mademoiselle Françoise, as she was called, pedalled away on the wheezy harmonium with her short-sighted eyes within an inch of the book. She had a very pointed nose, and looked very comic when she played, but the recollection was a part, and a dear part, of the old home life. So lost in her thoughts was the girl that she forgot where she was, until with a start she found that all had risen to sing the closing hymn, and the service was over.

She found her place in her hymn-book, but it was one she did not know, and so she listened instead of joining in it. Presently she became aware of a man singing in a shaky but powerful voice close behind her, and all at once it struck her that the voice sounded very much the same as the one that she had heard in the lane on the previous evening. It was strange that the voice of some one singing a hymn in church should resemble the somewhat hilarious song of last night, but certainly some of the notes sounded very much the same! She was sitting in Miss Leigh's pew, which was rather far up the aisle, and as she turned, a few minutes later, to leave the church, she glanced quickly to see who had been sitting behind her. But no, she must have been mistaken in the direction from which the sound had come, for in the seats close by were only a few women, two small boys, and old Major Vasey, who, with his tall hat in his hand, and with an expression, if anything, more melancholy than ever, was just walking into the aisle. "Poor old man," she thought to herself, "he certainly is the saddest old thing I have ever seen. I wonder what his life has been, and whether he has spent the whole of it at Fiddler's Green, paying short but frequent calls upon dear Miss Anne. I wonder if Miss

Anne refused him in the days of her youth, and whether that is the reason of his sadness?"

It so happened that Miss Margaret had one of her bad turns the next day; Barbara was too much occupied in helping Miss Anne to look after her to have time to carry out her intention of speaking to John Strong, and before the week had passed, something happened which made that course of action impossible.

Miss Margaret kept to her bed for two or three days, but although still upstairs she was more or less herself again, when one evening, at about five o'clock, Barbara asked Miss Anne to come out into the garden to see the roses. It was beautifully warm, and the fresh air would do her good. She fetched a light shawl, and threw it across the old lady's shoulders, and offering her her arm, led her out for a little stroll.

"I want you to come and see the bush at the bottom of the garden," she said. "It has fully two dozen splendid buds on it, I am sure."

"It always blooms well," answered Miss Anne. "Mr. Poole gave it to me. It was a cutting from one in his own garden, and Sammlle Dodge budded it on to a brier. Last year the caterpillars spoiled many of the flowers, and the leaves too."

"This year they shall not have a chance," said Barbara brightly. "I will make war on the caterpillars and destroy them. See, here is one now, a tiny baby one, curled up inside the leaf. That one will not live to eat the roses! I must spray them with soapy water, that is a good thing. There is going to be a good quantity of lavender, Miss Anne. That will be useful for the presses, won't it?"

Miss Anne smiled at the girl's manner.

"Very useful," she assented; "we will tie it up in muslin bags when it is ripe and dried. You do not find the days too dull here, I hope, Barbara?" she said timidly; "I am afraid you have not a great deal of gaiety."

"I do not find them at all dull. There is always so much to be done. All these last few mornings I have

been saying to myself, 'To-day I will weed Miss Margaret's garden, so that it shall be tidy for her when she comes downstairs,' and each evening I have not yet done it. Now, to-morrow it really shall be done! I will get up early on purpose."

"It is very kind and thoughtful of you to take so much trouble," said the old lady earnestly. "I do not think there are many girls of your age who would be so interested in giving pleasure to elderly people as you are. I am very grateful to you, my dear," she added, laying a kind hand on the girl's arm.

"I like to do things for you and Miss Margaret," she said a little shyly. "I should be so glad if you would tell me if there is anything you would prefer me to do differently."

"There is nothing," replied Miss Anne quickly. "You have done everything for us since you came, and made us so very comfortable. I thought we should never cease to miss our old Marie, but really I cannot say that I miss her at all—in fact, I think I was always a tiny bit afraid of Marie, she was so—very fond of her own way," said the old lady pensively. "I do not mean for a moment that she was not generally perfectly right, but sometimes it is pleasanter to have one's own wishes carried out, even if they are not—quite—perfect."

Barbara smiled at Miss Anne's way of expressing herself. She had never, of course, known the excellent Marie, but she could easily imagine the good Frenchwoman terrorizing the gentle old lady, for Miss Anne would always come off worst in any encounter of wills.

"I am afraid, my dear," she continued after a moment, "that a young girl like you cannot find our quiet life here very interesting, and it must be very different to what you have been accustomed to. You are young, and we are growing old—I might almost say we have grown old, and we live, think chiefly, on our memories of the past now. Youth looks forward, and old age looks back. We have not lived a dull life, or we have never found it dull. Some people might have, things move more rapidly now-a-days than they used to, but I

think people are apt to think that a quiet life in the country must needs be a dull one. Because a stream moves smoothly it does not mean that it is shallow, nor does it mean"—Miss Anne gave a sigh as she spoke—"that there are no stones under the surface. They are, perhaps not apparent to onlookers, but they are there all the same. You must see as much of Mrs. Arkwright as you can, and ask those delightful children of hers to come over whenever it is possible. I have always been fond of children, and it will be pleasant for you to have them here."

They walked round the garden, chatting of this and that, and Barbara was glad to find that the sunshine and the soft air seemed to restore Miss Anne's spirits a little, and to be doing her good. She seemed to be stronger and more herself than she had been all the day, and evidently appreciated the girl's efforts to interest and amuse her by pointing out little things as they came to them.

They were standing at last close to the porch, their stroll having come to an end, when a slight noise at the gate made them turn. A man was in the act of opening it, and as they watched he pushed the latch and walked in. For a moment Barbara did not recognize who it was. Miss Anne took one glance at the approaching figure, and then seized the girl's arm.

"No, Barbara, no!" she gasped quickly. "I am not at home. I am not at home."

And then, looking a second time, Barbara saw that their visitor was Major Vasey. Miss Anne's behaviour was, however, so unusual that she thought she must have been feeling suddenly ill, and must claim first attention. The visitor could wait. Supporting her with her arm, she led her quickly indoors.

"Go and lie down, will you not, Miss Anne?" she said, with some concern. "I will tell Major Vasey that you are not well enough to receive him this evening."

Miss Anne only nodded, and without speaking passed quickly upstairs, motioning Barbara aside when she would have accompanied her. Having watched her to

the top of the stairs, the girl went back to the door, where the Major was standing.

"How different he looks," was her first thought. "I hardly recognized him."

And in truth the quiet, melancholy old gentleman with the drooping moustache had strangely altered. His hat was set at a jaunty angle on the side of his head, his white moustache curled upwards with a rakish twist, his eyes were bright, and his whole look distinctly truculent.

"Aw haw!" he said, twirling his moustache; "is Miss Leigh at home?"

His manner of speaking was as strange as his appearance.

"No, Monsieur," said the girl quietly, "Miss Anne regrets that she cannot receive a visitor to-day. She is not very well."

She looked at him keenly as she answered. What in the world was the matter with him?

"Not receive," he repeated thickly. "But, damme! she'll see me. I'm an old friend——" and then the Major's utterance was interrupted by a hiccough. It was quite plain and quite unmistakable.

A vision flashed through Barbara's mind, a vision of old Albert, the postman at home. Had he not spoken just in this curious way. Yes, and hiccoughed too, if the truth must be told, when on hot summer days the new brew of cider had been too strong for him; did not then his underlip hang loosely and tremble, and his eyes wander round in just this fashion?

The Major had been drinking!

He stepped forward now, and made as though to pass into the hall, but the girl barred his way.

"No, Monsieur," she said distinctly. "It is impossible that you can see Miss Anne to-day."

The old man's eyes roved round and round, and finally fixed themselves on her face. He stared at her for an appreciable moment, and then something in her fearless regard must have reached his muddled brain, for he muttered something, a few unintelligible words,

and turned away. She followed him along the path, and then, as he fumbled with the latch, she opened the gate for him.

As she did this another man came running down the lane, and stopped short as he met the Major. He saluted, military fashion, and stood to one side to allow him to pass.

"Will you be comin' home now, Sor?" he asked, in a strong Irish brogue.

There was no answer. Major Vasey, with his head bent, walked on in silence, and, followed by his servant, disappeared up the lane.

Barbara stood watching, with a lump in her throat and tears welling to her eyes. So this was the mystery! Miss Anne's old friend was a drunkard! She was not inclined to think it such an awful thing that a man should now and again take a little more than his head could stand: rather was she inclined, with Petite Mère, to excuse old Albert's occasional lapses from perfect sobriety. When the days were warm, and good cider strong and plentiful—and men were weak? *Tiens!* What was it, after all? But in this case it was different. It was the thought of what it must mean to Miss Anne, dear gentle, timid Miss Anne, that made it so tragic.

Sober—Major Vasey was a quiet, retiring old gentleman, with an old-fashioned, courteous manner, who paid constant visits to his old friend, treated her with deferential affection, and was the last person to alarm the most timid soul on earth. But drunk—he could not, it appeared, keep away from her neighbourhood, but must needs come roistering outside her house at night, terrifying her beyond bearing, and singing the very song of all others which must remind her of all she would prefer to forget. Every incident which the girl had noticed fitted together like pieces in a Chinese puzzle now that she had found the clue. The voice in church—she had not been mistaken, after all—Mr. Poole's inquiry, and the Major's own words to Miss Anne, "Better, Nancy, Better?"

Oh, the pity of it, the pity of it!

This was why, when the Major called regularly and the nights were undisturbed, Miss Anne went about the house placid, serene and gentle; but when the Major did not come, and the nocturnal noises betrayed his state, poor Miss Anne grew white and nervous, starting at a sound, and trembling at the click of the wicket gate.

And yet, the girl reflected, what could she do? If she told John Strong of the shouting at night, what more natural than that he should communicate with the police, who were surely the proper people to see that quiet and order were maintained—and this would be unbearable to Miss Anne. Was the weakness of her old friend to be made the subject of public inquiry? No, a thousand times no!

All she could do was to keep watch, to be on guard, and keep her discovery to herself.

CHAPTER XX

FANCY'S FARM

"Of all the bonny buds that blow
In bright or cloudy weather,
Of all the flowers that come and go,
The whole twelve moons together,
The little purple pansy brings,
Thoughts of the sweetest saddest things."

M. E. BRADLEY.

BARBARA did not see anything of Major Vasey for more than a fortnight after the events recorded in the previous chapter. To her great relief, however, the evenings were undisturbed, and little by little the strained look of anxiety faded from Miss Anne's face, and her health improved considerably.

When at last the old gentleman called one afternoon, he had entirely resumed his normal demeanour. There was no hint of truculence or swagger in his manner, which was again mild and subdued to the point of melancholy, and as he sat under the apple-tree conversing with the two sisters, it was hard to believe that he had ever raised his voice above its present monotone, and almost impossible to associate him with a rollicking serenade sung outside the house at an hour when all peaceable folk were in bed and asleep. Miss Anne looked much brighter when she took leave of him, and he held her hand for a moment with a look which seemed to plead for pardon, and murmured his usual "Better, Nancy, better!" before he left her at the gate. And as the days went by, he took to calling with un-failing regularity on alternate days, never staying long, but just coming to inquire after the health of the ladies, and thus assuring them that all was well with him.

The visit to Fancy's Farm had been twice arranged,

and twice postponed; first, on account of some slight indisposition on the part of Patsy, and second, owing to a wet day, but at last a half-holiday dawned on which the fates seemed propitious, and the child and her brothers arrived at the "Porch Cottage" soon after luncheon. The sky was cloudlessly blue, the weather perfect for their expedition.

Patsy was, as usual, in a state of happy excitement.

"I came all the way sitting on Lance's carrier," she cried in her shrill treble, as she saw Barbara. "Mother said I would fall off, but I knew I shouldn't. It was heavenly!"

"It may have been heavenly for you, Pat," retorted Lance, mopping his forehead, "but I assure you, you are not a feather."

"I expect it is the cushion that is heavy," returned the child cheerfully, "but it makes me much more comfy. Mother said it would. I did so want to bring Badajos! He is getting quite used to being carried now, but they wouldn't let me!"

"Can you imagine me spending the afternoon pedaling away like nothing on earth, with a squealing pig up behind?" said Lance indignantly.

"He wouldn't have squealed," replied his sister, "and I know he would have been so pleased to see his old home, and Mr. Strong would have liked to see how much he has grown."

"Be content, my child," answered Lance loftily. "And be grateful, or I shall be forced to ask you what is heavier than one fat pig on the back of a bicycle?"

"That isn't the riddle! It's under a gate, and I'm not very particularly heavy!"

"I don't know so much about that!"

"I'll take her for a bit, Lance," said Tony, "if you're tired. We are past the worst part of the road now, and there are no more hills."

"Oh, she's all right. I don't mind her really, only I do strike at Badajos."

"Oh, there's Sammlle!" cried Patsy. "I must run and speak to Sammlle."

Sammlle Dodge was engaged in planting young cabbages, and he straightened himself slowly at her approach.

"How do you do, Sammlle?" said Patsy politely.

"Well'um," he replied, "I do finely, and I trust you're the same."

"What are you doing?"

"Well'um, I be a dibbling of these young greens."

"You are doing it very nicely," remarked the child patronizingly.

"Well'um, I don't say but what I make quite a half tidy job of it. 'Tain't so much the stooping to do it, as is the trouble, it's the unstooping of myself when I comes to the end of the row. That comes a bit difficult, that do! But I ain't got no cause to complain—that is, not so much as some!"

"Sammlle," Patsy spoke confidentially, "I would love to dibble. Don't you think I could do it?"

"Well'um, I don't say as you couldn't. You wouldn't have so far to stoop, for one thing," he chuckled softly. "But then, on the other hand, that ain't so easy as it looks. That takes a bit of practice, that do, for to set the plants just so. I likes to see them coming up all ship-shape and Bristol fashion, as the saying is. Gives a better look to a garden, that do, than if things come up all just nohow and crooked as a dog's hind leg!"

"I am sure I could dibble them quite straight," she asserted positively. "I would make a little hole and pop them in, just like you do!"

"Well'um, you might, and then again you mightn't. There's another thing," continued Sammlle reflectively, without pausing in his occupation, "and that's the way you sets a plant in. That has to be set just so, that has. If you sets it too low, that don't do, and if you sets it too high, that don't do neither, so there you are! That's the worst of setting out to do a thing. It must be done just so, or it isn't no manner of use. 'Tis the case with other things than the dibbling of young cabbages!"

This illuminating dissertation on the importance of

method was beyond Patsy's comprehension, so she took leave of the worthy Sammie, and trotted back to find the others just preparing to depart. A few minutes later she was hoisted on to her perch, and the little party rode away down the lane and across the Green.

It took them little more than half-an-hour to reach Fancy's Farm, a comfortable, old-fashioned house, standing in a pretty garden with a cluster of barns and ricks behind it. John Strong was at the gate, evidently awaiting their arrival, and he welcomed them heartily.

"Come right in and see the mother," he said cheerily. "You've had a long ride, and you must rest and get cool before you go round the place."

He led them up a path bordered on either side with gay flowers. Tall lupins and Canterbury bells, and old-fashioned, sweet-smelling clove pinks, and rich purple pansies. The porch over the front door was wreathed with a Banksia rose, just now in full bloom, its long sprays clothed in clusters of delicate blossom.

"Mother is proud of her roses," he said, in reply to Barbara's words of admiration. "She sets great store by her flowers. Mother!" he called, as they entered, and in response to his call Mrs. Strong came out of an inner room to meet them.

She was a comely woman, with a pleasant, cheerful face, and Barbara noticed at once the great likeness which existed between mother and son.

"I am very glad to see you," she said heartily. "My son has told me so much about you. You are welcome to Fancy's. I have no doubt but what we can find plenty to amuse you for the afternoon."

"Let them sit down and rest first, Mother. Then the boys can go with Coles, who is waiting with the ferrets. I expect that is what you'd like best, wouldn't you? You'll find there are plenty of rabbits along the hedges of the home pasture."

The boys' eyes gleamed in anticipation of the treat, as they assured him they would enjoy it more than anything.

"You can take the terriers with you, and set them on

to the rats in the rick-yard, when you get tired of the rabbits," he continued. "Miss Vincent would like to see your dairy, mother. She has lived in France, and she will be interested to see how differently we do things over here. I'm not saying we do them better," he turned to Barbara, with a smile, "but every country has different ways, I suppose."

"And what would the little one like to do?"

"The little pigs!" murmured Patsy ecstatically. "Oh, I would love to see the little pigs!"

"Why, so you shall. I can show you plenty of them. Wait a minute or two, until your brothers have started, and then you and I will pay them a visit. There are some young calves, too. Oh, I can show you no end of little animals."

"It will be heavenly!" Patsy made her usual remark with her hands clasped in the extremity of her joy.

Barbara found herself alone with Mrs. Strong presently, and they sat and chatted for a while before starting on their tour of inspection.

"My son tells me you have not been long in England," said the older woman kindly. "I expect you find some of our ways rather strange."

"A few," answered the girl, smiling. "It seems curious that I know so little of my own country, but already I am learning to love it. Of course, I have not seen other parts of England, but it is very beautiful round here."

"Yes, you may go a long way before you find such pretty country as there is round St. Ethel's. I am a Devonshire woman myself, and when I first married and came to live here, I couldn't get used to it. I had been accustomed to steep hills and a wilder land, and this seemed flat and tame in comparison, but I came to love it dearly. To love the wide fields and the green meadows by the river side. It is a homely land to live in, and the peace of it grows to be a part of your life."

"Your flowers are so lovely. We do not have such gardens in France. Every piece of the land at home

is cultivated, but I think the people do not care to grow things for beauty, they must all be for use and profit."

"I'm all on the side of use and profit myself," said Mrs. Strong, with a twinkle in her eyes. "But I couldn't get on without my flowers. They are a wonderful help, and teach us how a bit of brightness makes the world a different place. We are but a small party here now-a-days, with one of my sons away across the water, and another married. This house is big for just John and me, and it seems silent too, sometimes, but there's always plenty to be done, always plenty to keep me busy, and that's what makes a woman's happiness. I'm thankful that one of my boys is still in the old place. John is just like his father, he loves every stick and stone of it."

"I'm sure I don't wonder at it. It is such a charming house. I am so glad to come and see it, for your son has told me so much about it."

"Well, come along and have a look round, if you would like to. I must show you my dairy first. John would laugh! He always says I set more store by my dairy than by all the rest of the house. And I think it is true. He wants me to let others attend to it now that I am growing older, but I'm never one to sit with my hands folded in my lap." She led the way along paved stone passages, and opening a door, preceded Babara down a few shallow steps. "Here is my particular kingdom," she said cheerfully. "This is the room where we do all the packing for market, and hanging on the walls you will see all the prize cards Fancy's won. They make a good show, don't they? You see that one over there? That was the first of all. It was the year after I married, thirty-two years ago. I remember it well. It was for a basket of roses made out of butter. They used to make them at home, and they hadn't been seen in these parts before, and people were so excited about them. And when we came home from the show, my husband drove that nail into the wall and hung the card up just where it hangs now. He was

so delighted to think I had won it. And every year since then, more have been added to the number, until the wall is nearly covered, as you see it now.

"Here is the dairy beyond. Beautifully cool? Why, yes! I am sure it is. Next time you should come on a Tuesday, or a Friday, those are our busy days. But you'd have to come early, for we start at half-past four at this time of year. I like to get it all done before the sun gets up. I have two maids to help me, but for all John says, I wouldn't let them do it without me. Now, if we go out this way, we shall find ourselves in the yard. The cows are all in the meadow, but they will be coming up presently for the milking. The little girl will like to see that after she has had her tea."

"How is Frolic?" asked the girl, after a while.

"Frolic is very well," replied Mrs. Strong, "I had forgotten that you knew her. She is a pretty beast. We had her mother too, but she died last year. Gaylass was her name, and my husband always drove her into market to St. Ethel's every Saturday. It was a real grief when we lost her, but Frolic is just the picture of her."

"Frolic is a name that just suits her."

"Yes, that is true. But she is easier to drive than she used to be. She is gaining sense as she grows older, like most of us. I don't think we ever had a young one more difficult to break. But John has wonderful patience, and you need a lot of patience with young things, if you're going to teach them without breaking their spirits. John always has a way with him with young things, they soon get to know him and love him. I'm a proud woman, Miss Vincent; don't you think I ought to be, with three fine sons? I love them all dearly, but if there is one that is the particular joy of my life, it is John. No mother ever had a better son. Perhaps I ought to add, 'though I say it as shouldn't,' but I never can see why a mother shouldn't think her own better than others. It stands to reason that she should, after all, doesn't it? and one may as well be honest over it."

"I do not wonder that you are proud," said Barbara softly.

"Proud I am, and thankful. A good son he has always been, and he will make a good husband when the time comes, as please God it will come soon." Mrs. Strong glanced keenly at the girl as she spoke, but Barbara was occupied in stroking the smooth nose of a young calf, which had pushed its head through the rails of the pen in friendly fashion, and she did not notice the attention with which Mrs. Strong was regarding her. "He is very thoughtful for others, too," continued the woman. "It was always his way from a child, and it is the little kindly thoughts and services from their own that make the joy of life for a wife and a mother. He can be masterful, too, which is a thing I like to see, for a man should be master in his own home. He is worth nothing unless he knows his own mind, and speaks it when necessary. But there!" Mrs. Strong changed her tone to a lighter key. "I don't know what you think of it, but I cannot agree with all this modern talk about men and women having equal rights, and women being fit to do a man's work in the world. A man comes first—he always has, and he always will, but he'll never get far unless he has a woman beside him to help him to make the very best of himself. There are plenty of things a woman can do better than a man, but they are not the big fighting things of life. They are the little things which perhaps don't seem so very important while they are being done, but they hold all the big things together, and when women give up doing their own particular work that God meant them to do, and take on doing a man's job badly, they'll find they've lost their rights instead of gained them.

"But," she added, laughing, "whatever am I doing talking like this, when I started out to show you round Fancy's? It's a good thing John isn't here. I should get a scolding!"

They wandered all round through the big, dim hay barns, and through the poultry yard, where Mrs. Strong gave an interested listener much good advice on correct

management—into the stables, where Frolic whinnied plaintively at their approach, and was comforted with carrots and sugar, down to the pond in the orchard, where the ducks and geese were taking their afternoon siesta on the shady grass bank, and at last turned back towards the house.

Here they found Patsy and John Strong seated in the porch awaiting them.

"We was just resting," explained the child. "We got so hot hunting for eggs. We found twenty-seven, and some of the hens got so excited you should have heard the noise they made. And the little pigs were lovely, only I don't think there was one which was as beautiful as Badajos."

"I am glad you have enjoyed your afternoon, dearie," said Mrs. Strong heartily. "You will be ready for your tea. Miss Vincent and I have had a nice walk, too."

"And has Mother been explaining to you that if you search the whole world over, you couldn't find another farm so well managed as Fancy's, or a dairy that takes so many prizes, or hens that lay so many eggs?" inquired John, laughing.

He laid his hand on his mother's shoulder with a gesture of affection as he spoke.

"I don't think Mrs. Strong said so, but I am sure it is true," retorted Barbara.

"He must have a laugh at his old mother," said Mrs. Strong. "Have done now, and come in to tea."

"Where is the eldest brother? Why didn't he come?" asked John.

"He has been away," explained Patsy. "But he is coming home very soon."

"Well, you must bring him with you next time."

They walked into the long, low parlour where tea was spread, a real Devonshire tea, as Mrs. Strong explained, with bowls of clotted cream, and hot scones, and honey and preserves, and after a few minutes the boys came in, full of glee at the success of their afternoon's amusement.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it so much, you must come

down here any afternoon you can get free. There is always something doing on a farm."

"I should like to come and fish one day, if I may," said Tony.

"Of course you may, any time you like. There are plenty of trout in the mill pool, and I can fit you out with rods and flies."

The lad confessed that he had never tried fly-fishing, and John Strong promised to give him a lesson in the art.

"You've picked up a good appetite for your tea," said Mrs. Strong, "and I'm delighted to see it. If there is one thing I like to see, it is young people who know how to do justice to a meal. Take another scone now, and a little more cream."

Her motherly heart rejoiced at the way in which the good things of her providing disappeared before the onslaught of the boys. "It reminds me of the days when my own were young," she said.

"I don't think you've much to complain of with us now, Mother," said John.

"Not much," she agreed cheerfully. "Who is coming to see the milking?"

Patsy and the boys expressed their desire to accompany her, and Barbara and her host walked out into the garden.

"I'm afraid you must be tired," he said, "after strolling round all the afternoon on the top of a hot ride over here."

"No, I am not tired," replied Barbara, "it has been delightful."

"Well," he said, after a moment of silence, "what do you think of it all?"

"I think it is a most charming place, and I do not wonder that you love it."

"How did you and the mother get on?"

"Very well indeed. She was most dear and kind to me. I think she is wonderful. She seems to know everything about the farm."

He nodded.

"Yes, she's a wonderful woman, my mother. And what she doesn't know about the work of the place, you may say isn't worth knowing. So you like Fancy's?"

"Indeed, I do. Immensely!"

"You think it would be a happy home?"

"I am certain it is a happy home," said Barbara, wondering a little at his tone.

"I did so hope you would like it," he continued earnestly. "Of course, we are plain folks, you know that, but life can be very happy for plain folk. Happier than for some in greater positions, I think."

It crossed Barbara's mind that this young man had more than once seemed anxious lest she should be under any misapprehension as to his social position. In England, it appeared, people thought a good deal of this. It was something new to her. It had never entered into her life before. At the Pavilion they had seen little society, and their friends had been either of the respectable commercial class, like Monsieur and Madame Menoux, or of a humbler sphere in life, worthy peasant folk who were friends because some particular nobility of mind raised them above their fellows, friends of the heart, they might be called—the old charcoal burner, for instance—who would chat freely and even advise them on their private affairs, but who would never have dreamed of entering the Pavilion unless he had left his sabots on the doorstep, and held his cap in his hand. In the earlier days at Le Petit Andely, they had had friends, worthy cronies, who came in of an evening to discuss the affairs of the nation with Père Joseph, Monsieur Crouet, the village notary, and Monsieur Vernet, the apothecary, and Père Gervais, the priest, excellent men and good citizens, but as she realized full well, in no way the social equals of Dick and Molly Arkwright, or the ladies at the "Porch Cottage," or indeed of the young man who stood beside her. She could imagine Stephen Grant drinking a cup of coffee and exchanging political views with Monsieur Vernet and Monsieur Crouet in Le Petit Andely. Stephen Grant was too true a gentleman, and too kind of heart to fail

in courtesy wherever he might find himself, but these people she had known did not belong to his particular rung of the ladder. He might be with them, but he would never be of them. This had been quite clear to her on the day when he had quite politely, but quite firmly shown Jean Paul Laurent to the gate of the "Porch Cottage." But then, Jean Paul was a worm, and an odious worm. It would never have been necessary to show Monsieur Menoux to the gate, for instance, for Monsieur Menoux had too much natural good breeding to intrude himself where his presence was not desired. Also, his personality was so charming that he would have been welcome wherever he came. Molly would delight in Monsieur Menoux, with his twinkling eyes and never-failing cheerfulness and kindness.

John Strong was so frank, and pleasant, and kind, that she was beginning to count him as a friend, but, after all, his exact social position, as it counted in this country, had nothing to do with her, and there was no reason why he should wish to make it clear to her.

They were standing leaning against the gate at the end of the garden path. The sun was low upon the horizon, and a clump of chestnut trees in the home meadow before them threw long, cool shade across the green grass. From the cote in the farmyard came the cooing of the pigeons, a soothing, slumbery sound. Small wonder, she thought again, that Mrs. Strong and her son should think Fancy's a heaven on earth. It was a real home of peace and unpretentious comfort.

Her eyes wandered over the quiet homestead, and fell at last upon a large patch of pansies which were blooming in the border close beside the gate—a sea of velvet softness, pale mauve, rich gold and glowing purple.

"How beautiful!" she said, almost involuntarily.

John Strong had been standing with his back to the gate, watching her, and his glance had followed hers. At her words he stooped and gathered a single glowing purple flower, then stepping closer to her, he held it out.

"Do you know what the country people round here

call it?" he said, speaking very gently. "They call it 'Kiss-me-John-at-the-garden-gate.' Will you take it?"

Barbara, who had put out her hand, looked up into his face. It had gone quite white under the tan, and his eyes were seeking hers. Half startled, she withdrew a step, and her hand fell to her side.

"Won't you take it?" he asked huskily.

Barbara did not speak. She hardly knew what to say. His undoubted earnestness gave a deeper meaning to the simple offering than appeared necessary.

"I wish you would," he said. "I can't find words to tell you what I want to say, but will you take it, and my heart with it, for it is all yours. Barbara! I don't know that I have any right to ask you. You are far above me, but if you will be my wife, I think I can make you happy, for I love you most truly."

Barbara gave a little gasp of surprise and consternation.

"Take it," he urged, with a note of passionate entreaty in his voice. "I love you, I would be so good to you."

"Thank you," she faltered. "I thank you with all my heart, but I cannot take it."

She did not look at him as she spoke, but she heard him draw a quick breath.

"I do not love you," she said very low, but quite distinctly, "and—I like you too well to take it."

"Would not your liking be enough?"

She shook her head, then raising it, she met the man's ardent, beseeching gaze without flinching. "I am sorry," she said pitifully, "so truly sorry!"

For awhile he looked at her, then he drew himself up with a movement which was at once manly and appealing.

"You are right," he said simply, "it would not be enough. Don't look like that! Don't look sad for me." He took her hand and wrung it in a quick grasp, then released it. "I hear the others coming. Shall we go and meet them?"

As they rode home soon after, the boys and Patsy were full of gay chatter, but for once Barbara paid no

heed to them. She was thinking of John Strong, and wishing with all her heart that her answer could have been a different one. His mother had only spoken the truth when she had said that he would make a good husband, and the girl told herself she could envy the woman who was his wife. How he would cherish and care for her. But for her it was impossible. He offered his best, and he should have a woman's best in return, and this, much as she would have liked to, she simply could not give. Of love she knew little—it had not as yet entered into her life, but of one thing she was certain, it meant something infinitely more than the warm friendly liking she felt for this man. Would it ever come to her, this wonderful love of which she had heard and read? Perhaps yes, perhaps no, but she had learned something of its power from the words and intonation of John Strong, and it was just this dawning realization of what it should mean that had made her so sure that liking was not enough. Had he loved her less, and had she liked him less, she might have married him, but she liked him too well to offer him anything but the gold he himself wished to shower on her. But she sighed at the thought of all she had missed.

Truly, as Père Joseph had said, "It was not easy, this life." Why was one in this life obliged to cause pain to those one would most willingly have spared it? Which is a question to which older and wiser people than Barbara have been unable to find an answer.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE PARTY

“Summer glow, lieth low
Upon heath, field, wood, and grass
Here and there, in the glare
White, red, gold, peeps from the place.
Full of joy, laughs the sky,
Laughs what on the earth doth rove.”

THE MINNESINGER.

“MA BIEN AIMÉE (so wrote Petite Mère)—

“Thy letter did but make a certainty of that which I have feared in my heart this long while. There is a silence which speaks more clearly than words, and since in thy previous letters thou didst not mention thy fortune, I felt it could but mean that success had not attended thy search. Thou knowest, ma petite, how I share thy disappointment, but I fully agree that no good purpose can be served by attempting to find out the secret which the years have hidden from us. Doubtless, had our dear one been still with us, his wisdom would have perceived some course of action to be taken; but since he is with the good God, and we are but two women with little knowledge of the world, and no man to guide us, we can do no more. Also, for another reason the matter must be dropped, for, as thou sayest, it would be an affair of great expense, and we are not of the world's rich ones, thou and I! For the rest—there is that in thy letter which has greatly cheered my heart. What matter the dreams which were vain, since all is well with thee, and thou art happy and secure with thy new friends? It is pleasant to dream—at times; but dreams seldom come true in the way we anticipate. We had hoped to go and find the fairies, thou and I, beloved,

and that is not to be! Bien!—who is to say they will not come and find us instead?

“For me, I am an old woman; to be with thee would be great happiness for me, but for the aged their own hearthstone is the most suitable place, when all is said, and here I will wait patiently until the day when thou canst tell me that the good little people have found thee where thou art, and on that day I shall see them through thine eyes. It will assuredly come!

“To comfort thy loving anxiety for me, I must tell thee that the arrangement with ‘ma niece’ answers well. She is all that there is of the most amiable to live with, making no trouble, and the child is well mannered and obedient. That she is also inconceivably stupid matters not at all! She has a generous heart, and her presence here eases the wheels of the household. It is not necessary for me now to consider with torment of soul the spending of every sou. This is indeed a matter for thankfulness, for while, as thou knowest, I have never desired wealth, there is comfort in a modest competence. It smooths the road and makes for godly living.

“In answer to thy question, the two eggs, well beaten, should be added after the flour and butter are thoroughly mixed—be sure of this, or the result will not be satisfactory.

“I grieve to tell thee that Cléopâtre had un crise de nerfs effrayant last Tuesday, and all of account of so small a thing as Maître Hervé’s spotted cow, which did but recline ruminating upon the roadside. For seven-and-twenty minutes did I wrestle with her, feeling as Balaam must have felt long ago, but on this occasion it was no angel that barred our path, but most assuredly the devil! Enfin, the mood passed, and we arrived home safely, but late for supper: and since these attacks occur only at intervals, we may now, perhaps, be permitted to take our drives in peace for some time.

“Of Monsieur Jean Paul Laurent I have heard nothing, nor has Madame his mother honoured me with a visit—a matter for congratulation, as thou wilt agree. I understand she is desolée at the continued absence of

her son, who has snapped the leading-strings with which she held him. Let us hope that the vicissitudes of life in a great city like Rouen may yet make a man of him.

"All thy pets are well, but Alcibiade grows more truculent daily. It appears to me that he would serve a better purpose in the pot than in his present position, and if thou art willing, I will endeavour to replace him with a younger animal, whose character resembles less closely that of Bluebeard.

"It rejoices me to read of thy doings in thy new country. Truly, the world is a beautiful place; it must be, since the good God made it. Rest assured that He has no objection to thy loving the things that He Himself created.

"Melanie sends her love, and many of thy humble acquaintance demand to be brought to thy recollection. I assure them that La Petite does not forget.

"And so, good-night, my beloved.

"Ever thy devoted

"PETITE MÈRE."

The world did indeed seem to be a very happy and beautiful place to Barbara at this time. Everything was going smoothly at the "Porch Cottage," and now her mind was relieved of anxiety with regard to Petite Mère. She was more than thankful to know that the little woman was no longer obliged to "consider with torment of soul the spending of every sou," for she had known only too well how tiny was the income on which the sisters lived, and how barely it supplied them with the necessities of life. Also there had been the added expenditure in connection with her journey to England to be made up. She had rather dreaded to receive a reply to her tidings, and yet she should have known there was no reason for dread, for when had Petite Mère failed to look on the bright side of things, or failed to point out with simple, pious philosophy the many benefits for which she had cause to be grateful? The letter was so characteristic of the writer! Difficulties and disappointments were

always made light of—like the stupidity of “ma niece,” they mattered not at all.

The weather had been perfect, and the orchard at the cottage had been the scene of many little gaieties, which, as Miss Margaret said, reminded her of old days. Stephen Grant and Phil had returned from their travels, and Molly's joy at the sight of her boy's brown and radiant face had known no bounds.

Stephen was again staying at the “White Hart” in St. Ethel's, and had acquired a habit of turning up at unexpected moments to visit his aunts, generally in company with some of the Arkwright family. He would join them under the apple-tree, while Barbara and the younger ones played childish games, or made pretence at serious work in the garden. Miss Anne loved to have him with her, and it never struck her to question why he, who had hitherto been such a wanderer, should suddenly be content to spend weeks living in an inn in a small provincial town. He seemed perfectly satisfied, and that was enough for gentle Miss Anne, who was never disposed to interfere in other people's affairs. And Stephen, in the eyes of Patsy and her brothers, had become a sort of Father Christmas and fairy godfather rolled into one. He was for ever planning pleasures for them, and for ever ready with further suggestions for their enjoyment.

“It is so easy to do things when you have a car,” he would say. “You had much better use it while you have the opportunity.” And they were only too delighted to agree with him.

One day Miss Anne, to the great surprise of every one, announced that she was going to give a party. Not merely an informal gathering to which people could come or not as they chose, but a real tea-party, with the day fixed, and the invitations issued beforehand, so that the guests should make no mistake. After a good deal of cogitation, she decided it should be upon a Wednesday, for that was the only day in the week on which Phil Arkwright was free to enjoy himself, and Miss Anne was very much attached to Phil: she felt the party would not be complete without him. The guests

were not to be many; just Molly, and Dick, and the four children, Mr. Poole, Major Vasey, and Stephen. These, with the two ladies themselves and Barbara, would bring the number up to twelve; and, as Miss Anne wisely remarked, they could not possibly ask any one else, because the Worcester tea service had only twelve cups—an excellent reason for limiting the number.

Miss Margaret spent some days beforehand in a flutter of excitement. She followed Barbara from the kitchen to the parlour, and from the parlour to the garden, as though if she let her out of her sight for a moment the festivity would never take place.

"It is so long since we have had a party," she murmured over and over again. "We used to have many when dear mamma was alive; very pleasant parties and such delightful music. Oh, I only hope it will not rain! Barbara, what shall we do if it rains?"

"Don't let's think of such a calamity," was the cheerful reply. "If it rains we must have the party in the kitchen, because it is the largest room in the house."

Miss Margaret raised her hands in horror.

"Oh, but that would be very unsuitable, surely. I do not think mamma would have approved of our receiving guests in the kitchen."

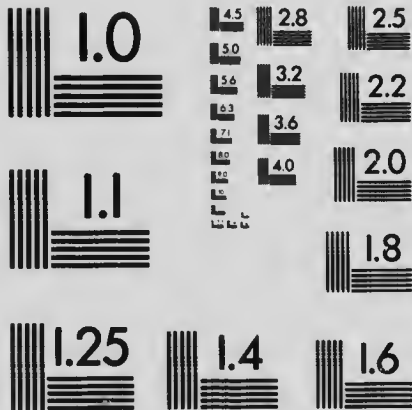
"It would be unusual, certainly," agreed the girl merrily; "but I am sure it will not rain, Miss Margaret. It could not be so unkind."

At last the great day arrived. Miss Margaret had so worn herself out in gleeful anticipation that she was easily persuaded to remain in her room, resting until midday, while Miss Anne read to her. Barbara had been up betimes, and had ridden into St. Ethel's to complete her purchases early in the morning, insuring in this way not only a cool ride, but also ample leisure to complete her preparations. For the fates had been kind, and the sky was cloudless, and the summer sun blazed overhead as the morning wore on with a warmth that was even a trifle excessive. Mrs. Dodge had been pressed into the service, and had been bustling this way



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and that all the previous day ; while the excellent Sammler had so tidied and garnished the garden that, as his wife remarked, "you couldn't collect a bit of rubbish, not if you hunted for it with a dustpan and brush."

Stephen Grant, walking up the flagged path between the bright flower borders, found the door standing open, and the cottage apparently deserted, but passing round the corner of the orchard he stopped, suddenly arrested by a voice—a young, sweet voice carolling the same song he had heard under the apple blossoms—

"Je n'ouvre pas ma porte pour un patissier
Qui apporte la lune dans sans tablier !"

He drew a step closer to the open window, and saw Barbara standing by the table in the quaint old kitchen, engaged in setting some little cakes upon a china plate. He watched her for a few minutes unperceived.

She wore a light cotton frock and a large apron, and her sleeves were rolled up above her rounded elbows. It was not a romantic setting for a picture, for her hands were not guiltless of traces of flour, and her face was just a little flushed from her labours, but he seemed to find it attractive, for he stood and watched her with close attention. She was not beautiful, he told himself, and yet—there was that about her which beauty often lacked. Perhaps it was the utter absence of artificiality or pose which gave her such charm—her face seemed to mirror her thoughts, as she sang to herself, for now and again she would pause as some thought struck her—some happy reflection which set it dimpling with merriment and gaiety ; but for the most part it was serious, with an illusive, unfathomable air of wisdom beyond her years. And all the while her deft, capable hands were busy with her task. At last she looked up and saw him standing there.

"Pardon, Monsieur," she said quickly ; "I did not hear you arrive. The ladies are upstairs."

"Do not disturb them," he replied. "I only came to see if there was anything you wanted. If you want anything from St. Ethel's, the car can fetch it."

She reflected a moment before she answered.

"No, thank you; I know of nothing. I did my shopping this morning very early."

"You must have had a hot ride."

"No; on the contrary, it was pleasant and cool when I went."

"At what time was that?"

"Eight o'clock, Monsieur. But will you not go into the parlour and sit down, or take a chair in the orchard? Miss Margaret is resting, and Miss Anne is with her. Shall I not tell them you are here?"

"No, don't bother. I shall see them this afternoon. Who taught you to make cakes?" he asked idly.

"We had an old servant at home who taught me first. 'Toinette made excellent cakes, and later I learned many others from Melanie, who is the sister of my guardian."

"Those look very good."

"Indeed, I do not think that Melanie would be ashamed of them," she said, with a note of pride in her voice; "but there is one kind I have tried again and again, and I cannot succeed with. I had so hoped to make them for to-day; but no, in spite of all my trouble, they came as flat as a pancake! It was a great disappointment."

"What sort of cakes were they?"

"We called them 'Ailettes D'anges'; 'Little Wings of Angels,' you would say. And they are delicious. But I am so clumsy, I cannot get them right. When I go home again I will get Melanie to show me more exactly."

"When do you expect to go home?"

For a second the girl's mobile face clouded over.

"Ah, Monsieur, I do not know when it will be. Not for a long time, I expect."

"I think you said your home is near Fécamp?"

"We live in a tiny house just on the edge of the forest. It is so tiny and so hidden that you would not know of its existence unless you just chanced upon it. But it is very beautiful, especially in autumn, when the trees are all lovely colours."

"Rather lonely, isn't it?"

"We never found it so. There are no houses close by, that is true. The nearest is the charcoal-burner's hut, and he is often away from home. The village itself and the church are half-a-mile away along the lane."

"What did you do with yourself all day? There could not have been many amusements."

"On the contrary, there were many," she answered quickly. "No parties, of course, like to-day; but there was the garden to attend to, and the animals, and once a week the journey to Fécamp. There was always plenty to do. Just at first, when we went to live there, we missed the river; we had always lived beside the Seine, and it felt strange not to see the water. But the forest made up for it after a while, and also we had more room for our animals."

Little by little he drew her on to tell him more of her home life, and presently she found herself confiding to him the sad history of Alcibiade, and the certainty of his tragic end.

"I have a young cock here," she told him, "which would be the very thing for Petite Mère at home, and we do not require him, for we have two others. He will also end in the pot, which will be a pity, for he is young and handsome, and has not the greedy disposition of Alcibiade."

"Send him over in a basket," suggested Stephen.

The girl laughed gaily.

"Oh, the poor thing! How he would suffer if the sea was rough!"

"It was not rough when you came over."

"No, Monsieur, it was only windy," she answered, with a gleam of mischief in her brown eyes; "and I love a wind."

"Even when it wraps a newspaper round your head?" he asked, with a smile.

"Even then it is not unamusing, Monsieur," she replied demurely.

Barbara had often wondered if Stephen Grant had recognized her, but he had never before referred to their first meeting.

"I wonder you found it amusing, for you looked in rather a sad mood that day."

"I had just left my home, so there was some reason."

"What made you come to England, all alone?"

"I came to seek my fortune, Monsieur," she replied in a whimsical way which left him uncertain as to whether she spoke in jest or earnest.

"I trust you have found it, Mademoiselle," he returned, with a little bow.

"Up to the present, no, Monsieur, I thank you. That is yet to come. So—now I have finished. It is time I went to Miss Anne."

Four o'clock had been the hour named in the invitations, and precisely at four o'clock Miss Anne and Miss Margaret took up their positions in the porch to await their guests. Miss Margaret was arrayed in her shortest and most frilly frock, with its usual adornment of prim little blue bows set in a straight row from neck to hem; a blue ribbon wandered in her fluffy hair, and on her much-beringed hands she wore a pair of white lace mittens. Her toilet had taken an infinite amount of thought and time, but on the whole she was satisfied with the result.

Miss Anne, on the other hand, was arrayed simply in her Sunday gown of black silk, but the pretty cap of Honiton lace upon her snowy hair gave an air of festivity to her appearance.

At two minutes past four the latch of the front gate clicked, heralding the arrival of Major Vasey. Miss Anne glanced somewhat anxiously at him, but was immediately reassured by his look; he appeared a little less melancholy than sometimes, but certainly not gay. He had pinned a small white rosebud in his buttonhole to do honour to the occasion, a fact which was at once noticed and commented on by Miss Margaret.

Hardly were his greetings over when the sound of the motor was heard in the lane, and Miss Anne called to Barbara to hasten out to meet her friends.

"Here we all are," cried Molly gaily, as she dis-

engaged herself from the enveloping folds of her veil and bent to kiss the girl. "How we ever packed in I don't know. Tony rode on the step, and I kept on wondering whether he had dropped off without being noticed."

Phil was helping his father out, and Barbara flew to his side.

"I am so delighted you have come; I was so afraid you would not be equal to it."

"I have heard so much of this party that I simply could not miss it. Stephen is going to take me back rather early, if Miss Leigh will excuse me."

It was the first time that the old ladies had met Molly's husband, but the introduction was soon effected, and Miss Anne herself conducted him to a comfortable chair with soft cushions which stood ready for him in a shady spot.

"Why, Aunt Margaret, how gay you look!" said Stephen. "I don't think I have ever seen you so smart before."

Miss Margaret bridled with pleasure, and looked very coy.

"I never change my style, Stephen, as you are aware. I have always felt that when one particular style suits a lady she had better make it exclusively her own."

"I am sure that is true," said Molly tactfully.

At this moment, Phil, who had been standing close by, dropped on his knees in front of Miss Margaret, and commenced to play "He loves me, she loves me not," with the little blue bows. The little lady gave a faint shriek of delight.

"Oh," she cried. "how could you think of such a thing?"

"There! now you've interrupted me!" exclaimed the boy, and proceeded to begin all over again, until the line ended up with a final "She loves me," under Miss Margaret's plump chin.

Rising, he bowed triumphantly. "She loves me! I have always suspected it, but we won't let the world into our secret, will we, Miss Margaret?"

"Such a charming idea!" she murmured ecstatically.

"Are we all here?" asked Miss Anne. "Has Mr. Poole arrived? Oh! there he is; now I think we will have tea."

"I walked across the fields," explained the old gentleman. "It is always a pleasant walk, but a trifle warm this afternoon. Hullo, Arkwright! I am glad to see you."

"Unwonted dissipation for me, isn't it?"

"Can't I come and help you, Barbara?" said Phil.

"Yes, do, but there is only the tea to be made; everything else is ready on the table. Do you know, I had the greatest difficulty in finding enough seats; as it is, I have had to use the bench out of the hall. That will be all right, unless it gives way."

"Oh, it won't do that; it is very strong, but I am afraid it is rather hard."

"I would rather sit on a form than stand on ceremony," retorted the lad.

"Go on, Phil! That isn't original. I've heard it before," said Stephen, who overheard this remark.

"Possibly. There is nothing really original in this world. True cleverness lies in making apt use of the brains of other people. That is where I shine!"

"You won't shine if you drop the teapot! Do, please, be careful. You are spilling it now!"

"Let me carry something," said Stephen. "I don't like to be idle when I see Phil over-exerting himself in this way."

With that he picked up a jug of milk, and they walked in solemn procession to the orchard, where the others had already taken their seats at the table.

CHAPTER XXVII

AN UNEXPECTED GUEST

"Careful with fire, is good advice, we know!
Careful with words, is ten times doubly so!"

"WHERE'S my Patsy?" asked Molly suddenly, for the child had disappeared.

She was soon discovered deep in conversation with her friend Sammie, and brought back mounted on Phil's shoulder.

"Here is a bundle of rubbish," he called. "Where shall I drop it?"

"We can make room for her here," said her mother, who was seated next to Mr. Poole. "Then I can look after her."

"Come, my dear," said the old man kindly, "there is room for a little one."

"Here, Patsy," said her brother, as he deposited her in her place, "you'd better play at being the ham in the sandwich. If you don't sit still we'll have to add the mustard."

"Me an' Allus was telling me a story last night about a lady who was turned into mustard," remarked the child reflectively, as she helped herself to bread and butter.

"Dear me!" ejaculated Mr. Poole. "I never heard of such a thing. It sounds very uncomfortable."

"It was a most interesting story. I should have thought you would have heard it. It was all about a lady called Mrs. Lot. They were running away from their home ever so fast, and God said Mrs. Lot wasn't to turn round, and she did turn round, and God made her into a tin of mustard."

Phil gave a yell of laughter, and old Mr. Poole's shoulders shook convulsively.

"Salt, Patsy darling," said Molly, stifling her amusement.

"Salt, was it?" returned Patsy composedly. "I couldn't quite remember. I knew it was something off the dinner table. I would sooner be salt than mustard. I tasted mustard once, and it burned my tongue. Me an' Allus tells me lots of stories about things that happened in the Bible, and we play at acting them. Last night when I was in my bath, I played it was the Red Sea, where the chariots and horses were drowned, and I got my hair dreadfully wet, and Me an' Allus wouldn't let me play it any more. It must have been very exciting coming out of the land of Egypt and out of the house of Bandage."

"Most exciting," agreed Mr. Poole. "The house of what, did you say?"

"The house of Bandage," repeated the child. "Me an' Allus was talking about that. We weren't quite certain what it was, but we think it must have been something like the big house in St. Ethel's, where people go when they have an accident and break their arms and legs. I suppose the children of Israel did have just as many accidents as we do now?"

"I should think it was highly probable," replied the old gentleman. He delighted in Patsy's conversation.

"Of course there weren't no motor-cars nor trains, but there were horses and chariots; and I expect people fell off them just the same as people do now."

"Your daughter's knowledge of Bible history may be described as more extensive than accurate," remarked Mr. Poole to Molly, with a chuckle, as Patsy ceased speaking and took a second slice of cake.

Meanwhile Phil was engaged in talking nonsense to Miss Margaret, to that lady's great joy.

"Names ought to sound nice," he was saying. "Now you, of course, are fortunate; you have a name which is associated with a simple domestic flower—could

anything be sweeter! But just glance round you and note the ridiculous names with which people handicap their unfortunate offspring. Look at poor Barbara, for instance. Was there ever a more cruel name? Barbara!"

"Yes," answered the girl quickly.

"I was not calling you, I was merely trying to demonstrate the fact that of all the names I have ever heard, yours is the most tiresome. To me it suggests nothing but the bleating of many sheep. BaaBaaRaa! Sheep! The most brainless and foolish of animals! Poor girl, I sympathize with you! I think I shall start a society for the instruction of parents in the choice of suitable patronymics. Stephen, too, is a distressing name. No one could be really cheerful who was called Stephen! It is shadowed by tragedy. If my name was Stephen, I should feel morally bound to be a martyr, and then think how unpleasant I should be to live with!"

"I think Stephen is a nice honest name," said Miss Margaret, who never grasped more than half the meaning of Phil's foolery. "I once knew a girl who was called Emma Jane, which certainly sounded very——"

"Plebeian!" declared Phil. "Hopelessly plebeian! I am sure she married beneath her!"

"No, she married a lord, but she changed her name long before that, and pronounced it in the French way, 'Imogene.'"

"What a flash of genius! Now, doesn't that show the importance of a really high-sounding name? Imogene! It suggests palaces and princesses at once. Personally, if I had a daughter, I should call her Vinolia. Oh yes, of course, I know it has been used commercially, but there is something so healing and soft about it. Sapolio, too, is another of my favourites."

"I'm jolly glad my name isn't Philip, that's all I can say," said Tony, with brotherly candour.

"Now, my dear chap, you're quite right, it wouldn't suit you a bit. For myself, I have no quarrel with my

parents, being fortunate enough to have a name which fits me like a glove. Philip! Always merry and bright! You must be singularly unobservant if you have not noticed that when things are not going as gaily as I could wish, when Stephen, for instance, is oppressed by gloom, it is I who give the Fillip to your drooping spirits."

He rose and bowed repeatedly, with exaggerated gesture, in answer to the laughter which his nonsense evoked, and he was just continuing further in the same strain when the hoot of a motor horn sounded in the lane.

It arrested attention, for up to the present Stephen's car had been the only one which ever came to Fiddler's Green.

"I hear what Mrs. Dodge calls a motter-'orn," said Barbara. "I wonder whose it can be?"

"I've finished my tea," said Patsy. "I'll run and peep."

She tiptoed to the end of the path, and then tore back again on flying feet.

"It's a lady! And she's coming in here. A very smart lady."

"A lady in a motor!" exclaimed Miss Anne. "Who can it be?"

In another moment the mystery was solved, for it was Flora Moultrie who came sailing towards them. She wore a pink silk dust-coat, and her black veil, which became her excellently, was thrown back from her face.

Stephen walked to meet her, feeling distinctly ungrateful for her visit. Their party had been quite complete without her, and he had an inkling somehow Flora wouldn't quite fit in with present company.

Even her appearance struck a wrong note in the little garden. Her clothes might have done for Ascot on Cup day, but they were too noticeable here.

"Ha, ha!" she said playfully, as they shook hands. "I have come to see whether you are going into mischief. As a matter of fact, I am staying with friends

about ten miles off, and as they had a stupid baazar and there was a motor at my disposal, I thought I would come over and make Cousin Anne's acquaintance."

Miss Anne received her pleasantly, but was decidedly surprised at the kiss which this unknown cousin insisted on bestowing on both her and Miss Margaret.

"You will have a cup of tea after your drive," said Miss Anne, after she had introduced her to the assembly.

"I should love it, thank you. What an adorable little place you have here."

Barbara had hastily disappeared in search of fresh tea, and presently returned carrying a small tray.

Phil took it from her as she approached the table, and Miss Anne, seeing her, said—

"May I introduce Miss Vincent?"

Flora bowed slightly, without pausing in her remarks.

"I never saw such a mass of flowers! I have wanted to come and see you for such a long time. It seems such a pity that relations should not know one another, and I have heard so much of you from Stephen."

"We live quite out of the world," said Miss Anne gently; "it is good of you to take the trouble to come."

"I did not expect to find such a large party," continued Flora. "I hope I have not come at an inconvenient time."

"Oh no," Miss Anne assured her.

"We are having a tea-party," said Miss Margaret eagerly. "It is the first we have had for so many years. Will you not try one of these?" She proffered a plate of cakes as she spoke.

"What divine cakes!" cried Flora extravagantly. "Don't tell me they are made at home. Your cook must be a treasure."

"We have to thank Miss Vincent for those," replied Miss Anne, glancing kindly at Barbara, who was standing at the head of the table close to her, uncertain whether she ought to stay in case the visitor required another cup of tea. The others had moved away a

little, and were talking together, with the exception of Stephen, who was seated by his aunt.

Flora Moultrie raised her long tortoise-shell lorgnette and stared at Barbara with a cool scrutiny which was embarrassing.

"Really!" she said languidly, "it is difficult to find any one who can make cakes now-a-days! Every one has been wondering what has become of Stephen. I suspected he was living the simple life somewhere in the wilds, but I did not give away his secret. We have all missed him so much."

Stephen pushed back his chair and rose to his feet. Why in the world did Flora put on such absurd airs and talk like a fool?

"We are very pleased to have him with us," said Miss Anne, in her gentle voice. "We have seen so little of him of late years. Would you care to walk round the garden?"

"I should be enchanted. I adore flowers, although I am afraid I don't know very much about them." She moved towards Stephen as she spoke, and gave him a look as much as to say, "Spare me! It is you I came to see."

But Miss Anne had her own ideas of what was her duty as hostess, and her unexpected guest was obliged to accompany her and listen to her polite remarks upon horticulture.

After a few minutes of it Flora was supremely bored, and said she must be returning.

"I am so delighted to have seen you and your charming cottage. Oh no, please don't trouble to come with me. Stephen will escort me to the gate," and she made her adieux.

"Well," she said softly, as soon as they were alone, "when are you coming back to civilization?"

"I don't know," he answered vaguely. "I haven't made any plans."

"Do come," she said, throwing him a pleading look, which was entirely lost upon him. "I wish you would."

"I haven't made any plans yet," he repeated.

"Poor old Stephen. I should have thought you were the last person in the world to——"

"To what?" he asked shortly.

"To be attracted by—what shall I say—such a Martha!" She glanced back to where Barbara, amid a good deal of happy talk and jesting, was clearing away the tea things. "She is certainly pretty, but just imagine her in London, can you?"

Stephen's only reply was to offer his hand to assist her into the car. His lack of response roused Flora's temper, which was never under perfect control.

"You are an idiot to stay philandering round a girl like that—you had better chuck it."

"Don't be a fool, Flora," said Stephen sharply.

Flora realized quickly that she had gone too far.

"Don't be angry. I was only joking. Let me know when I am to congratulate you," and with an airy wave of the hand she departed.

Her visit had only lasted half-an-hour, but it was destined to have a lasting effect, for Stephen could not rid his mind of the sting contained in her parting shot. Sitting over a pipe late the same evening, he thought of it over and over again. The word philandering had an ugly sound in his ears, and that there was undoubtedly some truth in the charge only made the matter worse. As for congratulations, why, the idea of marriage had never entered his head. Barbara Vincent was a very charming girl, but he had not the very faintest desire to marry her or any one else, or so he told himself. He had certainly enjoyed the last few weeks very much; he was fond of his aunts and he was fond of the Arkwrights, and the time had passed quickly; but if people were going to imagine that he was contemplating marriage, they were very much mistaken. The last thing he desired was to saddle himself with a wife. He turned the matter over and over in his mind, and at last came to the conclusion that although Flora had of course been absolutely mistaken in her

supposition, yet she had not been far wrong in her advice. He had better chuck it!

The upshot of this was that he went over to the "Porch Cottage" the next day and told Miss Anne that his visit had come to an end, and he was off on his travels again. Poor Miss Anne was surprised and grieved.

"I thought you were getting so—settled, Stephen," she said pitifully.

"I have been a wanderer too long to settle anywhere, I am afraid," was his non-committal reply.

Barbara happened to be out in the village upon some errand, so he did not meet her.

He then went on to see the Arkwrights, who broke into lamentation at his departure. Molly looked at him closely, as though searching for the true reason for this sudden change of plan, but she could learn nothing from his face. Molly had been building some castles in the air, and she found them tumbling about her feet in the most disconcerting way.

"Have you been to see your aunts? Poor Miss Anne will be sorry to lose you."

He repeated something about his wandering propensities.

"How was Barbara; not too tired after yesterday, I hope?"

"I did not see Miss Vincent. She was not at home."

Molly sighed. What utterly inexplicable people men were. You simply never knew what they would do next.

When Stephen arrived in London next day, he looked round his rooms with a sigh of satisfaction. They were familiar and comfortable, and there was no one to ask a word as to his comings or goings. "Fancy giving up one's freedom," he thought to himself. "Not I, for one." And yet, somehow, again and again his thoughts reverted to the little orchard with the old apple-trees, and again and again a little refrain floated across his memory. "Curious how things stick in your mind," he said to himself.

He remained in London a few days, and then ordered his man to pack his kit and his fishing-rods.

"Going out of England, sir?" asked the servant.

"Yes, I think I shall try Finland again this year."

"Any idea when you will be back, sir?"

"Not the smallest."

He was walking along Piccadilly one afternoon, returning from an expedition in search of a particular fly he wished to take with him, when he passed a picture shop, and stopped to examine the contents of the window. He was not really interested, merely idling, for time hung a little heavy on his hands. None of his friends knew he was in town, and he had not sought them out. There were one or two water-colours of the "pretty" order and a few prints, but nothing worth looking at, he thought, and he was just turning away, when his eyes fell on a little picture; and, having once looked he looked again.

It was a sketch in pencil, very delicately drawn, and with here and there a faint tint in colour, and represented a cottage doorway under an overhanging thatched roof. The door was open just a little way, and a girl's face was peeping through the chink. In front of the door stood a cupid with a cap perched on his head, a small white cap such as pastrycooks wear. In his apron, which he was holding up in both hands, he carried a crescent moon, while on the ground beside him lay his bow. Underneath were written the words, so familiar to Stephen—

*"Je n'ouvre pas ma porte pour un patissier
Qui apporte la lune dans son tablier."*

But it was not at the figure of the little god of love that he gazed so intently, but at the face of the girl half hidden behind the door. All he could see was a pair of laughing eyes under a riot of soft hair—a straight little nose and a dimpled mouth. That was all. He stood for some time, and then, turning away, he walked right up Piccadilly—on, past the turning which would have led him home; on up to Hyde Park Corner, down

Constitution Hill, and so on until, having completed the circle, he found himself again in Piccadilly in front of the picture shop. After another interval of indecision, this time considerably shorter, he walked inside, and emerged a little later with a flat parcel wrapped in brown paper under his arm.

When he reached his rooms he unpacked it, and again examined it with care; but he did not, as people usually do with a newly acquired possession of that kind, set it up on the mantelpiece for all to see. Instead of this, he placed it carefully in the drawer of his writing-table and turned the key on it.

It may have been that on second thoughts he felt this was not a sufficiently secure place, or there may have been another reason equally good; but the fact remains that the picture did not stay there long, for when he started for Finland, a few days later, it was reposing at the bottom of his suit-case.

Truly Molly had been right when she said that men were utterly inexplicable creatures!

CHAPTER XXVIII

"BETTER, NANCY, BETTER!"

"Underneath all things that be
Lies an unsolved mystery.
Over all
Spreads a veil impenetrably
Spreads a dense unlifted pall."

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

"OH dear, oh dear!" said Miss Margaret plaintively, "the leaves are falling all over my garden, and I tidied it only yesterday, and the wind has blown down several of my plants."

"Never mind, Miss Margaret, I will see to it presently for you. The plants don't really matter now, you know, because they are over, and the ground will have to be cleared for you to sow fresh seeds in the spring."

But the old lady was not to be comforted.

"I can't think what has come to everything," she wailed fretfully. "Everything seems to be going wrong. My Patience wouldn't come out last night, and I always get it out before I go to bed. Sometimes it is a great deal of trouble, and sometimes I am really obliged just to change a card—it isn't really cheating, you know, because it is only a game, and I play it all by myself; but last night I changed two cards, and even then it would not come out. I don't know what has happened to sister, she seems so low-spirited, and no one ever comes to see us now."

"Perhaps the luck will be with you to-night," said Barbara. "It would be nice if it came out right the first time without any bother, wouldn't it?"

"Why does no one come and see us now?" persisted Miss Margaret. "We had so many visitors, and now every one has forgotten us. Even Major Vasey hasn't

been near us for weeks. I do think it is so unkind ! Of course I know he doesn't come to see me, and he always talks most to sister Anne ; but still, he is better than nobody."

Barbara had learned by experience that when Miss Margaret was in one of these miserable moods it was no use trying to argue with her, the only thing was to try and distract her mind in some way. She tried several artifices without success, but at last hit upon the happy idea of going up to the old lady's room with her, ostensibly to arrange some details of her wardrobe, but in reality to set her playing with odds and ends of ribbon and fal-lals of which she had a great hoard. She had an unfailing memory for the history of every scrap of lace, every bit of ribbon or silk. She could tell you the day she had worn it, and what people had said to her, and what she had replied. She loved to sit handling and stroking them, for to her they were not just faded and, for the most part, worthless remnants, they were pages out of the Book of the Gone By, full of tender meaning. She required no attention beyond an occasional word of encouragement when the flood of her reminiscences ceased for a moment, and Barbara, seated on the floor with an untidy heap beside her, folded and straightened mechanically, and let her thoughts wander far from the task in hand.

She had, in truth, ample food for thought just at the present time, and was more than a little inclined to agree with Miss Margaret that everything seemed to be going wrong.

First and chiefly she thought of dear Miss Anne, and with the deepest pity, for alas ! the promise of summer had not been fulfilled, and just as the girl was congratulating herself that the stream of life at the "Porch Cottage" was flowing unruffled on its way, dark-pointed rocks began to poke their jagged heads above the surface. Her heart had so gone out to the gentle lady who treated her with such unfailing kindness, that with tender sympathy she longed above all to find some means to help. And this was just what she was unable to do.

Major Vasey's practice of calling on the ladies on each alternate day had continued for about a month, then his visits had become more and more irregular, and, sad to say, frequent nocturnal disturbances had made it only too evident that he had returned to his old habits after an unusually protracted spell of good behaviour.

As Barbara told herself, this really would not have mattered very greatly if it had not been for its effect on Miss Anne. The Major was an old man, and although she had no actual knowledge, yet she presumed that his weakness was nothing new, it was hardly to be expected that he could reform so late in life. If he would only have stayed quietly at home instead of wandering abroad when the attack was on him, it might have been ignored. But when each succeeding outburst left poor Miss Anne frailer, and whiter, and sadder, it became really serious. She never spoke of it to Barbara, the subject was never mentioned between them, although the old lady must have realized that the girl was fully aware of the circumstances, and Barbara had done all in her power to ease her mind, had left no stone unturned. She had treated Miss Anne's terrible nervousness as though it were caused simply by the fear of some marauding stranger, who might be prowling round the Green, she had gone so far as to procure a chain and padlock and to secure the gate towards evening, to make sure "that no burglars could break in." Miss Anne had made no comment. It seemed impossible to combat her terror. Barbara thought more than once of appealing to some one for advice, but Mr. Poole, who was Miss Anne's only really intimate friend, had been away from home lately, enjoying a well-earned holiday.

In addition to this Barbara was troubled about her friends at the "White House." Little Patsy had been taken ill with measles, not long after the afternoon of the "party" when they had all been so full of health and merriment, and for a while her condition had been critical. Then, just as she was recovering, the boys, one after another, had succumbed to the complaint.

Molly had, and rightly, refused to allow Barbara to come to the house for fear of infection, and she had only been able to see her friend very occasionally, just to exchange a few words at the garden gate when Molly could spare some moments from the sick-rooms.

Now, none of the invalids were in danger, but poor Molly had her hands full, for, with the exception of herself and her husband, Allus was the only one of the household who had escaped the epidemic. The faithful "Me" had been the latest victim, and, it must be confessed, the most troublesome patient of all.

As was only to be expected, the worry and anxiety had been very trying to Dick, whose slender store of strength had been taxed to the utmost, for he had done all and more than he was fit for towards easing the burden which rested mainly on his wife's shoulders, and he was now paying the penalty. Here again Barbara longed to help, and longed in vain.

"Barbara, I do not think you are listening."

She roused herself with a start, as she realized Miss Margaret was speaking.

"I beg your pardon, I am so sorry."

"I was showing you this little pair of mittens. You would hardly think I used to wear them, would you, but they were mine when I was quite a child? I can quite well remember the day Mamma gave them to me. It was on my birthday, and I can remember going into her room, it was the one sister has now, and her wishing me many happy returns of the day. I was so delighted with them. Don't you think they are pretty? I used to wear them in the evenings. We always went in to Mamma in the evenings, and played games, Draughts and Solitaire, and sometimes Pope Joan. If we were very good we used to be allowed to use the ivory draught-board with the carved men which stands on the parlour table now. I have never used them since Mamma died. I should not like to do so without her permission. Have you seen a pair of white satin shoes, Barbara? They ought to be here."

"Yes; I have just wrapped them up in paper."
"Oh! I was afraid I had lost them." Miss Margaret unfolded them and touched them lightly with caressing fingers. "I am so fond of them, Barbara. I wore them at my first ball. It was at the Town Hall at St. Ethel's, and was a very smart affair. I wore a gown of white tarlatan, and it was very much admired. We never had heels to our shoes in those days, although you may think it odd now. I had a great number of partners. I danced twice with Sir John Earle; he was so good-looking, and danced so well. He used to live at Denham Hall, but I don't know what has become of him. The ball lasted until the morning, and I remember coming home in broad daylight, and finding it so exciting. That was the evening that my sister first met Stephen's father, and Mamma reproved her for dancing too often with him. Mamma was always very particular about our conduct, and poor Charlotte was always rather wilful, I am afraid. Put them away, Barbara! It is time to get ready for supper, and I shall never wear them again. I could not bear to throw them away. Put them away quickly, for I hear Anne calling. She never quite approved of my love for old things. Anne never had such a warm nature as I had. She is naturally colder, and feels things less. It has quite cheered me to remember old days. Life is so different now. Yes, Anne, yes! I am coming."

To Miss Margaret's great delight, the luck was with her that evening, and her Patience "came out" without any recourse to the changing of cards, which "could not be called cheating," and she retired to bed early, as was her habit, in quite a cheerful frame of mind. Having seen her settled for the night, Barbara was just descending the stairs when she heard a knock on the front door, and Miss Anne peeped out of the parlour with a frightened face.

"Who can it be, Barbara?" she whispered. "You had better not open the door."

The knocking was repeated more insistently as she spoke.

"Open quickly, for the love of God," said a voice in a strong Irish brogue, "'tis a letter for the lady."

"It's all right, Miss Anne," said Barbara, soothingly. "It is some one with a letter. You go inside and I will open the door."

"A letter at this time of night?"

It was evident that the messenger was impatient, and Barbara hastily drew back the bolts, and saw a man standing there whom she recognized at once as Major Vasey's servant.

"'Tis from Mr. Poole," he said, pushing a note into her hand. "Oh, hurry, miss, now, for the love of God! for there's no time to lose."

It was blowing hard, and the lamp in the little hall flared high with the draught.

"I'm to wait for her," he continued. "Tell her to be quick. It's dying he is—tell her to be quick."

Miss Anne was standing in the parlour with her hands clasped over her heart.

"It is from Mr. Poole. I am afraid Major Vasey is ill," said the girl gently.

Miss Anne essayed to open the letter, but her trembling hands refused to obey her. Barbara took it from her and read it aloud. It was quite short.

"Jim is ill. He wants you. O'Hara will bring you. You must lose no time. H. P."

Miss Anne raised an anguished face.

"Jim is ill," she repeated, "he wants me—I must go to him."

The last words were almost a cry, as though she feared some one would prevent her.

"Yes, yes, of course you will go—at once. Just wait here while I get your cloak and shoes."

Miss Margaret could not be left in an empty house, and yet it was impossible to let Miss Anne go alone in her weak, nervous state on such a sad errand, so Barbara paused at the door on her way upstairs.

"Go quickly," she said to the waiting man, "go and

call Mrs. Dodge. You know the house. It is the first down the lane. Tell her she must come at once."

He raised his hand to the salute, and obeyed her without question.

Miss Anne did not speak again. She allowed herself to be dressed, making the necessary movements as though she were in a dream, and then clinging to the girl's arm she walked out into the night. It was blowing hard, and so dark that they could hardly see the road under their feet, and the short hundred yards they had to go seemed as though it would never end. The old lady stumbled along, her breath coming short and fast. She was a bad walker at the best of times, and before the distance was half accomplished her steps became so faltering that Barbara told the man, who was walking close behind them, to support her on the other side, and between them they assisted her along. When they reached Major Vasey's gate they could see Mr. Poole standing in the doorway with a lamp in his hand to guide them. Miss Anne looked at him as though to read in his face the question she dared not ask.

"I am glad you have come, Anne," he said quietly.

"He will be happier now you have come."

"I am quite ready. Take me to him."

When they had gone O'Hara motioned to the girl to enter a small room on the right of the entry, and set a chair for her. It was a small low apartment, very simply, one might say barely, furnished. In the centre stood a square deal table, innocent of any cover, and on it were a pewter inkstand and a few books. A smaller table against the wall carried a tobacco jar and a collection of pipes, while beside the empty hearth was a rather dilapidated wicker chair, cushioned in faded cloth. All was scrupulously clean, but it was devoid of comfort, and quite lacking in those almost indefinable touches which betray a woman's care.

"I'd best be making a bit of fire," muttered the man tonelessly, and he left her in search of material.

Returning almost immediately with paper and sticks, he knelt down and placed them in position, struck a

match and applied it. Then he remained there, watching the rising flame in silence, and there was something so grief-stricken in his attitude that Barbara felt she must, in pity, speak to him.

"Has Major Vasey been ill long?" she asked gently.

O'Hara threw up his hands with a despairing gesture.

"Sure but yesterday himself was as well as you or I, but yesterday! I left him last night sitting in his chair with nought to trouble him, and 'twas this morning that I found him lyin' at the foot of the stairs, all broken, and with never a word to say. 'Twas myself picked him up and laid him on his bed, and started young off hot foot for the doctor, and 'twas hours before could find a gleam of life in him. When the doctor came he stayed a matter of an hour, but 'twas little could do. He sent a bottle of medicine, and this morn'ing he came again, but he just shook his head. Eh, poor Major. 'Tis his constitution that's killin' him, for he hasn't got one. Sure that was what the doctor said!" Then he rose to his feet. "Never man had a better master nor a better friend than the Major's been to me, and it's a bitter day that sees him go—with the simple kindly heart of him that never harmed a fly! 'Twas himself that found me with me stripes and me character gone, an' with never a friend in the wide world, and took me on when never a soul had a good word for me, and I won't be saying that I was deservin' one. I've been with him ever since, and oh! whatever I'll be doin' without the Major I'll never know at all!

"I won't say as we didn't have words," he continued, after a short pause, "now and again. There was times when he wasn't himself, and I'd be skeered he'd be after tormentin' the ladies when the drink was in him, and he'd a fancy for stravaguing around at night. 'Twasn't always easy to get him to come home—but what of that? Drunk or sober he was the kindest soul that ever tipped a glass! Hark now! What was that?"

Mr. Poole came slowly down the stairs.

"Go and stand up on the landing, O'Hara," he said, "so as to be at hand if you're needed."

O'Hara drew himself up stiffly, saluted and obeyed.

The old clergyman sank wearily into the wicker chair, and passed a handkerchief across his forehead.

"I have left them alone for a while," he said sadly. "It will not be for long, and he is quite quiet."

"Can nothing be done?"

He shook his head.

"There are internal injuries, and he has no strength. Poor old Jim. Poor, poor Anne. After all these years that this should be the end." He spoke as if voicing his thoughts. After a moment he continued, "Perhaps you do not know that they were engaged to be married many years ago. It was rather a hopeless engagement from the first, for he had very little money to keep a wife. He went abroad with his regiment, and was away from home for a long time. Then he came back, and all preparations were made for the wedding, but it never took place, for the very day before he came to the house and made a dreadful scene. You can guess the cause. Miss Anne's father turned him out, and forbade him to return. The engagement was broken off—things went from bad to worse—at last he had to send in his papers and we heard nothing of him for several years. Then he turned up again. Mr. Leigh was dead, and Miss Anne agreed that she would marry him if he could keep sober for a year; and so it has gone on—he was always going to be better soon. It is a sad story. Poor Jim! We were boys together, and he—well, he was always weak, and dear Anne was never a strong woman. Who knows, if she had been stronger she might have done something for him, but she was too gentle. There are some men who never seem to have what I call a proper outfit for life from the start. They can't take a real hold on themselves, and Jim was one of these. Everybody liked him—he never had an enemy but himself."

He ceased speaking, and was leaning back with his eyes half closed. Barbara sat perfectly still, hoping that perhaps he could rest, for he looked very exhausted, but the next moment a cry rang through the stillness of the

little house. Barbara was up the stairs almost before the old man had risen. The door of the sick-room was open, and as she entered she saw O'Hara lay the Major back upon his pillow, and heard him speak a reassuring word. Miss Anne was standing by the bed, and the dying man's face was not more ashen than her own. Barbara went to her side and put an arm round her, and the old lady leaned on her as if thankful for her support. And so they waited. The Major's eyes were closed, he hardly seemed to breathe, but his lips moved incessantly as though forming inaudible words. There was no sound in the little room, but outside the rain fell heavily, mournfully, and the wind to the lattice.

Suddenly the Major opened his eyes.

"Damn you, O'Hara catch!" he said, quite distinctly, and O'Hara, starting motionless to attention at the head of the bed, answered, "Yes, sor!" with military precision.

A shudder ran through Miss Anne's whole frame, and Barbara held her close. Then again silence in the room, and outside the moaning of the storm.

How long they waited Barbara did not know. Time seemed a thing unknown. Ages were passing with every second, with every faint breath of the dying man. Gradually a shadow crept over his features—very gradually—the shadow of the great mystery of death. Miss Anne never took her eyes from his face.

Then Mr. Poole's voice was heard—very low and charged with sorrow and certain hope—reciting the prayer for the dying—

"Oh, Father of mercies, and God of all comfort, our only help in time of need . . ."

If the Major heard it the girl could not tell, but soon after Mr. Poole had ceased he opened his eyes again.

"Nancy!"

Miss Anne stooped forward and laid her hand on his.

"Jim!"

"I have tried, Nancy, I have tried!"

"I know, Jim, I know!"

He looked into her eyes, but the light was dim and his sight was failing fast.

"I can't see you," he whispered.

For answer Miss Anne bent down and kissed him on the brow.

For a while he lay so still that it might have been the end, but even as they watched they saw a little tender smile light up his face—a tender, flickering smile—and his lips moved.

"Better, Nancy, better!" he said, and then turned a little over on his pillow like a tired child and fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXIX

A FOREIGN ENVELOPE

"Oh! love, love, love!
Love is like a dizziness,
It winna let a poor body
Gang about his bizness."

HOGG.

STEPHEN GRANT walked into his sitting-room, and after giving his man a curt order as to the disposal of his luggage, threw himself into his arm-chair, with a sigh of relief.

If the truth must be told, Stephen was not in a very good humour. His fishing expedition had not been an unqualified success. The sport had been excellent, the weather all that could be desired, but in spite of this he had been thoroughly bored, for the first time in his life.

He had been wont to declare that he asked no better thing of the gods than solitude, with his rod and line on a good piece of water when fish were rising, but for some inexplicable reason his favourite occupation had lost its savour, and solitude its charm.

He had started by himself, but had shortly afterwards fallen in with some men he knew, and, thinking that their company might prove a cure for his discontent, he had joined forces with them. They were pleasant, cheery fellows, and, for a while, Stephen told himself that he felt better; he had probably been a bit seedy—liver out of sorts, that would account for it—but the improvement did not last, and in a few days he was wishing them miles away.

One of the men—Thompson, by name—he had known for a long time; he had travelled with him once or twice,

and had always found him a congenial companion, but now there was no doubt that Thompson had changed, and not for the better. He had lately become engaged to be married, and no doubt it was this that made him rather a bore.

It has frequently been said that love is a disease, and it has this in common with other physical maladies, namely, that those sufferers who have lately passed through the acute stages of the complaint are usually not averse to talking about it. It seems to relieve their minds to go into details, and they even take a certain pride in their scars. Thompson, who was a simple, friendly soul, some years younger than Stephen, was only too glad to have some one to talk to. He was extremely happy, and saw no reason to keep his feelings to himself.

He would enlarge at length on the great change that had come into his life, on the difference it made having some one to care for—"Who cared for you, don't you know," and so on. He even exhibited a photograph of the young lady of his affections, and Stephen had to agree that if she was not charming, well, her looks belied her.

One day, when the young man had been talking at great length in the same strain, Stephen, who had been sitting listening without any apparent interest, looked up and asked suddenly—

"That's all very well, but how do you know you can trust her?"

"Trust her?" repeated Thompson in astonishment; "of course I can trust her!"

"Yes! but how do you know?" returned Stephen doggedly. "How do you know that she isn't marrying you for some reason of her own, or for your money? How do you know she really cares for you, and if she does, how do you know that she will still care for you in ten years' time?"

Thompson hesitated for a moment. It was not easy to find words to fix his meaning. Then he said simply—

"I can't explain. But if you really care for any one,

you must trust. Love and trust are the same thing, I suppose."

"Many people have been under the impression that they were in love, and have found themselves disastrously mistaken," was Stephen's next remark.

"I dare say. But, hang it all, man! In every big thing you've got to carry your risks. And this is a big thing. Just the biggest thing of all."

Stephen picked up a pebble and flung it at a floating log. They were sitting by the river eating their lunch at the time.

"Well, I wish you luck, old man!" he said lightly. "You know that. But I wonder how you'll like being tied at home instead of having no one to consider, and being free to dash off wherever the fancy takes you?"

"I shan't mind being tied at home, so long as she is there. Half the men who wander do it because there is no one to sit still with them."

"I don't agree with you. They wander because they love it. Because they love the open road and the freedom of it. Look round you now! Not much catch to change this for a tennis court and a row of sweet-peas!"

Thompson laughed.

"No one asked you to! Can you never take the road again after you are married? I shall, I know, and I shan't take it alone either."

"I prefer it alone."

"But you'll tire of it. You'll want to come home at last. Not necessarily to a tennis court and a row of sweet-peas, but to a home with a woman in it. You'll tire of being alone." He looked at him keenly for a minute. "Why, man! you're tired of it now!"

"Rot!"

"You are! You mayn't know it yourself, but I can see you're not half so keen as you used to be. Three years ago in the Rockies you didn't wave your hands and draw attention to the scenery. You just looked and let it sink into your bones without talking about it. It is just because you are trying to persuade yourself that it means everything to you, just as it used to, that you

try and insist upon it. And three years ago you didn't sit down with your hands in front of you, or throw pebbles into the water, because you were too busy thinking to get a move on you. No, no, you were so keen about the life then, that you didn't spare a moment. If you sat still you went to sleep, you didn't sit and think, and then wonder what in the world you were thinking about."

"Rot!" said Stephen again, and although he attached no importance whatever to Thompson's opinion of his mental condition, yet the words remained in his memory.

He thought of them now, as he looked round his comfortable room. This was all right! Who wanted anything better than this? He had simply got a restless fit on, that was all. He sincerely hoped he wasn't really losing his content, his love of nature, and his interest in life. Of course, he was getting older, and he presumed that as one got older, one didn't enter into things with the same zest as before. But hang it all, he was rather young to begin to lose grip. It was rather a dreary outlook, if he was going to feel hipped and discontented for the rest of his natural life. It was time he started another job, and stuck to it with a purpose. Idleness was probably at the root of the matter, and yet, how he had enjoyed life until a little while ago! He had been the keenest man alive.

A home with a woman in it! It sounded all right; but how the devil was one to be sure of the woman? he asked himself irritably. Women never knew their minds for ten minutes together. He ran through a list of his acquaintances—half of them had reached the stage of leisured repentance, some were making the best of a bad job, and a few, a very few, had what might be really called a home. Dick, for instance. Dick was a lucky chap, but then Mrs. Dick was one in a thousand. A sweet, courageous woman, with a heart of gold. In spite of all their anxieties, they were happy, she and Dick, with the children and each other, in spite of shortness of money, and ill-health, and sundry other worries, which were proverbially supposed to drive love out of the window.

And then his thoughts went just a little farther, to the "Porch Cottage," and some one he had heard singing through the kitchen window, but they pulled up with a jerk when they came to Flora Moultrie.

Everything had been happy and jolly until Flora came and upset it! Flora was a good sort in many ways, but there was not the smallest doubt she could be vulgar at times. There was nothing so vulgar as reading mischief into the simplest actions. Good heavens! Fancy being married to a woman like Flora! He was sorry for her, because Moultrie as a husband undoubtedly left a good deal to be desired, but, honestly, he wasn't sure that Flora had not got the best of the bargain.

And yet she wasn't a stupid woman, Flora, not by any means, she could be interesting and amusing enough, when she chose. But she was selfish. That was at the bottom of it. All women, with the exception of Mrs. Dick, were selfish. They had their own ends in view, and they kept on hammering until they got them. That was just it. He had not the smallest intention of putting himself in such a position that a woman could hammer him. If you were married, there was no escape. And yet—a home with a woman in it!

He got out of his chair and filled a pipe, and looked round his room again. It was getting dark, and he walked to the wall and switched on the light. A very comfortable room, he told himself; he had never seen any in London he liked better, and yet it looked wrong, somehow. Empty, that was it. He had been away, and there were no papers or books lying about, it didn't look as if it had been lived in; it would be better in a day or two. He wandered round, touching an ornament here and there, setting a picture straight on the wall, pushing a chair into a different position. He had been rather pleased with his *pied-à-terre* and his possessions, they usually gave him a kind of friendly feeling when he returned after absence, they conjured up memories; here he had bought this, there he had bought that, but now—— A pile of letters and papers on a table met his eye, and he turned them over idly. There were a

quantity of circulars, and these he threw to one side without opening, and then, feeling that they were a hideous nuisance, but must be attended to sooner or later, he collected the letters and returned with them to his arm-chair.

The usual polite intimation that a gentleman would be only too happy to advance him any sum of money on his note of hand, without security—he tore it through angrily. A letter from a man asking him to join him for a fortnight in the north of Scotland—by Jove! he'd go, there was nothing to keep him in London. Two invitations for dinner—thank Heaven he needn't accept those, if he was going to Scotland he was spared dinner-parties. A begging letter from a clergyman in some God-forsaken hole he had never heard of, saying that having just completed the restoration of his church, he was appealing to the generosity of others to pay the bill, or something to that effect couched in smoother language. What a lot of rubbish! And then he picked up the next envelope and turned it this way and that between his fingers. It was of thin, foreign paper, and was addressed in a fine, foreign-looking writing, but it bore an English penny stamp. He amused himself by trying to decipher the postmark, but it was so smudged that he gave up the attempt after a minute or two, and tore it open. He glanced at it, and then, springing to his feet, he read it carefully through—

“MONSIEUR,

“I regret to be obliged to inform you that Madame your Aunt is seriously unwell. She contracted a severe chill about three weeks ago, but the doctor did not consider that there was cause for alarm until last night, when she became rapidly worse. I grieve to say that her condition is now very grave, although the doctor does not give up hope of her recovery. Miss Margaret is in her usual health.

“Assuring Monsieur of my sentiments the most distinguished,

“BARBARA CLAUDIA VINCENT.”

And across the bottom of the page were four words, evidently added in a great hurry, "I am so anxious."

Madame your aunt! It was Aunt Anne. Poor Aunt Anne! Then he looked at the date. Three days ago? Impossible. But, yes, there was a calendar on the mantelpiece. Three days ago! What might not have happened in three days?

Whatever his previous demeanour, there was no lack of energy about Stephen now, as he strode across the floor to the telephone, calling to his man as he went. And in front of his eyes floated four words, "I am so anxious!" There was something about them that sounded like a cry. Barbara Claudia Vincent assured him of her sentiments the most distinguished in the manner of the most correct French letter-writer, but added a little pitiful sentence which appealed to him for help. Aunt Anne was ill in the cottage at Fiddler's Green, some miles from a doctor, and no means of communication with the town, and alone, with the exception of Aunt Margaret, who was useless, and worse than useless. There was no one to depend on, no one to turn to, and the entire responsibility rested on the shoulders of a girl who was "so anxious."

Calmly and coolly he gave his orders and made his preparations, but all the while some new and hitherto unexperienced sensation seemed to be stirring in his heart.

At about eleven o'clock on the same evening the rain was falling in torrents at Fiddler's Green, the wind tore in angry gusts, roaring round the corners like a senseless fiend. Barbara, toiling along on her bicycle, battled against the elements, her eyes fixed on the little streak of light upon the road before her. Her hat had blown away, her thin skirt, heavy with moisture, clung round her slight form, impeding her movements; she was drenched to the skin, and breathless with fatigue, but bodily discomfort was quite unheeded. Miss Anne, her dear, kind Miss Anne, was dying, and her only consideration, her only fear, was lest she should arrive too late.

With grim determination she pushed on, across the Green and along the lane, until suddenly she heard the sound of wheels behind her. Springing to the ground she drew close to the hedge, and as she did so, a voice hailed her from the darkness.

"Is that you, Miss Vincent?"

"Yes. Don't wait. Go straight on."

"Let me give you a lift. I came along directly I got your message, and hoped to overtake you."

"No, no," she cried. "Don't wait for me. It is only a little way now. I shall be in directly. Please lose no time."

The doctor drove on, and Barbara, too tired now to remount, walked slowly forward, wheeling her machine. Her loosened, dripping hair whipped across her face, she could not spare a hand to brush it away, as with head down she struggled against the gale. Miss Anne, dear Miss Anne. But now the doctor had come, surely he could do something!

Ah! here was the gate at last! With a sigh of thankfulness that she had reached the end of her journey, she opened it, and, still pushing her bicycle, passed up the path. The door was open, and as she reached it, Mrs. Dodge came down the stairs.

"How is she?" gasped the girl.

"Bad, miss, but better than when you left. I mustn't stop, I ran down to fetch something."

Barbara leaned against the porch and closed her eyes. Her knees were shaking, so that she could hardly stand. Miss Anne was still alive. "Bad, but better than when you left." Just a moment's rest, and then she must go and help.

And then for the second time that night came a voice through the darkness.

"Is that you, Miss Vincent?"

She roused herself with a start.

"Oh!" she cried, "is it——"

"It is Stephen Grant," was the reply. "How is——"

"Bad, but better than when I left," repeated the girl mechanically.

"I have brought a nurse with me," he continued. "I thought perhaps she would be a help."

"The doctor is here now; will you come in?"

She led the way into the kitchen.

"If you will wait, I will go and see——"

Then Stephen saw her face.

"But you?" he said quickly. "What have you been doing?"

"I have only just come in."

"Come in? What do you mean?"

"I went to St. Ethel's to fetch the doctor."

Before he could reply, they heard a step on the stairs, and the doctor himself entered.

"Ah," he said, "I ran down to see what you were doing! Up you go this minute and change every shred on you. Mr. Grant, I am glad you have come. Miss Leigh has rallied for the moment, but I am thankful I came. She is deplorably weak, but if we can get her through the night, I shall not give up hope, by any means. Miss Vincent, will you go. We cannot afford to have you ill. I see a nurse in the hall. It was good of you to bring her, Mr. Grant, and now there will be no more for you to do, young lady, and it's time you thought of yourself. You haven't been to bed for three nights. Go, at once, please."

He spoke kindly and decidedly, and Barbara went, without a word. She came down again about an hour later to find Stephen Grant sitting on the settle beside the fire-place.

"The doctor has just gone," she said, "and Miss Anne is quite quiet."

"I know," he replied, "I saw him before he went. He is coming early in the morning. I hoped you had gone to bed. The nurse is quite efficient, and there is nothing more for you to do."

"What did the doctor say?"

"Nothing more. If she lives through the night, he thinks we may expect a little improvement towards morning."

She did not reply, but walking to the stove, took

up the kettle and moved away to refill it in the scullery.

"Give that to me," said Grant quietly. "You must not do anything more. Won't you go to bed?"

She listened for a second attentively, as though she heard something from the room above, and the next minute she had flown up the stairs, only to return almost immediately.

"It was nothing," she explained. "Only Mrs. Dodge. She is going to lie down in my room."

"Won't you go to bed yourself?"

"Oh no," she cried, "I couldn't. Please do not ask me to. I could not rest. Something might be wanted. I should like to stay with her, but the nurse thinks it better that I should not."

"I expect she is right. I am sure she is very capable, and you are worn out. You ought to get some rest."

"I couldn't sleep," she repeated.

"Very well, then, sit down here in this corner, and promise you won't keep springing up every time you hear a sound. I will go up myself from time to time, and tell you how things are going on. Now, I am going to boil the kettle and make you some tea. You are not to talk until you have had it."

Quickly and deftly he set about his task, filling the kettle afresh, and setting it on the stove, and fetching the necessary paraphernalia. Stephen Grant was not an old campaigner for nothing—and Barbara sat and watched him. It was comfort untold to have some one to depend on, and he was so strong, and kind and practical. Surely now that he had come, all would be well!

It was not long before he was standing beside her with a cup in his hands.

"Drink this," he said, "it will pull you together."

"I really do not want it," she said piteously.

"Never mind that, drink it up."

He stood waiting until the last drop had disappeared, and then he went into the parlour and returned with a cushion, which he placed behind her head.

"There! Now try and rest a little. I am going to smoke a pipe, if you don't mind."

He drew up a chair and seated himself on the other side of the hearth, and so they kept vigil, in silence, for the most part, for he could see that the girl's every nerve was strained to catch the slightest sound from the sick-room, and now and again, true to his word, he would steal softly upstairs and return with the same message, "No change."

At last, thinking that speaking might be a relief to the sadness of her thoughts, he began to talk, and gradually he drew from her the details of Miss Anne's illness and its cause. How, after returning from Major Vasey's house on the night of his death, the old lady had collapsed so utterly that it was some time before she could be restored to consciousness, and that although she had apparently recovered a little later, her illness had developed from that time.

"And then, this evening, she was so much worse—I do not know the reason, because when the doctor came this morning she was about the same as yesterday, but she seemed to be dying, and I had to leave her. There was no one else to go and fetch him. Oh! I feared so greatly that I should return too late."

"I only wish I had known sooner. Of course, I should have come."

"Miss Anne asked for you a few days ago. It was the day on which I wrote to you, but since then she has hardly spoken. Oh, Monsieur! you do not think that she will die?"

"The doctor says that if she lives through the night, we may expect some improvement in the morning," he repeated kindly. "You must not lose heart now. You have been so splendid. You have grown very fond of my aunt, haven't you?"

"I could not help loving her, she is so gentle and so good," she answered simply. "I think every one must love Miss Anne."

They fell into silence again, and presently Stephen saw the girl's head fall back against the cushion, and her eyes close.

The collarless white blouse she wore left bare the slender column of her throat, and her hair, hardly yet

dry from the rain, curled itself in a myriad little rings framing her wan face in dusky softness. "How absurdly young she looked," he thought, "hardly more than a child. Much too young to be far away from her friends, earning her living among strangers. No wonder she was tired out, poor little soul, after riding nearly ten miles in the teeth of the gale, after days and nights of anxious nursing. She was really fond of Miss Anne—not only her words, but her actions proved it. Surely if truth and honesty and simplicity of purpose were written anywhere, they were written on the face before him. This child sought nothing in return for her devotion, it was given in whole-souled affection. There was character, too, written in the broad, white brow, and strength in the line from temple to chin. This was no selfish, empty-headed girl, who would not know her own mind for ten minutes together, but a woman made for love and the sweetest of human companionship."

The fire fell with a crash, and he waited with bated breath to see if she would waken, but no. She changed her position very slightly, and slept on.

Then, as he watched, she sighed—just a long breath of utter weariness, quite unconscious, but infinitely sad, and two slow tears forced themselves from under her eyelids, and ran slowly down her cheeks. And over him there rushed a great desire to gather the slight form in his arms, to comfort and cherish and shield her.

"In any big thing, you've got to carry your risks"—but were there always risks in this—"Just the biggest thing of all"?

CHAPTER XXX

THE BIGGEST THING

"Our teachers teach that one and one makes two:
Later Love rules that one and one make one."

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

GRADUALLY the cloud which rested on the "Porch Cottage" lifted, and the sun shone again. Slowly Miss Anne regained strength, but for all that her progress was slow, it was sure; and as day succeeded day Barbara's heart grew light, and past anxieties were forgotten in the happy present. Stephen Grant came daily, and the invalid looked forward to his visits with the keenest pleasure. "You are not going away?" she would ask pleadingly, and his invariable answer set her mind at rest.

Stephen had not the smallest wish to go away. His unaccountable restlessness had vanished as suddenly as it had appeared, and he wanted to stay where he was. He wanted to stay to watch a little lithe figure moving about in the quaint, low rooms and along the garden paths. What matter that the flowers were past, and that the orchard trees stretched bare, cold branches to meet a winter sky, for in his heart something was stirring that recked nothing of times or seasons. He wanted to be at hand to catch the echo of a voice singing softly, waking answering chords, new, and strange, and very sweet, and above all he wanted to watch the soul of a woman revealing herself in a thousand different ways. In the quick changes of expression that flitted across her mobile face, at one moment gay, with a gleam of mischief in her great grey eyes; the next, serious, unfathomable, mysteriously alluring. In the cheerful patience with which she sought to distract and amuse

Miss Margaret, who depended upon her for everything in Miss Anne's absence, and particularly in the thought and care which characterized her in everything connected with the sick-room.

His early life had taught him to distrust impulse as a guide to action, and although, when necessary, he could decide quickly and wisely, and had the courage of his own opinions, yet in the present matter his very earnestness, his great desire to decide rightly, hampered him. He was so desperately anxious to make sure! So desperately anxious not to avoid "carrying his risks," but to ascertain as far as possible the extent of those risks at the outset.

They met every day, and although they had little opportunity for any conversation beyond the affairs of the moment, yet the interests they had in common, and the affection they shared for Miss Anne, had drawn them together. Barbara had ceased to regard him as a stranger, and would consult with him in friendly fashion over any question that arose, asking his advice as if it were the most natural thing in the world that she should follow it.

The girl herself was not at the moment inclined to introspection. If she had been, she would most likely have attributed her happiness to the fact of Miss Anne's recovery. The possibility of there being another reason had not crossed her mind. All was infinitely well with her and with those she cared for. Was not that all-sufficient reason for joyousness?

It is impossible to say how long this state of affairs might have continued, if it had not been for an untoward happening which tore the scales with lightning suddenness from two pairs of eyes. The cause was primarily Tommy, and it happened in this wise.

Stephen had been at the "Porch Cottage" early in the afternoon, and had then departed, announcing his intention of going to see the Arkwrights, whose period of quarantine was drawing to a close. He had said nothing of returning later in the day, and no one expected him.

At about seven o'clock, Barbara, having some message

to deliver to Mrs. Dodge, slipped on a coat and walked down to that worthy woman's dwelling. She stayed for a while chatting, for Mrs. Dodge was at all times ready for conversation, and inclined to resent any attempt to curtail her remarks; and presently Tommy, wishful to escape the hour of bedtime, which always came much too soon to please him, strayed out through the doorway into a wonderland of darkness.

His going was quite unheeded. Mrs. Dodge was too taken up with expressing her opinion on the various stages of Miss Anne's illness—a subject which she never wearied of discussing—and it chanced that Barbara was standing with her back to the door.

Suddenly the strident hoot of a motor was heard in the lane, and as suddenly Mrs. Dodge missed her grandson.

"A motter-'orn!" she screamed. "Where's the boy?"

Quick as thought Barbara realized the danger, and flew out in time to see Tommy standing in the middle of the lane, with the glare of a motor's headlights just turning on him as it rounded the corner a few yards away. Again the horn sounded warningly. The child gave no heed, entranced by the brilliancy of this unwonted apparition. Another second, and the girl had dashed across the road and seized the child, only to catch her foot in some obstacle, trip, and fall heavily in the ditch on the opposite side.

Stephen Grant, sitting next to his man, who was driving, had glanced up to see first the boy, and then a flying figure right in front of the car, almost, it seemed to him, under the very wheels—and he had seen it pitch forward and fall.

The car pulled up with a jarring and grinding of brakes, but long before that Stephen had leaped out. A clutch of the most appalling fear and anguish he had ever known had him by the throat as he stooped over the prostrate girl. But almost immediately she attempted to rise, and then his arms were round her, and she was lifted to her feet.

She gave a little sound, half laugh, half sob, for her nerves were shaken, and leaned against him for support, and so for a short moment she stood close clasped in his embrace.

"You are not hurt?" he asked, speaking with difficulty, and as he spoke he laid his face for a fleeting second against her hair.

"No, no!" she gasped. "I fell with Tommy. I hope I did not hurt him."

She moved slightly, and he released her instantly, and the episode, such as it was, was over, for the stout Tommy was discovered quite uninjured, although more than a little breathless, seated in the ditch.

"Were that a motter-'orn?" he asked in a tone of awe, as Stephen picked him up and carried him to his granny.

"A motter-'orn! I should just think it were!" retorted the good woman furiously. "How often haven't I told you to mind the motter-'orn? And if it hadn't a been for Miss Barbara, wherever would you have went?"

An unanswerable question indeed, but Tommy did not attempt to solve it; he was gazing wide-eyed at the brilliant headlights, entirely regardless of everything else, and for the rest of his childish life a motter-'orn was for him a fearful and wonderful beast moving swiftly on silent feet which groaned and wailed like nothing he had ever seen or heard—a fearful and wonderful beast with large yellow, staring eyes.

"I came to tell you that Mrs. Arkwright wants to see you to-morrow, and to say that I will come and fetch you directly after luncheon," Stephen said awkwardly, when at length he could stem the flood of Mrs. Dodge's gratitude.

He did not wait for Barbara's reply, but returned immediately to the car, which backed its way down the lane. He was conscious of nothing but the one fact that a moment's anguish had told him all he wanted to know—had shown him with absolute certainty that, come what might, his whole life and his whole future were bound up in the little form he had held for a moment in his arms. He was thrilling with the contact. Every pulse

was bounding, and through his whole being coursed a stream of the most intense emotion. Partly sickening fear at the thought of what might have been, and partly ecstasy, that at last, at last he knew. It is quite possible that he over-estimated the danger, quite possible that the car could have been pulled up before it reached her, even had she not fallen, and in doing so thrown herself out of reach—it had all happened so quickly that he could not tell—but, be this as it might, the light had come to him in one blinding flash. Risks! What were they? What risks could count against the knowledge that here at last was love—love with all it could mean? Just the biggest thing of all. The blind god, having spared Stephen hitherto, had sent his arrow well home now, and he quivered under the wound.

He paced up and down his room that night, thinking of her; of her gaiety, of her gentle sweetness, and of the words he would say to her, and of her reply. And then, of course, he tortured himself with the thought of what it would mean to him if she did not love him—if he could not teach her to love him.

There was not, after all, the slightest reason why she should; he was older than she was, and all unversed in the art of Love's warfare. How, if she denied him entrance, should he besiege the sanctuary of her heart? He longed for the day that he might go to her, a suppliant.

So this was Love? An overwhelming force that shook him, strong man as he was, to the very foundations of his being, and yet—as he thought, and thought, and thought again, there came to him the knowledge that love implied more than a boundless attraction drawing one heart to another with bands so strong that they seem almost tangible. It meant tender companionship, sweetest dependence and infinite trust, growing greater and ever dearer through the passing years.

And Stephen was right. Love is a great and wonderful gift given to many, but to love greatly is a lesson learned only by a few. It is not an easy lesson, for it can only be studied in the book of Service, on the page

of Self-denial; but those who have learned it are the only ones who can keep the gift pure and perfect to the end.

And Barbara, lying wakeful in her bed, stared into the darkness with eyes that were half bewildered, wholly wistful. Something had happened to her; what it was she could not yet understand.

It was as though she was standing on a lonely shore, alone and yet not alone, and at her feet the tide was coming in, inch by inch, in tiny rippling wavelets, quite small at first, but growing greater as they crept up one by one. And behind the soft music of the waves there sounded in her ears the murmur of a mighty sea behind, growing louder and ever louder as she listened. Her heart was beating tremulously, fearing and yet welcoming the unknown. It had stirred with the quick flutter of a fledgling bird at the moment when she had found herself drawn into the shelter of arms that had held her closely, when the tone of a voice had reached it—what mattered the words?—words were nothing. His heart had called, and hers had answered to its cry. It was waking now, waking in the birth of her womanhood.

Wave after wave broke—first at her feet, then higher—higher, until she was lifted gently but irresistibly, lifted and carried out on to the illimitable ocean, to meet a joy above all that she had ever known or dreamed.

And then it seemed to her she heard *Petite Mère* speaking. The dear familiar voice came faintly as though from a great distance, but it was quite distinct.

“*Mignonne! C’est l’amour!*”

“I have come to carry you off for a drive,” he said, as he entered the old kitchen on the following afternoon. “Aunt Anne has consented. She does not want you, and Aunt Margaret is quite happy with the nurse. Will you go and get ready?”

So Stephen had planned. He would not speak the words that were burning on his lips until he could be quite certain that there could be no chance of in-
rup-

tion. They must be quite alone, he and she, when he put his fate to the hazard—alone, that he might plead his cause, and haply might not plead in vain. He would take her away somewhere, anywhere, so that they could be alone together.

He was standing by the car as she walked down the path, and he watched her come. Her face was a little pale, and her eyes serious, with dark shadows under them which told of sleeplessness, but beyond that he could read nothing. He wrapped her in a great fur coat which he had brought with him for the purpose, helped her in, and seated himself at the wheel by her side. He drove slowly down the lane and across the Green, and then, instead of taking the road towards St. Ethel's, he turned in the opposite direction, and quickened his pace.

"Are we not going to see Molly?" It was the first time she had spoken.

"Not yet. Later."

"Where are we going?"

"I don't know. I have never been along this road before."

The day was bright and clear, and the sun was shining—one of those days which come to break the dreariness of an English winter—days when the sky is blue above us, and nature seems, not imprisoned, but sleeping gently. They bring a sense of expectancy, these days, drawing thought forward to the spring, rather than reminding us of summer's vanished beauty.

Few words passed between them as they sped along between the grassy banks, where the bracken lay sere and brown, with here and there a brilliant leaf of bramble shining like a jewel in a setting of tarnished gold—up on to a wide heath where the fir trees stood out richly green against the sky—on, always on. Distance was of no account. The world contained nothing but just themselves and something that was drawing nearer with every heart-beat.

At last the road ran into a beech wood, an aisle of giant trunks clothed in garments of grey, and fawn, and silver green, and Stephen knew that he had found the place.

"Shall we get out and walk a little?" he said quietly. "You will get cold sitting still."

He pulled up the car, and they descended and walked a while without speaking. All was very still; the only sound was the rustle of dry leaves under their feet, and the faint soughing of the breeze in the tree-tops.

Then he turned and faced her.

"Barbara," he said, "Barbara!" And then could say no more. All the pleading he had prepared, all the words he meant to say, had gone. He stood before her with his hands outstretched, his eyes upon hers. "I love you," he said at last, "I love you! Have you any love for me?"

Slowly she raised her hands and laid them in his with a little movement of absolute trust, absolute confidence.

"I did not know," she said simply, "I did not know that this was love."

He drew closer until she was in his arms, and he stooped his face to hers.

"Darling, you know it now," he said very gently. "I love you. Will you be my wife?"

Her lips answered his, and as they met Love's Splendid Magic wove a golden radiance over all.

"Love is so great a thing," she murmured presently. "It changes everything; yesterday I was alone—and now— Why do you want me? I am not wise—and you do not know who I am, or—"

"I love you," he answered passionately. "You, and nothing in the world beside. Sweetheart, nothing in the world counts but you and I and Love."

"You do not want to know—"

"I want to know nothing but that you love me."

"But I must tell you," she returned gravely. "Will you listen?"

For answer he kissed her again.

"Tell me what you will; but oh! my dear, my dear! you have given yourself to me, and nothing can cancel the gift."

"I know the names of my father and mother, but I know nothing further of them. I never knew any parents

but Père Joseph and Petite Mère. Dear Petite Mère! Oh, you will love her, won't you? Because I love her so dearly, and except for her I am all alone."

"Not now!"

"Not now!" she corrected, with a smile that lit up the eyes he loved. "Not now; but you understand—there is no one else—and——"

"And what, darling?"

"I do not want to try and find out. Petite Mère is all the mother I ever had. She is more than my mother—for me, that other is nothing, but if you think that you should know——"

"I want to know nothing," he repeated. "I will never try and find out, and I will love Petite Mère for all her love for you."

"I wish she were here! Oh, so greatly I wish she were here!"

"Could she not come to you?"

"I fear not. The journey is a great consideration."

"If she cannot come, we will go to her directly we are married. When shall that be, Barbara. You will not keep me waiting long?"

She looked thoughtful for a minute.

"Oh, but I could not leave Miss Anne until she is better! Who would look after them both?"

"We must wait until she is stronger," he agreed. "But then we will find somebody who is trustworthy, and you will come to me. First we will go and see your Petite Mère, and then—— What would you like to do? We will do whatever you like best. I want you to choose."

"But"—she hesitated—"I might choose something that was too great an affair. Something impossible."

"I don't think you will," he said, smiling. "Tell me what you are thinking of."

"I had always planned that some day, when I had obtained the fortune I came to seek, that I would go and see the world. Petite Mère and I were to go together—'to find the fairies.' We were to visit the most wonderful places, and see the most wonderful things! But—"

there was no fortune; it was all a most foolish mistake—a dream of Blue Roses, you understand—a mirage that faded away. And so, you see, that was the end of my castle in Spain!”

“No, not the end,” he cried. “Come with me, Barbara; let me show you all the wonderful things you planned to see. Let us build the castle again together!”

“Would it be possible?”

“Of course it would be possible. It is the one thing of all others I should love to do.”

They had been strolling along, all unheeding of whither their steps were leading, but now they found themselves approaching what appeared to be the entrance to a park. Before them was an old red brick lodge, half buried in ivy, but the wrought-iron gates which should have barred the way were lying off their hinges, overgrown by grass and weeds.

“How deserted it looks!” said Barbara.

“We will go in and explore,” suggested Stephen, and they turned into an avenue of beeches, at the end of which they could catch glimpses of a house.

They walked on hand in hand, talking together as lovers have talked since the beginning, and will until the end; and at last they came to another gate, which, after some struggling with a rusty latch, opened to Stephen’s hand.

They entered a great courtyard and in front of them was an old mansion with quaint gables and chimneys and heavy mullioned windows. Two stone lions guarded a flight of shallow, moss-grown steps which led to a front door. Stephen turned the handle, but it was locked.

“Let us come round to the other side,” he said. “I never saw a more beautiful old house, but it looks as though the Seven Sleepers had been in possession for a hundred years.”

Barbara peeped through a window.

“I wish we could go inside. I am sure we should find Barbarossa asleep, with his beard grown right through the table while he slept.”

A small door in a side wall admitted them to what had evidently been a splendid garden in days long gone by, but was now all ruinous and overgrown. Terraces sloped down to a stream which ran sullenly, half choked in weeds and slime; and through the dead vegetation they could trace old-fashioned parterres primly set round a broken sun-dial.

"It must have been perfect when it was cared for," said Barbara. "I have never seen anything like it—so ancient and so magnificent. Just imagine it in the summer when the sun is shining, and all the trees are out. Oh, it is sad to think no one lives here now. What can be its history?"

"I haven't any idea. I don't even know where we are. I will find out when we get back. You are quite right. It would be a paradise in the summer. It only needs repairing and setting in order. Shall we come and live in it, sweetheart, when we return from our wanderings?"

She laughed at the jest, and answered merrily—

"But of course we will come and live in it; and we will plant the parterres full of roses, and have peacocks strutting on the terrace, and I will wear a ruff, and—what is it you call it?—I was reading only lately about it—oh yes, a farthingale!"

"I don't know what it is in the least, but it sounds very attractive! You shall have a black boy to carry your train, and I am sure you must carry a fan of peacocks' feathers."

"No, no, I refuse! They are too unlucky."

So they jested like happy children, until the waning daylight warned them they must be returning.

"We will go and see Molly on our way," said Stephen, as they walked back towards the car. "But you must not stay long, because I want to take you to Aunt Anne, and I am going to leave you to-night."

"You are going away?"

"I am going away, but I shall return very soon. In three days at latest. I can't bear to leave you, but I must go."

As he helped her into his coat he held her for a moment.

"It is all too wonderful," he murmured. "Soon, very soon, you will be my wife—and then we shall never part again. First we will go and see your *Petite Mère*, and then—we will go and find your fairies. Just you and I, with the world before us."

"And my dream will come true," she whispered. "But, *mon ami!*"—she lifted a radiant face to his—"there is no need to go and seek them, for the fairies have found me!"

CHAPTER XXXI

LITTLE WINGS OF ANGELS

"If love is not worth loving, then life is not worth living,
Nor aught is worth remembering, but well forgot ;
For store is not worth storing, and gifts are not worth giving,
If love is not."

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

BARBARA sat sewing beside Miss Anne's couch, while at a table in the corner of the room Miss Margaret strove to occupy herself with the fascinating Miss Milligan. It was evident that the attention of the latter strayed from the intricacies of her favourite game of Patience, for again and again she gathered the cards together, and again and again she shuffled and set them out. Even the exchanging of a card was effected lightly and entirely without the consideration due to so questionable a proceeding, for the little lady's mind was in a whirl.

Ever since the moment that Stephen had announced his engagement, Miss Margaret had been in a flutter of excitement. The prospect of a wedding was so absolutely enthralling, she could think of nothing else. It was in vain that Barbara assured her that they were not going to be married at once; Miss Margaret busied herself over every detail as though the great day would arrive with to-morrow's dawn, almost, in fact, before a fresh row of bows could be stitched on her freshest and most frilly gown!

She plied every one with questions. Would there be favours? When her old friend Mary Deane was married ("a very smart wedding, my dear") there was a favour for every one in the church—little bunches of orange blossom—not real, you know, but made out of wax and tied up with satin ribbon. I have mine still.

And she drove in a carriage with four white horses, ridden by postillions, and even the postillions had favours, and there were bunches of white flowers in the carriage lamps. Will you have four white horses, Barbara? And how many bridesmaids? I have been a bridesmaid several times, but of course not for a long while. And will there be little slices of wedding cake in boxes, Barbara? I have seen them. There is a card inside each box with the bride's maiden name crossed through with a silver arrow, and her married name and the bridegroom's. How will you feel with a new name? I am so glad you will have a fresh initial, and are not keeping the same one. There are not many names beginning with V, are there? It is a good thing—I have always felt it is better to change it, although it means more work in marking your clothes. Will you have everything new?

And so on, and so on.

Miss Anne was growing stronger, but as yet she was unequal to any sustained conversation or effort, and she lay upon the sofa listening quietly to her sister's chatter, and watching the girl beside her. A change had come over Miss Anne since her illness, a change which Barbara had not failed to notice. Gentleness had always been her chief characteristic, but now to her gentleness had been added something which the girl could only describe as peace. Her face was sad, but it was with a sadness free from regret—free from all anxiety. The cloud which had shadowed her whole life had passed, leaving a great calm, and because she trusted implicitly in an Almighty Wisdom which knows and pities and understands, Miss Anne was at peace.

The engagement of the two to whom she was so attached brought her infinite joy. She had always greatly desired to see Stephen married, and now her wish was to be fulfilled. She put out her hand and laid it with a gesture of great affection on Barbara's knee.

The girl looked up and smiled in quick response.

"Have you heard when Stephen is coming?"

"No, I have not heard, but he said three days, and

to-day is the third day, so I expect he will come," she said, with a little blush.

"Do you think Mrs. Arkwright would come and see me? I should like to see her if it would be quite safe."

"I am sure she would come. Oh yes, it is perfectly safe now. I saw her two days ago, but only for a few minutes."

"How are the children?"

"They are all well again. Phil has gone back to his work and the boys to school. I thought Patsy looked very white, but I suppose that is only natural after being in bed so long, and unfortunately, being winter, she cannot get out very much. If it were only summer she could be in the fresh air all day, and her cheeks would soon be rosy again."

Stephen and Barbara had only paid the Arkwrights a short visit, and, as may be imagined, the news they had to tell had been received with such a hubbub of congratulation, for the whole family happened to be at home, that the girl had had no opportunity for any private talk with Molly. She longed to see her friend, not only to tell of her own happiness, but to find out many things which she wished to know.

She had thought Dick pretty well; he had been more cheery and even a little too excited, Barbara thought; but she had not felt at all satisfied about Molly, who had certainly grown much thinner, and showed evident traces of the strain through which she had passed.

There was no doubt that Patsy ought to be sent away to some seaside place to recover her general tone. In fact, that was what Molly wanted too; the whole family should go away somewhere where there was sunshine. But even as she thought, she knew it was impossible. They could not possibly afford it.

She was so happy herself that she longed to feel that those she cared for were happy too, so deeply conscious of her joy that she would have liked to share it with the whole world. It was all so new and strange and wonderful, this thing that had come into her life, that

she could not measure the depth of her content. Sure as she was of her love for Stephen, and implicitly as she trusted in his love for her, yet he was still in some degree a stranger, and she was fearful lest she should fail in any way—lest in her ignorance and lack of knowledge of the world she should disappoint him. Yet he had chosen her—chosen her, young and inexperienced as she was, from all the women of his acquaintance, because he loved her. She would do her best to be worthy of his love; she would do her best to learn all the hundred and one things of which she was ignorant, things belonging to the world in which he had lived and moved, and which had never entered into her life at the little Pavilion.

She had written to Petite Mère, telling her simply what had happened—a short letter, and rather incoherent, but brimming over with love and gratitude and affection. She longed for the reply—Petite Mère's letters were always just a glimpse of herself, and comforting and dear. She must ask Stephen (it was still difficult to even think of him as Stephen) to write to Petite Mère; he would explain all that Chérie would naturally want to know.

How she yearned for her! It was so hard to feel that she was far away and outside all this, the greatest thing in her life—it was at such a time as this that a girl needed a mother to guide and to advise. And Stephen did not know her! It seemed so strange that the man she loved and had promised to marry did not even know the little woman who had been all in all to her through her previous life. But when he knew her he would love her—no one could possibly help loving Petite Mère.

"Barbara, what have you chosen for your wedding gown?" Miss Margaret's voice broke through her reverie.

"I have not chosen anything," she replied, with a smile. "I have not thought about it."

"Not thought about it?" returned the old lady. "I thought of it at once, and I should have supposed it

would have been the first thing in your mind too. I think I should have a soft white silk," she continued after a moment's reflection. "Of course satin is more fashionable, but it is a little stiff, don't you think? Silk is so young! And I would have three frills round the edge of the skirt and one frill round the fichu over the shoulders, and wear a knot of orange blossom in the front, and another knot of orange blossom in the side of my hair under my veil." The old lady spoke sentimentally and rather jerkily, setting down a card with every item she enumerated. Then, pausing with the ace of hearts held high in the air, she deliberated a moment. "Yes—yes," she said decidedly. "I would carry one white rose in my hand," and with that she set the ace of hearts down upon the rest of the suit as if to crown the whole.

"My dear," said Miss Anne kindly, "you have forgotten that fashion has changed; Barbara will, I am sure, want to consider a little what is the present mode for a bride. I think the orange blossom at the side of the hair is just a trifle out of date."

But Barbara was not listening; her quick ear had caught the sound of a "motter-'orn," and she rose to her feet.

Miss Anne nodded affectionately. "Run along, my dear. We shall be quite all right till nurse comes in."

She stopped in the porch, a feeling of shyness preventing her from going farther, and in another moment he was walking towards her up the little flagged path; he held a small box covered with white paper in his hand, and wore a thick coat and a travelling cap.

Just as he reached her he stopped and said in French, "Babette, I bring thee little wings of angels."

For a second she stared in amazement, and then she understood. She stepped quickly to him with a little cry.

"Oh! you have been! you have been!" and the next moment she was tightly clasped, half laughing, half sobbing, to his breast.

"Yes, I have been, and I have seen your Petite

Mère, and she has given me her blessing, and Melanie sent you the little wings of angels. She made them in a great hurry, because I could not stay very long, but directly she heard the news she said, 'La Petite will want a little taste of home!'"

"Oh, Stephen, it is good of you! It is so dear of you to have thought of it!"

As she spoke, she remembered how Molly had said that Stephen was one of those people who thought of everything and never talked of what he was going to do, but only did it.

"Let us go inside, I have such great news for you." He took off his coat as he spoke, and presently, when they were seated side by side on the old settle, he said, smiling—

"You haven't told me you are glad to see me yet."

"There is no need, because you know that," she whispered.

"Tell me!"

And when she had told him to his satisfaction, he began to speak of his journey.

"I really went to see if Petite Mère would not come. I wanted to bring her to you because I knew you would love to have her, but she would not. You were right when you said I should love her—she is perfectly charming, and we made great friends. You won't be jealous, will you, darling, if I tell you that I kissed her when we parted."

Barbara gave a little happy laugh, and would so have liked to see Stephen bending down to kiss Chérie, who would have come nearly as high as his shoulder.

"I told you all about everything, and that you were happy; which is quite true, sweetheart, isn't it?"

"Quite true."

"And I promised her that directly we were married I would take you to her. I could not persuade her to come. She told me to tell you that her heart is with you and that she is writing."

"And you saw the little house; it is very tiny, is it not?"

"It is charming, and Petite Mère took me round and showed me everything, so that I could tell you the latest news of all the things you cherished."

"I know," said Barbara; "Cléopâtre and Paul and Virginie and Alcibiade."

"No, not Alcibiade. He is no more, but his successor is very handsome. Petite Mère is waiting for you to find a name for him."

"Did you drive to the station with Cléopâtre?" asked Barbara, with great interest.

"No, I regret to say that I did not. As a matter of fact I hired a motor in Rouen because the trains did not fit."

"A motor! All the way from Rouen! I do not suppose a motor had ever been seen near the Pavilion. However did you find the way?"

"I picked up a small boy on the high road just after you pass the church. He was evidently rather alarmed but full of valour, and he thoroughly enjoyed himself sitting beside the driver."

"What was he like? I wonder if I know him."

"He had absolutely scarlet hair, and squinted abominably. He was intelligent, but by no means beautiful."

"Oh, but I can guess who he was! It was François Monnaie; his mother keeps the shop. Yes, he is certainly not beautiful, François, but he has plenty of intelligence. I can fancy that a motor must have been very exciting for the inhabitants of the village. Why, I do not believe Melanie has ever seen a motor, or, if she has seen one, it would not be more than once or twice. She has hardly ever been out of the garden all the time we have lived at the Pavilion."

She questioned him gaily about this and that, interested in every detail connected with the home she loved, until at last Stephen said—

"You have not asked me about my news."

"I am so sorry," she said penitently; "it is selfish of me: please tell me."

"It has to do with the Arkwrights."

She started up in sudden alarm. "They are not in trouble?"

"No, no," he said soothingly. "Put your head down again and I will tell you all about it. I only heard it myself to-day, for when the car met me at the station it brought a note from Dick, asking me to see him at once, and saying that the matter was important. I thought it was rather a nuisance, because I wanted to come straight to you; but instead of that I went to the 'White House' and stayed there two hours, so you may fancy it was something very important."

"Do tell me."

"Well, it really is splendid news. It appears that a relation of Dick's is dead, and that he is the next heir to the property."

Barbara started to her feet. "Oh, he is dead!" she cried.

"How did you know anything about him?"

"Molly told me once that there was some relation who was very old, and that at his death Dick would—how do you say it?—succeed. Oh, Stephen, is it really true? And Molly will be free from care at last."

"Well, it seems to be true enough. He died some time ago, nearly two months, I believe, and the lawyers informed Dick, as he was the next of kin. The old gentleman left no will, and he is the nearest relative, so unless some one else turns up, he'll get the whole property; and, do you know, Barbara, that the lovely place we saw is Brook Stretton, the very place that will belong to Dick if all is settled up as we hope it will be. The poor chap was so afraid of raising his wife's hopes that he never told her a word about it until yesterday, when the lawyer wrote and told him that they had not so far been able to trace any one with any nearer claim."

"Oh," cried Barbara, with sparkling eyes. "I cannot tell you how I rejoice! Just think of Molly and the children in that beautiful place!"

"There is a good deal of money, too," said Stephen. "So far as I can understand they will have a very fine

income, more than enough to put the house in order and live there comfortably and start the boys well. He seems to have been a most eccentric old person, old Brook. He only came home about once a year, and no one knew where he was or what he was doing."

"He must have been a wicked old man to neglect a property like that," said Barbara. "It will be a long time before it can be set in order. Oh! just think of what it will mean to Molly! Dick can go abroad and have all the care he needs to get quite strong again, and Patsy can go to the sea, and Phil need not go on working in that stupid office, where there is no chance of his getting on. Oh! it is too good to be true. How long will it be before they know it is quite certain?"

"I am not sure of the law, but I fancy it must be some little time before they can take possession. The lawyers seem to think that if no one puts in a claim there won't be any difficulty. In Dick's family, at any rate, he had always been recognized as the heir. He is the eldest of his branch. Old Brook was a cousin of his mother's, I believe. But I shall know more about it in a few days, for he has asked me to go up to London to see the lawyers for him. He isn't fit for the journey himself."

"It is simply too splendid! Isn't it wonderful what a difference money can make in people's lives?"

"Money isn't everything."

"No," she said. "But it is a great deal, isn't it? It is no use pretending that money is not a great possession, because it makes a great deal of difference to people's happiness."

He looked at her keenly. What did a child like her know about money?

And Barbara, for her part, thought: He has never had to count over with torment of soul the spending of every sou, otherwise he would know that money is of the very greatest importance. Not riches—they were not necessary—but the modest competence, which, as Petite Mère truly said, makes for godly living. It is

difficult to be cheerful and good tempered and to practise all the other virtues, if you are perpetually harassed by the thought of how you are going to pay for the necessities of life. But of this Stephen knew nothing. How should he? It was outside his experience altogether.

"Well, I am thankful for Dick and his wife, because undoubtedly it is a splendid thing for them," he said.

"How I wish I could see Molly!"

"Well, put on your hat and come over now," he said.

"The car is outside, and I know she is longing to see you. I'll go up to Aunt Anne while you get ready."

Phil, who was the only one of the young Arkwrights who had at present been told of the change in the family fortunes, was standing on the doorstep as Stephen and Barbara drew up to the house.

"Come in," he said. "Father and mother are in the drawing-room. I am so glad you have come. Poor little mother is nearly out of her mind with it all."

And indeed this seemed to be the case, for presently Molly took Barbara into another room, leaving the men to talk business; and then she threw her arms round the girl and stood shaking from head to foot, striving in vain for self-control. Barbara held her close and soothed her with loving words. It was, after all, so natural that she should break down now that all her struggles seemed to have come to an end. It is always upon the woman that the burden presses hardest in a question of ways and means. A man may feel obliged to deny himself many things, and be harassed by the knowledge that the quarter's income will barely suffice; but it is the woman who has to do the planning and contriving, in a thousand petty ways of which he knows nothing; and it is a mother who, while pressing her children to take a second helping, is considering all the time whether, if they do, the joint will suffice for the morrow's dinner.

At last she grew calmer. "What a miserable coward I am!" she said, with an attempt at a smile. "But I didn't sleep a wink last night for thinking of all the little things, the odious little things that no one has

known anything about. For it really does seem as if we should never have to worry over them again. And Dick has known it all for weeks, and never said a word about it. I thought something was on his mind, but I imagined it was the children's illness and the doctor's bill, and instead of that it was this stupendous thing. Oh, Barbara, my heart is so full of thankfulness, I can hardly speak coherently."

"I don't wonder; I nearly cried for joy when I heard of it."

"Just think of it: Dick can go to that place in Germany and get cured; and Phil, dear old Phil, who has been such a brick, can have some of the fun which is owing to him, and the boys!—oh, there is no end to the list of joys which I can see dancing before my eyes! The world seems full of happiness. Here are you two dear people going to be married, just the very thing I have hoped for; for you are the one wife for Stephen, and you will have the best husband in the world—except my Dick, of course," she said, smiling. "I did want you to marry Stephen, because he really is one of the salt of the earth. I never knew any one so thoughtful or so kind."

"I know, Molly, I know," said Barbara softly. "Oh, Molly, do you think I shall be able to make him happy? I feel as if I were so ignorant of many things which come quite naturally to you. I have lived so out of the world."

"That doesn't matter a pin," said Molly stoutly. "He loves you, and you love him. He won't worry about the things you don't know. Do you know, I have always felt sorry for Stephen. I am sure he could not have had a happy childhood or a good mother. He seems to distrust women so, and I was afraid he never would find any one to prove to him that they were not all selfish and shallow. I have so wanted him to choose some one who would make it all up to him."

"How am I to do it?" asked Barbara earnestly.

"Just by your love for each other," said Molly simply. "You must just teach him all it really means, because

a man never really knows unless a woman teaches him. You must let him right into your heart, and then you will get right into his. Stephen has always suffered from bottling things up in himself, he has got that nature. You must share everything, and never let the smallest thing come between you. Oh, I know that what I say is true. One has to be so careful of the trifles that cause division."

"I will remember."

"Forgive me for speaking, won't you?" said Molly prettily, "but I know more about men than you do, and although they are very dear, they are not always easy. When are you going to be married?"

"I do not know. Nothing is settled; you see, the old ladies must be considered."

"I can't think what they will do without you," said Molly, with conviction. "Ah, here is Stephen. Have I kept her too long?"

"Much too long," he answered, smiling, as he crossed over to where Barbara was standing. "But I forgive you. I congratulate you, Mrs. Dick, more than I can say! If ever two people deserved their luck, it is you and Dick. So far as I can see the matter ought to be fixed up soon."

After some further conversation Barbara asked for Patsy, who had not appeared.

"She is upstairs," said her mother. "I sent her to rest. Amelia is reading to her. Oh, by the way, Barbara, I never told you. The partnership of Me an' Allus is dissolved. An awful thing has happened."

"What do you mean?" But Phil, entering at the moment, burst into laughter. "Allus is going to be married."

"Allus married! Who to?"

"You must not laugh," said Molly, trying to keep her face grave. "It is really a tragedy. You see, they have always had a young man. I expect you remember seeing him when you were staying here. He walked out with Me an' Allus, and we never knew which he liked the best. Well, poor Me had the measles, and

during her illness it appears that Spriggins (that is the man's name) was very anxious, and came regularly to the garden gate to inquire for her. Allus always saw him, and she seems to have won his heart, for the end of it is that they are going to be married, and Amelia is left in the lurch! She is most unhappy about it!"

"Poor Amelia! To be supplanted by her younger sister!" said Stephen.

"You should hear her on the subject," said Phil. "She is simply priceless. She keeps on assuring us that she didn't want him, but of course she did. 'T'ain't as though I wanted him,' he continued, setting his arms akimbo and dropping into the vernacular. 'We liked 'avin' a young man, Me an' Allus, to walk with of a Sunday, and if he'd come to me fair and square and above-board, and said as how he wished to offer marriage to me sister, I'd have said nothing' (you bet she would); 'but 'twas me as introduced them first, and them nasty sneakin' underhand ways I can't abide, agoin' and fixin' of it up when I was laid up with a face as spotty as the side of a trout, and me bein' the eldest, and the proper person to be told of such goin's on.'"

"Hush, Phil, she'll hear you!"

"Personally," continued the lad, regardless of the interruption, "I consider Spriggins a man of sense. Allus possesses one great gift, that of silence. My only wonder is how he ever induced her to reply when he popped the question!"

"I expect she can talk all right when her sister isn't there. Patsy always says she is most amusing."

"I can't imagine her being amusing under any circumstances. Amelia really has a sense of humour."

"And she never stops talking," added his mother. "Things are badly divided in this world."

"As the woman said who had twelve children and only one tooth," said Phil quickly, "It's a case of too much of one and not enough of t'other!"

CHAPTER XXXII

A DISCOVERY

"For fortune's wheel is on the turn,
And some go up, and some go down."

MARY TUCKER.

YOU may wander for days in London and never meet a soul you are really anxious to see, and yet if you go up for a few hours you invariably run against the one person of all others you would prefer to avoid.

The laws of chance admit of no explanation, one must simply bow to their ruling, and it must be acknowledged that Stephen's bow was not exactly cordial. He had not the smallest desire to see Flora Moultrie, but finding himself face to face with her, as he walked out of the lawyer's office, he could do no less than take off his hat.

It was not that he disliked Flora, but he had an inward conviction that she would not view his engagement with approval, and when she did not approve of a thing her remarks were sometimes scathing.

"Hullo, Stephen!" she said in a most friendly fashion. "What luck to meet you! So you have fallen a victim at last!"

"Yes; how did you hear?"

"Oh, it is all over the place. How do these things get about? The same old chattering little bird, I suppose. Well, I wish you the best of luck!"

"Thanks very much," he said, with a little more warmth in his tone. Flora was going to be pleasant, after all.

"Which way are you going?" she asked, and upon his somewhat inadvisedly replying, she promptly said she was going in the same direction, and it ended in their taking a taxi.

"I suppose you think yourself very fortunate," she remarked sweetly, when they were fairly started.

"Yes," he replied, "very fortunate. If you knew Miss Vincent you would find her very charming."

"I have no doubt, and she is certainly clever."

There was a little inflexion in her voice, which he recognized meant that Flora was going to be spiteful, and he mentally cursed his folly in giving her this opportunity of a *tête-à-tête*.

"So few women know anything about household affairs now, cooking and that sort of thing; but I do trust, Stephen, you won't find you would have done better to choose some one a little more—well—how shall I put it?—accustomed to the world in which we live. Your Martha is certainly charming and clever, but a little—shall we say?—unsophisticated."

"Thank God for it!" he retorted.

"Yes, by all means," she said pensively. "But, do you know, I am really not sure that kind of sentiment answers in real life, from your point of view, I mean. You know I was only thinking of you. We have been such pals. From hers, of course, it is easily understood—she has done jolly well for herself."

"I consider myself honoured that Miss Vincent has accepted me," he said stiffly.

Flora turned her head and looked at him with a kind, pitying expression, as though he were a well-meaning but very foolish child.

"My dear Stephen, you surely did not think for a moment that she would refuse you?"

"I certainly could not be sure that she cared for me."

"Perhaps! but refuse you! I give her credit for more sense. What girl who had spent half her life scouring pots and pans would refuse a man with your income?"

"You are very much mistaken if you think Miss Vincent has spent her life scouring pots and pans, as you are pleased to call it, or that she is marrying me for my money," he said hotly.

"Don't get annoyed. I am not saying anything

against her. I admire her wisdom. All women love money, particularly when they haven't got it. Because your Martha is mercenary like the rest of her sex it doesn't follow that she will not make you an excellent wife. Indeed, I should think that was certain with her previous experience in household matters to guide her——"

Stephen put his head out of the window and stopped the driver. If he stayed another moment he would swear and say something he would regret afterwards.

As he shut the door Flora leaned forward. "Why go in such a hurry?" she asked sweetly; and then, as he walked off, she called after him, "Be sure and ask me to the wedding!"

"I'll be damned if I do!" he said furiously, as he strode along. "A vulgar little cat how spiteful women can be!"

Of course he knew that you never could believe a word that Flora said when she turned nasty, and of course any one who knew Barbara must know that the very idea of applying to her the epithet mercenary, was positively laughable! The whole thing was spite, pure and simple, and not worth a moment's thought, so he assured himself; but Flora Moultrie, who might indeed with considerable truth be designated a little cat, could not under any circumstances have been called a fool. She knew her man, and she had winged her arrow with just the little weight of truth that sent it well home. The mere idea that the fact of his money would influence the woman who should be his wife had always been revolting to Stephen, and although he had forgotten it in his new-found happiness, yet now Flora's words roused the old doubt. Again and again he told himself that it was absurd; Barbara had not the smallest notion what his income was, he was sure of it; but again and again the germ of truth in Flora's statement forced itself to the front.

"All women love money, particularly those who haven't had it!" And as time went by the drop of venom in the wound rankled and stung, for as day by

day his love for Barbara grew stronger, so the longing grew more insistent to be sure that she did not share this characteristic of her sex, and that her love for him was in no way the outcome of any attraction his money might have had for her.

He could not doubt she loved him, and at times when he held her in his arms and her honest, fearless eyes looked into his own he was ready to swear that he was wholly satisfied, and to curse himself for his mistrust, and yet at another he would torture himself afresh. The wedding-day was fixed—in a few weeks she would be his absolutely and unalterably and his heart was to be at rest—or so he assured himself.

The matter of Dick Arkwright's inheritance seemed to be arranging itself satisfactorily. There were certain tiresome formalities required by the law, but once these were completed there was no reason to anticipate further delay in proving his right to the succession.

No one had in any way disputed his position as next of kin to the dead man, and he was beginning to make plans for the great change in his circumstances. It had been settled that he and Molly and Patsy were to go abroad to enjoy some sunshine until such time as the weather permitted his undergoing a treatment at the German health resort from which his doctor expected he would derive enormous benefit.

Phil and the boys were to travel for a few months under the care and companionship of a friend of Stephen's, and they were already occupying themselves in looking out routes and studying maps. Nothing was at present settled so far as their future was concerned. Lance stated openly that his one wish was to go to Canada as soon as he could persuade his father to permit it; but Tony, who was younger and not so robust, would probably have to continue his education with a tutor until he went to the university.

Molly was never tired of weaving plans for the future of her sons, but she had not yet come to a decision.

The whole party had driven

and, the younger ones especially, could think of nothing but the delights of the old place; while Molly and Dick sat hand in hand dreaming happy dreams of their life in that enchanting domain.

Some consternation had been caused by Amelia, who, while weeping bitterly at the thought of being parted from Patsy, declined absolutely to accompany her to what she termed "furrin parts."

"I never have been on the sea," she declared tearfully. "And I never saw it but once, and that once was enough for me. Cross it I could not. 'Twas more than enough for me to stand on Yarmouth pier and see the way them nasty waves come choppin' and tossin'! If I was to be chopped an' tossed like that I'd die, and then a lot of use I'd be to Miss Patsy, ma'am! Give me a grave in solid ground, says I. I never could abide drownin'."

Amelia had another cause for distress, for, having heard much of the glory of Brook Stretton she "didn't see as it was the place for her!"

"You'll be havin' footmen and butlers and a fine lady's maid and lots of things as I have never been used to, and I shan't be allowed to do for you same as I have done, and I've had enough o' men, and seems to me, ma'am, it would be better that I took my month's notice."

In vain Molly assured her that she had no desire to part with her. Amelia, her usual balance of mind entirely shattered by the "goings on" of Allus and the respectable Mr. Spriggins, refused to be consoled, and it was Stephen who finally made a suggestion which seemed almost an inspiration. "Why shouldn't Amelia go to 'Porch Cottage' and look after the old ladies?" She could rule them with the same kindly discipline which Molly had found so bearable, and which had answered so well for all concerned, and Barbara could start off on her honeymoon knowing Miss Anne and Miss Margaret would be in good hands.

Strange to say, Amelia received the suggestion with unqualified approval, and so it was arranged. The nurse, who was an excellent woman in every way, would stay

until Molly could spare Amelia, so that there was no reason to delay the marriage.

It was to take place at the little church at Fiddler's Green, and, greatly to Miss Margaret's disappointment, it was to be a very quiet affair. No carriage with four white horses, no postillions and no favours! but possibly some orange blossoms. Mr. Poole was to read the service, Dick to act father and give the bride away, while upon Patsy rested the heavy responsibility of being the chief and only bridesmaid. Dear Miss Anne's wedding gift had taken the form of a cheque which would more than suffice for the simple trousseau, and Molly was acting as adviser-in-chief in the matter.

No one had taken a more lively interest in Barbara's love affair than Samuel Dodge, who had not hesitated to assure her that he had "seen it coming." "I study 'uman natur," he said, with his usual chuckle, "and them as makes a study of it can see through a brick wall farther than most. And I'm sure I wishes you well. You an' Muster Grant, too, for a finer couple than you'll be you won't find in a day's march, as the sayin' is. Muster Grant he's a pleasant, kind-spoken gentleman." And then Sammlle had rubbed his head with a contemplative forefinger, before continuing his line of thought.

"Well'um, I mind me well when missus an' I was courtin', and that weren't yesterday—not be a week o' Sundays! Handsome young woman missus were, and slim, though you mightn't think it seein' the way she have run to flesh with advancin' years. 'Twern't only miself as thought her 'andsome!—there was others!" The old man's eyes twinkled, "More'n one of them! But Sammlle Dodge he up sides and boarded and carried off the prize! Aye! and we ain't regretted it neither, which is more'n many can say.

"Well'um, I tells you this: married life, that's just what you makes it. Six of salt and half-a-dozen of sugar, that's what it is; and love—as they talks so much about—is a wonderful good thing so long as you leaves it alone. It's when you begins a pickin' of it to pieces

and wondering whether it's this or whether it's that, that you find it loses shape. My daughter, she's a dressmaker, and she says to me the other day, 'Dad,' says she, ''tis all very well makin' a new dress—that's a pleasure; but when you start a pickin' of it to pieces and a makin' of it up again, that's when the trouble begins.' Now love, that's just the same. It's a good garment and it'll keep you warm all your life as long as you don't keep a pickin' of it to pieces, and trying to make folks different from what the Lord made 'em! Wrap yourself up in it, and keep snug, just the two of you, and don't be thinkin' all the while whether it just happens to suit you or not."

It was quite evident that Sammlle Dodge had not studied "'uman natur" for nothing.

Barbara sat, one afternoon about three weeks before the day fixed for her wedding, at the table by the window in the old kitchen which had now so many happy associations for her. She had been writing to Petite Mère, but now she had laid down her pen and leaned back in her chair thinking of many things.

There was no doubt that her thoughts were very happy, for her eyes shone like stars and her mouth curved in a little tender smile.

She was reviewing the events of the past year. Only a year ago she had not known her native land. She had been contemplating the advisability of embarking on a great enterprise in search of that non-existent fortune upon which she had counted so certainly. Then—she had left home. She recalled her journey across the Channel and her first sight of Stephen, of his apologetic face as he disentangled her from the folds of *Le Petit Journal*. She would hardly have believed any one who had told her he was to be her husband!

And now—he had all her heart.

She thought of her visit to the lawyer, and even still her cheeks burned at the remembrance of it: her disappointment, the loneliness and misery of her time in London, the kindly welcome of dear Molly and Dick, and the nightmare of her days with Mrs. Septimus

Waghorn and the odious Clarence. How furious Stephen had been when she told him about that! He had refused to see any cause for amusement, and yet, as she looked back, time had so changed the perspective that she was ready to laugh at her experience.

After that—her arrival at the "Porch Cottage" and all the events which had led up to her present joy. She had seen John Strong only yesterday, and he congratulated her with such evident sincerity. She did hope he would find a nice wife very soon.

She looked round the old room and thought of the little house at Le Petit Andely, and of dear Père Joseph, and of Petite Mère—Petite Mère whom she would see very soon now! Only three weeks before she was Stephen's wife, and he would take her to Chérie before they started on their wanderings.

She had not found her Petite Fortune, not in the way she had expected, but she had found fortune beyond her wildest imaginings in the great love that had come to her, and although she and Petite Mère would never journey together as they had planned, yet perhaps Chérie had been right when she said she was too old to wander—that for her her own hearthstone was best, and she and Stephen were going together to see all the wonders of the world.

Her Blue Roses had bloomed, truly—not just as she had dreamed, but infinitely more beautiful. Was there another girl in all the world upon whom blessings had been poured as upon her?

Surely not! Her cup of happiness was full to the brim.

She heard a step behind her and felt a hand laid upon her head.

"Dreaming, darling?" asked Stephen. "Happy dreams?"

"So happy!" she replied. "I did not hear you come."

"I must just run up and ask Aunt Anne something," he said. "I want her to read a letter before the post

goes. I will be back in a few minutes. I have brought you the St. Ethel's paper. There is a bit about Dick and Brook Stretton which will amuse you."

Barbara put away her writing things, and then she picked up the paper and began to read.

The paragraph ran as follows—

"We learn with great pleasure that Mr. Richard Arkwright of the 'White House' succeeds to the fortune and property of the late Mr. Francis Brook of Brook Stretton, and we tender him our hearty congratulations on the splendid inheritance which has fallen to his lot. The fortune, we are credibly informed, is considerable, amounting to nearly a quarter of a million of money, and the property, which occupies some five hundred acres on the borders of the adjoining county, is justly famed for its beauty. The mansion of Brook Stretton dates back to Tudor times, and is a rare and perfect example of the domestic architecture of the period. We understand that Mr. Arkwright was only distantly related to the deceased gentleman and inherits as next of kin, and it is curious to notice how once more history has repeated itself. Some of our older readers may perhaps remember that upon the last occasion of the death of the owner no will was forthcoming and it was some time before the heir could be traced. Finally he was found in Mr. Francis Clapperton Verroll, a representative of a distant branch of the family, who upon succession changed his name to Brook. This gentleman seldom resided at Brook Stretton, allowing the estate to fall into disrepair and earning for himself the reputation of being somewhat eccentric. There was a rumour current many years ago that he had contracted a marriage early in life, but as no evidence of this seems to exist we trust that Mr. Arkwright may be left in undisputed possession of his noble heritage, and that he may improve in health and live to restore Brook Stretton to its former magnificence."

"Francis Clapperton Verroll! Why, surely that was

the name of the man who was married in the church in Smithfield where the martyrs were burnt at the stake!"

The girl's first thought was, "How curious if I should be in some way related to Molly!" Then she read the paragraph through again, and yet a third time, with a frown puckering her forehead and her eyes dark with bewilderment.

She laid the paper down, and walking to a drawer took out the old journal and found the entry written in the straggling childish handwriting—

"I saw Mamma's name in the big book where they write the marriages. Her name before she was married was Prudence Eager, and she married Papa, Francis Clapperton Verroll, on March 12, 1861."

CHAPTER XXXIII

BARBARA'S FORTUNE

"Love is the centre and circumference
The cause and aim of all things—'tis the key
To joy and sorrow, and the recompense
For all the ills that have been, or may be.

Love is the only thing that pays for birth,
Or makes death welcome. Oh! dear God above
This beautiful but sad perplexing earth,
Pity the hearts that know—or know not—Love."

ELLA WHEELER WILCOX.

"BARBARA! Dearest! What in the world is the matter?"

Stephen uttered a cry of alarm as he entered. The girl was standing quite still, her hands resting on the page of a book which lay upon the table; her head turned to the window, her eyes were looking out upon the leafless orchard trees—gazing intently, with a strange, inward look, as though she saw something that filled her with dismay. He could see that her breath was coming very quickly, as though she were terrified.

He moved to her side and glanced out. But, no! There was nothing unusual to be seen—only bare waving boughs and frosted grass, and in the distance old Sammler sweeping the path.

He put his arm round her. "Tell me what has happened," he said. "Whatever the trouble is, let me share it."

The words pierced through the tumult in the girl's mind. Yes! Stephen was right. She must not keep it from him. He had a right to know—and he would help her.

She turned and picked up the paper, and with her finger she pointed to the printed words.

"Francis Clapperton Verroll," he read. "Well, dearest, what of him?" he asked, completely puzzled as to her meaning, as well he might be.

Barbara moistened her dry lips.

"I think," she said slowly, "that he was my grand-

father's grandfather!"

She nodded. "Will you please read this."

She held out the album, and he took it from her hand and read where she indicated.

Then he raised his head, and looked at her in silence for a long moment.

"Whose book was this? Who was Mary Verroll?"

"My mother."

"How do you know?"

For answer, she walked again to the drawer from which she had taken the book, and returned with some papers tied together with a faded ribbon. Selecting one, she laid it before him.

It was a certificate of marriage between Mary Verroll and John Stewart Vincent.

When he had read it she replaced it with a second—the certificate of baptism of Barbara Claudia Vincent, child of John Stewart Vincent and Mary his wife.

He passed his hand across his forehead, too utterly astonished for words.

"It is quite clear, isn't it, Stephen?" she asked.

"I think it is quite clear," he answered in a perfectly toneless voice.

"What does it mean?"

"Mean! Why, it means that if these proofs hold good you are the next-of-kin to your grandfather, Francis Clapperton Verroll, or Francis Brook, as he is generally called, and that the whole of his property comes to you."

"The whole of it?"

He looked at her curiously. What an odd question.

"The whole of it. You would be sole heiress, unless, of course, you had any brothers and sisters. In that case, I am not sure of the law, but I fancy it would be apportioned between you."

"No one else would have any of it?"

"Certainly not."

"How could I find out if these proofs were correct?"

"It is quite simple. If your grandparents were married in St. Bartholomew's, Smithfield, it could be proved by searching the register."

"And then?"

"You would have to verify these other certificates, I suppose. That would be all."

"Is it only by these certificates that it can be proved?"

"How do you mean?"

"I mean—have the lawyers any other way of finding out that my grandfather was married?"

"They won't know, unless you tell them. But you'll have to tell them. They can't search the registers of every church in England, and, for the matter of that, they are not certain that he really was ever married."

"These papers are mine?"

"Of course. No one else has the slightest right to them."

His eyes were searching her face. What was in her mind? This slip of a girl, who did not seem in the least elated or excited at this stupendous discovery, and—all women loved money! Rather did she seem troubled and very thoughtful, as she put question after question and listened attentively to his replies.

Suddenly she moved, and walking across the room she pulled out the damper over the stove. A perfectly pointless action, he thought, but probably she did it unconsciously.

"Barbara! Do you understand what this means? You will be a very rich woman."

"No," she answered, quietly but quite decidedly, "I shall never be that."

"You can't avoid it. When your right is proved——"

"It will never be proved."

"But it must."

"It will not." With a quick movement she tore the page from the album and folded it together with the other papers.

"Stephen, mon cher! You understand. I am going to burn these."

He made a quick movement forward, but controlled himself immediately. The child did not know what she was doing. How could he allow her to throw away a fortune absolutely regardless of its importance.

"No!" he said sharply. "You can't do that!"

"I am going to burn them. Oh, Stephen! Don't you see that it is the only thing possible!"

"I see it is impossible."

She drew a step nearer to him. "Just think of what it means!" she said quickly. "Just think of Dick and Molly and the children."

"It does not belong to them. It belongs to you."

And because he was fighting hard to subdue the flood of passionate admiration and remorse which was surging in his heart, his voice sounded cold and stern, and because his whole soul applauded her decision, he argued against it with still greater vehemence.

"It can never belong to me!"

"You don't know what you are doing! You can't throw away a vast fortune, as if it were an old glove!"

"Oh! do you not see——" Barbara faltered.

"I see you have no earthly right to be foolishly quixotic!"

Her lip quivered. Why did Stephen stand there with his arms folded, and look at her with eyes that were so cold and hard? And she did not know the meaning of quixotic! She had never heard it before, but it must surely be something dreadful, since he said it in that tone of voice.

"You said yourself that money was not everything," she said pleadingly.

"This is a fortune."

"Stephen!" She hesitated, and her voice dropped almost to a whisper. "Can it be—is it possible—that you want it yourself?"

"Few men would object to a quarter of a million!" he answered shortly.

She came still closer. "I did not think of that," she said simply. "I had always thought that you had sufficient; you did not seem to be in need of anything, and you said it would be easy for us to travel, and see things, but if that is so, it does not make any difference. It must go to Dick and Molly. We will not go, we will give up the journey; what does it matter? and, if we are poor, well! we are young and strong, and Dick is ill, and there are the children. Stephen! Don't look at me like that!! You know how I love you! We will be together. The money can make no difference. Oh! say it can make no difference!"

"And—if it does make a difference?" The words dropped slowly from his lips.

She turned and picked up the little packet from the table, where she had laid it down.

Then she faced him, standing quite erect, with the tears brimming in her eyes.

"I could never take it. If all my happiness depended on it, I could never rob my friends of all this means to them. I am sorry! so deeply sorry that you do not see it. I had so hoped that—you would—always—understand."

She walked to the hearth, and, taking up the iron, opened the door of the stove and dropped the packet into the red heart of the fire. The door shut with a dull, reverberating clang, the flames roared up the chimney, and Barbara stood quite still. The tears were coursing down her cheeks now, but she did not raise a hand to brush them away. Her world seemed to have fallen to pieces. All the glow of hope and joy had faded into dust and ashes, like the fortune she had sacrificed against his will.

Another moment, and Stephen's arms were round her and his kisses raining upon her cheeks—her eyes—her hair.

"My love! My little love! My splendid Barbara! Forgive me! Oh, forgive me!"

"You are not angry? Oh, you are not angry?"

"Angry!" he cried, with a little sound that was half

a sob. "Angry? My dear, my dear! Can you forgive me?"

"I?" she said tenderly. "I have nothing to forgive."

"Barbara! I doubted you! Blind fool that I was! You gave me your heart, and I could not believe that it was the purest, grandest thing, the most flawless gift! Teach me, oh, teach me to be worthy of it, Barbara! Worthy of your love and all that love should mean!"

"I, too, must learn," she said thoughtfully. "We will learn it together, thou and I, since it is Love that has made us one."

The winter daylight faded, slowly the shadows crept across the old room, and the darkness fell, but the two who sat together on the oak settle heeded it not at all. Around them shone the light that never was on sea or land, for Love was absolute.

THE END

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